The Bhoots and Ghosts of Bengal:
An Analysis of Bengali Ghost Fiction in the Original and in English Translation

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Master of Philosophy

by

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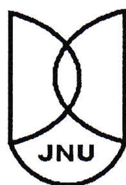

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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation titled **"The Bhoots and Ghosts of Bengal: An analysis of Bengali Ghost Fiction in the original and in English translation"** submitted by **Ms. Amrapali Saha**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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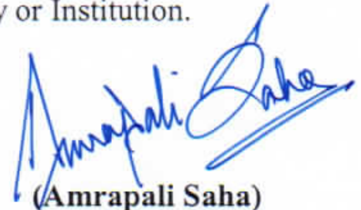
DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled ***"The Bhoots and Ghosts of Bengal: An analysis of Bengali Ghost Fiction in the original and in English translation"*** submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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INTRODUCTION

Towards an After-life for the Bhoots of Bengal

Language is that ball of yarn, which as it does to a cat, fascinates as well as exasperates a translator. Hence, a foray into translation is to unravel the skeins of meanings, to behold the tenuousness of the world that we have spun around us. George Steiner writes that languages are infinitely complex living organisms, containing a certain life-force and powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay and they can die, he adds.[1] However, the task of the translator is to look beyond, "to make of the word a reaching out past death." There is a world in a word so to speak or perhaps several worlds, lying dormant, with ghosts of meanings alive in them. Translation in this context becomes the creation of a "dam against oblivion," and marks a return for these revenants.

A language is also a museum of everyday things, its history evocative of the evolution of cultures. For instance, the Bengali term "śabda"[2] (শব্দ) not only means a word, but also a sound, a noise, a cry, or a call. It is as if the word is a historiographical account in itself of the evolution of human speech, from its most elemental utterance to its written form. To look back then is to look at language as a beam of light, passing through a glass prism, facilitating the dispersion of a word into a spectrum of meanings. One leaves behind the translucence of a word's present form in favour of the lightning clarity of hindsight. A word is a silent chronicler of history and because the composition of all narratives is a form of othering, necessitating distance, time itself imbues it with this sense of history. Like beachcombers collecting seashells, translators look at words deposited as the detritus of time, to interpret the ideas impearled in them and imagine the worlds they contained. Seashells usually wash up on the shore as empty and clean, the organism having already died, so the very task of translation deals with death, as it brings out the ghost in the shell. So much of history depends not on what we unearth, but in listening to the past as it speaks and in initiating a conversation. History is in the giving of a voice to silent things and responding in turn, as an idea does not have a life of its own until it finds shelter in an imagination.

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[1] See *Language* 96.
[2] See entry on "śabda," *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary*. Digital Dictionaries of South Asia. Web.

The "Ten Translated Tales of the Indigenous Ghosts of Bengal" was an end-term translation project undertaken in the Monsoon Semester of 2014, under the guidance of Professor GJV Prasad for his course on Translation Studies. This project laid the foundation for the scope and subject of my M. Phil. dissertation that concerns the bhoots and ghosts of Bengal, an analysis of Bengali ghost fiction in the original language of composition, Bengali, as well as in my translation of them into English. In this regard, "the history of the notions and the words" will be instructive, as they were for Paul Ricoeur in his work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (4). Exploring "Bengali" as a category of linguistic as well as cultural identity was crucial to the formulation of my research objectives, especially at the points of convergence of memory, history, and forgetting. The research objectives are as follows: to look at the Bengali sociocultural imagination through the conceptions of death and the afterlife; an examination of the paranormal beings of Bengal in order to illuminate upon the lived experiences of Bengali society and culture; and to make the case for a project involving further translations as a far more comprehensive body of work, with detailed annotations, and possibly supplemented with ethnographic investigation. Although there is an abundance of these "bhooter golpo" or ghost stories in Bengali, and English translations abound, I am yet to come across scholarly inquiries or thorough academic research into the particular narratives that will be under discussion, especially with the "bhoots" in these narratives as the loci of focus.

