

Liminal Existence: Tracing Spectrality in Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon*

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Abstract

*In literary discourses, the figure of the spectre is a ubiquitous motif in narratives across various cultures. The influential text of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993) inaugurated a 'spectral turn' in the academic field. Spectral Criticism explores literature's symbolic and psychological elements, emphasizing the uncanny and hidden meanings. This paper intends to analyze how spectrality is decisively woven into the fabric of the novel, *A Blessing on the Moon* (1997) by Joseph Skibell. The study also unravels how the author skilfully employs magical realism to narrate the Holocaust, the most dreadful event in the twentieth century. Through the prism of spectral criticism, this paper examines how Skibell destabilises the notion of death as the ultimate finality highlighting its emancipatory nature. The paper also intends to analyse the representation of the Jewish ghost as the narrator and how death becomes a source of power to ascertain the voice of the marginalised community that had hitherto been subdued in world history.*

Keywords: Spectral Criticism, Spectre, Holocaust Narrative, Uncanny, Magical Realism.

"A spectre is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and non-phenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance."

-Jacques Derrida, "Spectrographies"

The motif of the spectre is ever present in the literary arena. Literature, especially fiction is a realm of the incomplete, the unresolved, and even indefinable, embodied by ghosts. The spectral dimension of literature is rooted in its freedom from empirical referentiality and its ability to construct worlds that challenge conventional ontological frameworks. The origin of spectral criticism as a theory can be traced back to the French philosopher and theorist Maurice Blanchot who opined that the act of reading is a dialogue with the dead. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* published in 1993 (translated into English in 1994), the iconic text of Jacques Derrida inaugurated 'spectral turn' in the domains of humanities and social sciences alongside literary criticism, that draw references from Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's work, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986). Derrida used ghosts as a conceptual

metaphor to critically evaluate the Marxist legacies that haunt the present with a persistent demand for attention. His notion of ‘spirit’ and the theme of spectrality has initiated many literary studies in the academic field. The phrase ‘spectral turn’ was created by Roger Luckhurst in his essay “The Contemporary London Gothic and Limits of Spectral Turn” in 1999. Further, David Punter in his work, *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century* (2002) introduced spectral criticism as a way of envisaging literature as a particular anthropological site for interactions between the living and the deceased. The global and transcultural reach of the spectral turn was established by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Preen in their monumental work, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013). It reinstated the figure of the ghost as the subject of critical study by disposing of the traditional notion of casting ghosts as the mere projection of a troubled psyche or something intimidating.

Etymologically, the word ‘spectre’ has its roots in the Latin term ‘spectrum, which in turn comes from the verb ‘specere’ meaning ‘to see’ or ‘to look at’. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term ‘spectre’ as an apparition/ phantom/ ghost especially one of a terrifying nature or aspect. The contemporary notion of ‘spectre’ involves, an apparition of the dead, a revenant, the deceased returned to a state of limbo or interstitial space – an entity neither alive nor dead. The American Sociologist Avery Gordon in her work, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) also challenges the previous idea of spectral features as a marker of personal psychological disorder or vestiges of ancient superstition. Rather, they alter the perception of time by distinguishing among past, present, and future. Being socio-political psychological states, they invite our attention to enabling actions. As Colin Davis in *Hauntology Spectres and Phantoms* (2005) puts it, “spectre is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence and making established certainties vacillate”. It subverts the conventional dichotomies and ontological absolutes. Spectre always transcends definition, existing as an intermediary entity located between the boundary; that is, neither alive nor dead, present and absent, existent and non-existent.

This paper primarily scrutinises the novel, *A Blessing on the Moon* by Joseph Skibell using the theoretical principles of spectrality. The characteristics of spectral criticism include examining how the ghosts of the deceased characters impact the events of the narrative, their significance, the depiction of the supernatural, and the incorporation of uncanny elements in the narrative where the familiar becomes eerie. Spectral Criticism examines the invisible and often marginalised aspects of culture. Additionally, it encompasses liminality, timelessness, and transformation contributing to the novel’s thematic depth.