Bengali human beings and ghosts are more often than not similar to each other, highly opinionated and voluble about their opinions. They are also aficionados of fish and sweets, thus, suffering from the scourge of the Bengali stomach, chronic indigestion. I have used the spelling "bhoot" instead of "bhut" to distinguish their Bengali identity from a pan-Indian bhut-hood. Also, phonologically speaking, this particular spelling is closer to the rounded Bengali pronunciation. In their nomenclature for the English avatars, I have used the word "bhoot" where it occurs in their names, to underscore their distinctive cultural identity, but also referred to them as ghosts in certain cases. For instance, the "jaular bhoot" has been translated as swamp ghost to clearly illustrate the specific water body that they inhabit, and which gives them their name. Most of the stories that shaped this dissertation were neither an integral part of the Bengali literary landscape nor have they been sampled outside of it. This is mostly due to the fact that the sources for these stories are varied, from edited anthologies like *Eksho Bochchorer Shreshtho Bhoutik* (Hundred Years' Best Ghost Stories) and *Dui Banglar Sera Bhooter Golpo* (Best Ghost

Stories from Two Bengals) to *Shuktara Shonkolon, Anandamela,* and other popular printed collections and magazines for kids in Bengal. These texts used to mark a way of life as a child growing up in Bengal even until the 1990s. Speaking from personal experience, one devoured these stories during long summer holidays and short winter breaks, bought at a small price (one week's pocket money) from book fairs or makeshift stalls set up during Durga Puja.

The guiding principle behind the selection of these stories, and for the purpose of translation, was that they do not have to compete with the Harry Potters and hobbits, or the vampires and werewolves, but these stories must also find shelf space for our consideration. These stories offer a glimpse of the rich and varied realm of the strange and amusing creatures of the Bengali afterlife, inviting an in-depth critical analysis for they have much to reveal about the land and its people. My selection of the stories was determined not by the name of the author but through the content of the stories, to survey an eclectic crop of ghosts, and present a picture of changing Bengal, sometimes caught halfway between partial modernization and a wish to hold on to the agrestic simplicity, a place that afforded those desolate corners, shaded spots, towering trees, and abandoned huts for the ghosts to reside in. One of the reasons why the chosen language for translation was English is to acknowledge one's own circumstances, a language in which I learned to acquire knowledge, speak, read and write, hence, becoming the language of my intellectual pursuits. In this case, translation became a means to bring about an actual connection with the shared cultural past and encouraginf engagement with it.

The term "bhut," writes W. Crooke (*Folklore* 146-7), comes from the Sanskrit "bhuta" which means "formed or created." In earlier Hindu writings, it was applied to the powers of nature and even to deities, such as Shiva, who is considered to be Bhutesvara or "Lord of Spirits." However, as Crooke demonstrates through the example of the Greek "Daemon," a word that mutated to the less respectable avatar of demon over time and shed its shades of meanings, mutability is also at the heart of language, as it is characteristic of human life. Therefore, the word "bhut" deformed into a mutant term referring to several classes of malignant spirits. In Crooke's study, a "proper Bhut" was the spirit emanating from a man who dies a violent death, either by accident, suicide, or capital punishment. This being could also acquire an additional degree of malevolency if it was denied proper funerary ceremonies after death. Herein, it must be noted that the seat of emanation of this potent spiritual being was not the divine, but a mortal human.

Jan N. Bremmer points out that most primitive peoples conceived man to have two kinds of souls. Firstly, there was a "free-soul" that was inactive when the body was active and manifested itself only during dreams or at death, but had no clear connections with the physical or psychological aspects of the body (2). Secondly, there were a number of "body-souls" that endowed the body with life and consciousness (2). However, these body-souls did not represent that part of an individual which survived after death. The free-soul was often associated with the breath, as seen even in the case of the Greek "psyche," which is etymologically connected to psychein, "to blow or to breathe" (Bremmer 2). The word "ghost"[3] is derived from the old English term gāst (a gast, aghast), which means breath, spirit, soul, ghost and being. One of the key identifying features of a ghost in Bengal is their nasal voice, "naki sur," or the voice that sounds like someone is speaking through the nose. The ghost then is essentially a "breath." The "breath" comes through the nose. Therefore, this being is a form of breath that can speak and when it does, the voice produced is of a nasal quality. Nevertheless, what truly ties a ghost, an entity of the afterlife, to a human being is breath, the same life-giving force. To go back to the roots then, etymologically speaking or in terms of one's own culture, is a project of translation and interpretation, of remembering and renewal, and most importantly, of giving life to the dead.