The defining essence of spectral criticism is analysing how spectre of the deceased character emerges as the narrator and how that influences the events of the narrative. A posthumous narrative—a recognized subgenre of fiction, is a form of literary narration carried out “from beyond the grave” recounted by one or more deceased characters. Despite their varying approaches, these figures serve as primary conduits for sensory experience and comprehension. The ghost narrator motif is a pivotal aspect of spectrality. In the novel, *A Blessing in the Moon*, the story ‘begins with the apparition of a spectre’. The spectre of Chaim Skibelski is the spirit of the dead that has returned from the grave, to what Derrida refers to as *revenant* (*Specters* 6), a French word for ghost; which means, one who returns. Derrida also states that ‘the spectre always returns- it begins by coming back’. The story is narrated by Chaim Skibelki who has been murdered by Nazi soldiers during the Holocaust. As the narrator says, “And later, as dusk gathered, I climbed out of the grave, it was so shallow and I ran through the forests.” (Skibell 13). Only towards the end of the first page of the novel, do readers discover that the protagonist has died. Chaim says, “And I realize I was dead. I was dead” (13).

By evoking the ghost and imparting it with a first-person monologue, Skibell unveils reality and exhibits all those ineffable nuances of experience. Existing as liminal figures, the dead reappear in the living world as beings neither wholly living nor fully deceased. Ghosts return to end their incomplete tasks in the realm of the living. Likewise in the novel, death doesn't become the ultimate conclusion for Chaim. He had to wander until he could accomplish his solemn duty of restoring the moon to its former position in the sky thereby, seeking resilience and closure. Also, the spectre's haunting presence signifies a past that remains unreconciled. The spectres in the narrative embody the historical trauma of the Holocaust. They serve as a powerful metaphor for cultural memory and resilience. Despite the adversity of misery and loss, spectres of Jews in the novel exemplify the indomitable spirit of victims to endure and transcend historical injustices. The protagonist gains a position of agency and power through death. Chaim with the help of Rebbe resurrects the Jews. Since the narrative originates with a ghostly figure, the spectral qualities of Chaim- the narrator imbues the story with a spectral essence.

Besides, a spectral framework rejects the notion of an origin as a singular and identifiable point of reference (Blanco and Peeren 32). It follows 'the law of orphan' as formulated by David Punter (267). Since the spectral defies a clear origin, the use of unreliable narration in a similar fashion disrupts textual inheritance through the parlance of the narrator. Within the confinement of this literary device, the text detaches from a source as seen in the narrator. Hence, the spectral quality of the text is revealed in the narrator as it becomes disconnected from the source.

The distinctive trait of a spectral work is the use of liminal space which contributes to the novel's thematic depth. Arnold Van Gennep, the French Ethnographer, introduced the term liminality in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1906) which is associated with different ceremonies in an individual's life. The word's etymology traces back to the Latin term *limen*, which denotes threshold. Van Gennep explains that in the liminal or threshold space, the deceased lies between the worldly and the other-worldly, ie, the plane of the living and the departed. As Martha Lincoln says ghosts are liminal figures that "mediate the sensuous and the non-sensuous, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, reality and not-yet-reality, being and non-being in other words ghostly" (192). Their very nature as neither alive nor dead, present or absent, highlights the intermediary nature of concepts. Due to their liminality, they can deconstruct and transgress boundaries by creating space for new frameworks for knowledge and perception within the gaps they create.

As presented in *A Blessing on the Moon*, Chaim's spectre exists in a liminal state that bridges the worlds of the living and the deceased, embodying a threshold between two states of being. The novel grapples with the liminal space between memory and history and also blurs the lines between lived experience and myth. Hotel Amfortas, apparently an eternal shelter for Jews killed in the Holocaust stands as a liminal space. Under the guise of a peaceful place, it hides darkness and manipulates characters' memories, leaving them perplexed.

One of the most salient aspects of spectrality is employing magical realism as its focal point. Magical realism integrates realistic elements with imaginative or supernatural experiences. According to M. H. Abrams, magical realist 'writers weave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dream-like elements, as well as with materials derived from myths and fairy tales' (258). This novel blurs the borders of fiction and reality by combining history and fiction and also integrates Jewish folklore. The chief protagonist, Chaim Skibelski is a fictional portrayal of Skibell's great-grandfather. Skibell descended from a Jewish family whose grandfather was forced to flee from Poland, has often spoken about the tragic loss of his numerous relatives at the time of the Holocaust. He further says,

All in all, about eighteen members of our immediate family had just disappeared, violently, from the face of the earth. And no one ever talked about it. This silence, I think, haunted me as a child and formed my character in a number of ways that eventually were not that pleasing to me. So, the book is an attempt on my part to recover from the silence a family history that, except for a clutch of photos and whatever is encoded genetically, had all but disappeared. (211)

Enticing readers to explore, Skibell unveils an enchanting world that includes the head of a dead German soldier who talks along with walking deceased Jews, the moon that falls into earth, wolves that speak like humans, the transformation of a Jewish saint Rebbe (Rabbi) into a crow, the magnificent Hotel Amfortas where dead people unite and other fantastic elements, as though they seem to be occurring in the everyday reality. Moreover, he depicts spectres with a realistic flare that their feelings and thoughts can be compared to those of humans. Together, these images merge the boundaries of fact and fiction and even after death, the ghosts exhibit perfect aspects of humanity. This can be seen when Chaim who is already dead from the beginning of the novel defies the conventions of mortality and coherently engages in real-life conversations with Ola, the non-Jewish girl whose family has usurped his home. He can understand her better than any of her family members.

The juxtaposition of the banal and the bizarre events in the novel destabilizes the reader's comprehension challenging the demarcation between reality and fantasy. The narrative's magical undertones comprise the resurrection of dead Jews from the pit, bleeding wounds after death, talking animals, the appearance of Jesus and Mary in a blue chariot, the mysterious healing river, the luxurious Hotel Amfortas where Chaim reunites with his two wives- Ida and Ester, his children, sons-in-law and grandchildren, the metamorphosis of his Rabbi into a crow, into an old man and then to a young woman etc. The two Hasidic Jews, Zalman and Kalman attempt to tie the moon to their boat and its eventual fall to the earth has been depicted as a normal event. The author deftly utilizes fairy tales, and Jewish folk tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* to facilitate a nuanced exploration of historical trauma. Moreover, the subtle yet significant presence of spirituality is woven by the infusion of Jewish rituals and ceremonies such as 'Shabbas', 'tashlich', 'kaddish', 'vidui', 'havdalah', and 'kabbalah'. Concurrently, in a way of bending realism, Skibell portrays the real incidents that happened with Jewish communities who were brutally murdered and became homeless globally during the Holocaust. Spurred by antisemitic prejudices non-Jews collaborated with Nazis in the persecution and confiscation of Jews' properties. In the novel, the dead bodies of Jews in Poland were dumped in a pit and when Chaim returns Polish citizens have already taken possession of his home representing the historical truth of the Nazi regime. A poignant scene unfolds at the palatial Hotel Amfortas when Chaim's family assumes they have finally arrived at 'the World to Come' or the paradise where they can attain salvation. Chaim's son-in-law, Marcus asks, "If there is a Paradise, do you actually think they'd let Jews into it?" (131) This query unravels the Jewish plight as they were always oppressed throughout their lives. Ostensibly considered a comfort space, this Paradise later turns out to be a ruse. This deceptive place is portrayed as analogous to a concentration camp where they were baked in the kitchen. Their fleeting happiness dissolves into despair and exposes the stark reality that even after their death, they are not spared. He meticulously demonstrates quotidian details consisting of Andrzej (Ola's father) and his cousins engaging in a game of cards, and reference to a liquor cabinet, ledger book, compass, cracked telescope, radio, sausages, cigars, and the depiction of buildings and vehicles in the backdrop of Kosciuszki street.

Magical realism reconfigures the power paradigm, as the tormentor once formidable relies on his victim's compassion. Chaim stumbles upon the decapitated Nazi soldier who had killed him awaits his mercy and appeals not to abandon him alone in the forest. He speaks to Chaim: "I needed to be

forgiven, Herr Jude. Forgive me. Won't you?' And Chaim replies: "Little head, I say. When you killed me, you took everything. My home, my wife, my children. Must you have my forgiveness as well?" (93) After a while, Chaim finds himself carrying the severed head of the soldier around to protect him and forgives his slayer, thereby gaining agency.