Christopher Moreman observes, that like the ancient cultures of Egypt and the Middle East,[4] the earliest Hindus too believed in a material afterlife in which dead ancestors could physically take advantage of those things being offered to them from the world of the living (99). Gifts to the dead consisted of food, weapons, clothes, domestic animals, sometimes slaves and even a wife, which were burnt or buried[5] with the dead. These offerings were mandatory to ensure that the ancestors would not inflict harm upon the living. Obtaining a place in the "World of the Fathers" ("pitrloka," abode of the ancestors) was not only dependent upon one's ritual actions ("karma") throughout one's life as outlined in the Vedas, but also and more importantly, on the people left behind in the world of the living, who were entrusted with the duty of

[3] See entry on "ghost," *Advanced English Dictionary*.
[4] For a comparative understanding of the conceptions of the afterlife in the major world cultures and religions, see Moreman 245-255.
[5] Christopher Moreman points out that in the Hindu system of religious beliefs; fire was regarded as an important facilitator in the individual's journey to the afterlife, as it reduced the matter to a more ephemeral substance in the form of smoke. However, he also brings to our attention that the Rig Veda did not place any particular emphasis on the ritual of cremation. The performance of funerary rituals did not depend on whether the body was burnt or buried. Cremation as a chosen method for the disposal of remains gained importance in the later Vedas due to the growing concern over various kinds of spiritual pollution, including contact with the dead themselves. (See Moreman 101)

continuing the rituals to ensure a place for their loved one in the afterlife. Hence, Moreman posits that ritual offerings suggest a view of the afterlife as a kind of continuation of the earthly existence. Axel Michaels also concurs that "the next world is always also in this one" (131). Notions of the next world, writes Michaels, generally reflect the highly respected goals of society, which make them all the more relevant when it comes to sociocultural analysis. Therefore, an enquiry into the invention of the afterlife may reveal a wide-ranging inventory of the sociocultural beliefs fundamental to the world of the living.

"An Indian Ghost Story" by W. Crooke, published in the year 1902, is an account of a respectable and educated Bengali man's strange supernatural encounter, a brief sketch of which shall serve as the starting line for this journey that the process of translation entails. The Babu, employed as a clerk in a secretariat office in Calcutta, was an intelligent man who "spoke and wrote well in English." One may justly conjecture that he possessed a scientific and rational spirit of mind considering what a proficiency in English meant in colonial parlance. The account begins with the Babu's proposed visit to his wife's village where his wife, whom he had not seen for some years, resided with the family of his father-in-law. The Babu happened to halt at a roadside confectioner's shop for refreshments and entered into a conversation with the shopkeeper, upon which he was informed that his father-in-law and the entire family had died after contracting cholera. However, it was "commonly reported" that they had continued to inhabit the ancestral house in the form of "Bhuts, or malignant spirits" because their funeral rites had not been performed. The Babu, an urbane, English-speaking man, presumably of a rational temperament, commenced with his journey undaunted by the shopkeeper's story. Upon reaching his father-in-law's residence, he found the old man seated in the reception room as usual, unaltered in his appearance, except now he spoke in a nasal tone of voice as did the ladies of the house. Crooke delineates three infallible tests by which one may recognize a Bhut: firstly, a Bhut does not cast a shadow as he walks; secondly, he can stomach anything in the neighbourhood but not the scent of burning turmeric; and thirdly, a genuine Bhut always speaks with a nasal twang (*Folklore* 149). Eventually, the Babu pieced together the story and realized that he had willingly walked into a death trap in a house full of ghosts. He decided to appeal to his wife, though he knew she had become a "Bhut" herself, by invoking the sacred ties of their marriage that supposedly transcend death and hold good even in the afterlife. It is this ghost wife's response to

her human husband's entreatties that hold the key to the conception of death and afterlife in the Bengali sociocultural imagination,

> My dear husband, as you can see, *we are all Bhuts*; and our bodies are being eaten away by worms. But in spirit *we* are Bhuts, and we intend to kill you tonight. Your only chance of safety is to go out once and perform our sraddha (funeral rites) at Gaya, and then *we can go to heaven*. But you must marry me again when I am *reborn* in the family of my father's brother. When *we pass out of this state of Bhuts*, the Pipal (sacred fig) tree which stands in the courtyard of the home will fall down of its own accord. (282)
>
> (Italics my own)

A discussion on the conceptions of death and the afterlife in cultures across the world opens up a rich and vast realm of speculations that have been concomitantly fed by the literary imagination, religious ideas and localized sociocultural beliefs. Thomas J. Hopkins observes that death can be seen, or is seen, as more or less the same by everyone, as the death of the physical body. However, it is in the conception of what constitutes the afterlife that illustrates cultural differences. The death of the physical body is not explicatory in itself of what happens after death. Therefore, in his essay, "Hindu Views of Death and Afterlife," Hopkins writes that one must look to the world of the living to understand the conception of the afterlife. The term after all is "afterlife" and not "afterdeath," even though death is the facilitator of this process. The afterlife cannot be separated from life because not only is the latter a necessary precondition for the former, but they are also interrelated. The meaning attributed to the afterlife stems from that given to life and vice versa, representing a continuum "not only in terms of sequence, but also, more important, in terms of concepts and values" (Hopkins 144). These concepts and values differ from culture to culture. Moreman observes that death is a universal human experience, and like any other human experience, it is also to some extent a product of cultural expectation, as it is a determining factor in defining the parameters for cultural belief (5). Despite the cross-pollination of ideas, each religion offers its distinctive take on death and the afterlife, which is more often than not moulded by the cultural climate of the region.[6]

However, before we go on to cultural differences, we first need to understand what specifically constitutes the afterlife and how the sociocultural imagination has a formative

[6] For a comprehensive and contrastive analysis of death and the afterlife in various religions, see Obayashi xi-xxii

influence upon it. Mu-chou Poo, in his introduction to *Rethinking Ghosts in World Religions*, notes that there are two key interrelated concepts, the afterlife as a continuing but manifest existence in a different form, and the removal to another realm. Poo writes that the vision of reality shared by the Western religions is essentially "personalistic and historical," while that of the Eastern religions is "nonpersonalistic," where death is seen as a "path out of transient world into the absolute and nonpersonal reality" (3). It is in conjunction with this view that we can read Hopkins' formulation of death and afterlife in Hinduism, where progress towards salvation is not for most Hindus, a matter of a single lifetime, but a long-term process involving repeated rebirths until one reaches the necessary level of development (145).

Hence, death becomes an act of translation, neither final nor complete, of the human being in the world of the living with a specific identity of his own to a "nonpersonal" entity in the afterlife, carrying traces of the former but not quite the same, such as a translated text. However, this death is not an end so much as it is a beginning of a process, for we are all "Bhuts" as the ghost wife remarks, death has delivered her to a state where she may have lost her tangible materiality, but she has gained another kind of presence. This too is a transitory state from which she can pass out (a redeath) and be reborn as a human being, which holds the promise of another beginning rather than a finality of existence. In a way, we are all in transit, human or ghost, and simply at varying points in the journey. At this juncture, I put forth the task of a translator as being akin to that of death.