Skibell incorporates magical realism to confront the ineffable traumas of the Holocaust transcending direct representation to evoke a profound emotional response in the readers. As Joe Langdon writes, "The deliberately ambiguous nature of magical realist text means that they can often be read in a multitude of ways, often causing the reader to "lose the plot" and feel or experience, rather than objectively observe or understand, occurring events." (9)

According to Helene Cixous, there "is nothing more notorious and uncanny to our thought than mortality" (542). Another trope of spectrality is the presence of uncanny elements in the narrative where the familiar becomes eerie. It focuses on unsettling and mysterious aspects within the text exploring the uncanny where the familiar becomes eerie. Sigmund Freud proposes the notion of the uncanny to describe the characteristics of reading literature. The word uncanny originates from the German language term *unheimlich*, which means not from the home. Bennet and Royle in their essay, "The Uncanny" in *Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (2004) argue that literature is "the discourse of uncanny" as it conjures a spectrum of experiences, thoughts, and uncanny feelings (35). For them, uncanny alludes to a sensation of oddness, mystery, or unrest. Also, the word uncanny takes several forms such as the recurrence of a feeling, situation, or character; unusual coincidences like divine intervention and the idea of fate; anthropomorphism or attributing human characteristics to non-human entities; fear of being buried alive, etc.

Death is something that is always at once familiar and unfamiliar. Reappearance of Chaim Skibelski and his relatives and friends after death as well as communicating with the living adds a supernatural layer to the narrative. Correspondingly, assigning voice to the deceased intensifies the uncanny nature of the narrative. The spectre itself is the deconstructed phenomena that blur the line between any hierarchy like visible and invisible, presence and absence, therefore, challenging the established notions of mortality. In the novel, animals undergo remarkable transfigurations with instances like the character Rebbe (Rabbi) becoming a crow in the beginning and later turning to a young woman, the capacity of pigs, goats, and wolves to converse in a human language refutes the ordinary perception of the natural world.

The novel infuses dream-like sequences within the Hotel Amfortas where Chaim awakens apparently from a daydream of his family reunion distorting temporal boundaries that add to its uncanny quality. Moreover, craftily employing the magical realist gambit throughout the narrative, whereby the author blends ordinary and fantastical elements also augments its uncanny aspect.

One of the major tenets of Spectral Criticism includes timelessness or disruption of temporal categories. In Blanco and Preen's view, "the spectre causes a temporal disturbance by appearing when it is least expected." Spectrality destabilises temporal order "by collapsing the borders between past, present, and future." As Derrida puts it, "haunting by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality." (5)

Characters experience vivid flashbacks and memories that transport them to different moments in the novel, *A Blessing on the Moon*. These nonlinear recollections provide insights into characters' pasts and contribute to the overall temporal complexity. By incorporating magical realism, Hotel Amfortas turns into an ethereal space where Chaim meets his ex-wife (who passed away long ago) and his second wife, Ester and his children subvert conventional temporal boundaries. Chaim narrates the account of Kalman and Zalman's deed of snatching away the moon from the sky, ages ago, to Ola. The severed head of the Nazi soldier also reiterates this narrative. Kalman and Zalman await Chaim's arrival, anticipating his aid in restoring the moon and challenging the conventional

flow of time. The cyclical nature of Rebbe's teaching and imparting wisdom to Chaim stretches across time and transcends conventional temporal constraints. These examples showcase the non-linear temporal experiences in the novel and grant a layer of complexity to the narrative.

Spectral novels exhibit the theme of transformation within their narrative. The characters in the novel also undergo profound transformations, both physical and spiritual, throughout the narrative. The return of spectres offers an opportunity to amend the past cruelties, and injustices and restore harmony. Jewish ghosts reappear in literature not merely to haunt spaces where anti-Jewish violence occurred but also to advocate rectifying past injustices. The Jewish ghosts exercise their agency either by punishing or forgiving the culprits. Being Holocaust victims as well as belonging to the fantastical realm, they act as the representatives of the assassinated Jews. Even after death, Chaim shows remorse for terminally ill young Ola whose family usurped his home. Ola confesses to Chaim: "I cried when they killed you." To which Chaim replies: "It didn't hurt" (43).