Death, in Hinduism, is seen as neither final nor complete. Translation has a similar character. In translation, there is a movement towards another kind of existence for a text that is different from its original, losing its prior form but carrying on the content to a different realm offered by another language. The growth of any text begins with translation, considering even interpretation is a form of translation. It was in the process of translating ghost stories set in rural Bengal that I came to realize how these stories were like caskets that carried my heirlooms. These heirlooms consisted of a language, a culture, a literature, and a social imagination, which were part of my inheritance even if my knowledge about them was at the most, vague. But if one continues to treat them as heirlooms, these stories shall die a bad death and become ghosts to that very culture which gave birth to them, assuming that it has not happened already. Suchitra Samanta, in her introduction to her translations of Bengali ghost stories titled *Hauntings: Bangla Ghost Stories* writes that it is probably a rare Bengali, growing up as a Bengali, who is

unfamiliar with what a nishibhoot is, or a daini, a petni or a shakchunni (12). She adds that such entities are integral and unique, to the cultural world of Bengali. Unique, yes, though there might be resonances with similar entities from other cultures (nishibhoot: calling ghosts, daini: churel in other parts of the country and witch in western folklore, etc.), but whether they have continued to be integral is the question with which I am concerned.

A critical engagement with these "bhooter golpo" (the Bengali term for ghost stories) will reveal how the conception of the afterlife in Bengal comes across as a translation of life in the living world and society of Bengal, and more importantly, the social changes and cultural transitions that it has recorded. Stuart H. Blackburn observes that because religion in India is so closely aligned with the social hierarchy, its forms are readily associated with differential status (257). The afterlife too is not outside the purview of this system. For instance in Bengal,[7] ordinary bhoots were considered to be members of the Kshatriya, Sudra, or Vaisya class, while the ghost of a Brahmin, the Brahmadaitya, was accorded a higher status even in the afterlife, having their own special haunts, and feared and revered by human beings and other ghosts alike (*Folklore* 152). Therefore, death and the dead are not only ideas and symbols, but they also serve as evidence for documenting changes in the social fabric and political values of a society, and in understanding the multivalent nature of cultural beliefs. As Mu-chou Poo writes,

> How people imagine and deal with ghosts is conditioned by the social and cultural context in which the conception of death and afterlife is nurtured. Thus the conception of the ghost can be examined as a social imaginary… The idea of the ghost, being part of cultural structure concerning life and death is necessarily highly variable. On the other hand, one also needs to take note of the influence of the idea of death and afterlife on social behavior, religious beliefs and collective imagination. (4-5)

To cut a long story short, people come into the possession of ghosts and inherit their conceptions of the afterlife depending upon the culture to which they belong. But the task of the translator in this case is to make a short story long. That is, to understand the deeper implications of the cultural weight that these ghosts carry, and how they give rise to conflicting currents of familiarity and foreignness in the process of translation. This is because the social imaginary is

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[7] For more information on the characteristics of these ghosts, see *Folklore* 152.

an “ongoing, constantly changing process” (Poo 5). It does not sediment unless it is allowed to do so through assumptions of a static shared cultural past. This social imaginary is a constituent of the conceptions of ghosts and the afterlife. Each culture formulates its own version such that the social imaginary becomes a confluence point for the collective imagination and sociocultural phenomena (Poo 6). However, one must note that just as a river does not stop but keeps flowing even at a confluence point, similarly, the social imaginary is also subject to change. “When new elements are added, old ones may fall out, as the adhesive, the collective imagination loosens its grip on certain elements,” writes Poo (6). A sociocultural phenomenon takes from its present contextual environment much as it is imbued with elements from its cultural past.

André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett write that translations are neither produced nor received in a vacuum (3). In fact, translation is an opportunity to examine different cultures, as well as differences within a culture across the plane of languages. It is a means to study cultural interaction that is not offered in the same way by any other field (Lefevere, Bassnett 6). Hence, it is the reciprocation between languages that forms the core of a translation exercise. My personal foray into the field of translation was in mediating between Bengali and English. The word “mediation” is important because the task of translation involves a series of negotiations between the two languages. Although English has become the predominant linguistic medium steering literary as well as critical discourse in Indian academia and influential in shaping our present sociocultural imagination, it is this very situation that necessitates translation. Writing in the context of an almost total lack of comparative studies in English academic circles in 1986, George Steiner pointed out that the alternative path “is parochialism and retrenchment from reality…this would be alarming because in culture, no less than in politics, chauvinism and isolation are suicidal options” (*Language* 63). In a multilingual environment, as afforded by India, translation is not a movement from one language *to* another, the latter usually deemed to have a greater cultural capital; rather it should be seen as a movement *between* two languages, creating confluent streams of cultural exchange.

Firstly, one must modify Samanta’s observation to suit the actual conditions of our time. Hence, it is probably a rare Bengali, even if growing up as a Bengali, who is familiar with the different varieties of ghosts in the cultural world of a Bengali. Samanta writes that such entities endure in the cultural imagination because of their very “real connections” (13) with the world of the living. Their endurance is subject to the assumption that one’s cultural world remains

unchanging, but as one is acutely aware of the fact, that is not so. In the process of translating the stories, it occurred to me that I was also like that educated and urbane bilingual Bengali Babu, with my intellectual allegiances to English as I should like to believe that I am tolerably well-versed in its spoken and written form. But at the same time, I found myself in a socially sanctioned relationship with a Bengali cultural past just because the language happened to be my mother tongue. It dawned on me that I was falsely under the impression that my cultural past was alive. However, it was in the process of translation that I realized it had been dead for a while and had turned into a "ghost." This "ghost" began to haunt me at the moment of our encounter, that is, in the act of translation. It led me to question if I had at all grown up as a "Bengali," and if so, why was my own cultural past a spectral presence to me. This cultural past was a ghost that I knew existed, but with which I could not identify.

We are all "Bhuts" as the ghost wife remarks in W. Crooke's story, if we continue to believe that our cultural world has remained static. These stories capture a changing Bengali society and social values, caught at the cusp of tradition and modernity, with the village in half-light juxtaposed to the blinding brightness of the city lights. There is no "real connection" (to quote Samanta) with these ghosts, now mostly conspicuous by their absence. Thus, not just the stories, perhaps even I am like those caskets carrying a dead literature, culture, and social imagination, content to leave these heirlooms in a bag of fish bones. Jonathan Parry points out that, in Hinduism, those who die a bad death are liable to get stuck in the limbo of pret-hood on a long term basis. Such spirits draw attention to their miserable lot by soliciting the help of the living to take measures to alleviate their plight (229). Hence, the ghost wife needed her human husband to release her from the state of Bhuts, while the human husband also required the help of his ghost wife to prevent himself from becoming a ghost. A story lives on as long as there is a teller for it, and there cannot be a storyteller without a story to tell. They are the sources of sustenance for each other. As Samanta writes, these ghost stories speak in the specific voice of a land, its people, their social groups, and beliefs (13). Nevertheless, one must also understand that this "voice" is also specific to its particular milieu. Hence, the task of translation not only involved translating from one language to another, but also translating a specific sociocultural imagination and conception of the past to the present. As a result, even one's familiar terrain revealed elements which seemed foreign because of the time that had passed. It must be noted that the exercise of translation in this regard is neither a form of exorcism nor a deliberate self-

exoticization. It is not a choice to be made between dichotomous identities, whether linguistic or cultural, instead it is to create a meeting point for the broken floating fragments of languages and cultures within and outside of us.

"Side by side," the meaning of the prefix "para" in Greek perhaps best describes what the paranormal specifically constituted in Bengali folklore and literature. The word "bhoot" (ভূত) in Bengali does not only refer to a "ghost" or "apparition." It also means the "past" that exists in the form of an agrestic spectral presence. The ghosts in the translated stories were not just a constitutive part of one's early childhood memory and literature; they were also considered to be a simultaneous and subliminal presence in the rural life and folk culture of Bengal. Largely eccentric and idiosyncratic, these ghosts such as Gechho Bhoot, Mechho Bhoot, Mamdo Bhoot, Shankachunni, Skondhokata, Brahmadaitya, and Nishi and so on, were supposed to inhabit peripheral spaces close to human habitation, in a parallel coexistence with normal life. Thus, "para-normal" in this context can be interpreted as an extension of the normal, such that death is considered to be that line running between life and what comes *after*-life, in the Bengali sociocultural imagination, that one must cross over to get to the next state in the journey. The afterlife as a translation must be read in conjunction with the Bengali sociocultural imagination of the living world that has a formative influence on its conception. However, as the stories illustrate, these indigenous ghosts of rural Bengal are not just creations of their environment, but they also hold the key to understanding their creators.