As the story progresses, he stumbles upon the decapitated head of a Nazi who had shot Chaim in the head when he was alive. He finds himself dragging the soldier around to protect him. In doing so, Chaim had to come to terms with forgiving his killer. When the speaking head dies, he refuses to leave it as a carrion for the birds in the forest. He reflects, "What gain could I derive from its desecration?" (94). Instead, he carries the head with him to provide a respectful cremation. This transformation represents a spiritual and existential journey as he grapples with the trauma of his past life and seeks a sense of peace and understanding. Chaim's Rebbe, a wise and revered figure, transforms into a talking crow after escaping the massacre. Yet, as a crow, Rebbe gains new perspectives and becomes a guide for Chaim, symbolising the need for flexibility and adaptation in the face of tragedy. The Hotel Amfortas, deceptively a peaceful shelter for the deceased and wandering Jews turns out to be a trap. This shift from illusion to reality underscores the dangers of false comfort and the need for critical awareness, even in the afterlife. Hence, the novel portrays a rich tapestry of character transformations that transcend the boundaries of life and death, offering a poignant exploration of human resilience and memory amidst profound adversity.

In addition to these attributes, spectral criticism can be examined through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis. From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the novel *A Blessing on the Moon* incorporates the three orders or registers of subjective experience; 'the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.' The chief protagonist, Chaim's identity fragmentation exhibits the Imaginary Order whereas his encounter with his friends and relatives along with the Jewish rituals reflects the Symbolic Order. In the novel, Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real can be examined in the surreal and spectral occurrences that permeate the narrative. The Real refers to the dimension that surpasses language and representation thereby eluding complete comprehension. The deployment of magical realist tropes within the text uncovers the boundaries of the Symbolic order or the realm of language where the structured reality dissolves, creating a void. In Lacan's view, "the real is what resists symbolization absolutely" (324). It is the realm where imaginary and symbolic order seek to control.

Apart from the magic realist ambit, the confrontation with the unrepresentable, unsymbolisable trauma of the Holocaust also alludes to the Real aspect. As "the real is the impossible" (Lacan 280), the impossibility of deciphering the trauma of the victims through language reveals its intangible quality. The phenomenon of death ceases to exist in the Symbolic order but is closest to the Real. The non-linear narrative structure of the narrative and its uncanny trait also disrupt the Symbolic order. Moreover, his yearning to seek closure or to reach 'the World to Come' emerges as his *objet petit a* or the object of desire.

Upon the novel's culmination, Chaim transforms into an infant, nestled in the lap of his Rabbi who has turned into a young woman. This abrupt ending sheds light on the Neo-natal stage where

a child feels a sense of completeness or absoluteness. Chaim's final remarks: "I begin to forget everything. I gurgle in her lap... and the light of the moon fills my eyes until it is all I see" (207). Also augments the Real aspect of the novel.

As Derrida succinctly notes, spectres act as disjuncting figures, unsettling the stability of the present, and offering potential for emancipation (Jung and Orr 314). Spectral criticism opens up a new perspective to the marginalised people at the bottom of the hierarchy, who wait for a voice of their own. In the narrative, *A Blessing on the Moon*, Skibell, through his embodiment of the ghostly figure of Chaim Skibelski, probes into a past that falls beyond his lived experience by reconstructing it imaginatively and also resurrecting his great-grandfather from the depths of silence. He also incorporates Jewish folktales with the aid of magical realism as a way of recounting the chronicle of his predecessors. By providing Chaim Skibelski with a narrative voice, he offers a platform for the voices of the Jews who have been persecuted and slaughtered in the name of racial purity to resonate and furnish a different perspective from the dominant authorities' narrative. Hence, by articulating his hitherto unspoken traumatized experiences, Chaim gains potential power after his death that he never had during his lifetime. With the infusion of tangible and intangible tropes along with the revival of deceased Jews, Joseph Skibell in his literary narrative, *A Blessing on the Moon* empowers the victimised over their perpetrators.

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