> The fact that each cultural system produces its own version of the world after death, and its own kinds of ghosts, suggests that although the need to imagine might be similar among all societies, the actual imagined result may differ according to specific cultural/local conditions. (Poo 10)

To add to this point, I would like to put forth that the collective imagination is not just contingent upon specific cultural or local conditions, but also upon its spatiotemporal context. Each of the changes that this collective imagination undergoes marks an end to its former life. However, it is through translation that one has the opportunity to engage with that past. The act of translation is mutually beneficial for the language from which it is translated, as well as the language into which it is translated. Firstly, translation offers us with the opportunity to add to the existing realm of discourse in the language into which the text is translated. Secondly and

simultaneously, it offers the original text, which is rooted in a specific time and space, to move on to another life, as a translated text in a different realm of discourse. These ghosts and their stories gradually began to lose cultural currency with the advent of modernity in Bengali literature, while the twin handmaidens of modernity- rapid scale urbanization and migration to the cities-contributed towards the changing sociocultural imagination. Children read about witches and headless ghosts in western literature, but they were unaware of the "dainis" and "skondhokatas" of Bengali folklore, an ignorance that is flourishing even today. From the collective social imagination and literary discourse, it moved into another state that can be termed the collective social memory, and it will continue to be in that state until it perishes with those who remember them. In this case, the task of the translator would be to help them gain passage on to the next realm, to bring them into the domain of another language, so that they are reborn in another state of existence.

Paul Ricoeur in his book, *On Translation*, uses the word "work" in its Freudian double sense, the "work of remembering" and the "work of mourning," to refer to the work of the translator. Ricoeur writes, "In translation too, work is advanced with some salvaging and some acceptance of loss" (3). Therefore, in the journey towards an after-life for the bhoots of Bengal, translation is but a process and the translated text is not a finished product. In translation, the stories are in a state of being much like the ghosts in the stories, until it is time for them to pass on to another state. However, it must be noted that this process can also mark a learning curve for the translator, in reshaping one's notion of what is foreign and what is familiar. One realizes how knowing the language does not mean being equally well-versed in that culture even though it is one's own, and how these inadequacies are revealed by a language that is supposedly not one's own. This is a reiteration in itself of how the process of translation is instrumental in bringing out the various social and cultural changes that a community goes through over time. As the ghost wife tells her husband to marry her again when she is reborn, through translation, I have renewed my relationship with that cultural past that Bengali offers to me, albeit translated into English, which is the language of my thought processes.

The challenges encountered in this task were many: trying to find the equivalent word in English for the Bengali word; sometimes it was a matter of grasping the meaning of the Bengali word through its sense impression in English, or to choose the one most apt from the options and translate the meaning with which it is culturally imbued; to understand the differences in cultural

conceptions which seemed alien to me at first because of their contingency upon a specific time and place, then to translate it through and into English and see if it could be retained or was worth retention. At times, a sentence had to be broken up into many parts upon translation, keeping in mind the differences in the grammatical and syntactical structures of the two languages, but also playing around with them to test the flexibility of structures. I have also been guilty of an occasional interpolation here and there in a couple of stories, but that has mostly served to elucidate the difference between the action and thought of the character. What has come to the fore in the process of translation is not the dissolution of the original text, language, and cultural elements in another language. Rather it was a task of remembrance, and most importantly, of rejuvenation.

As a translator, in that moment of translation, I found myself seated on a boat swaying gently in a mélange of words, both English and Bengali, in and out of both worlds afforded by these two languages. But as the process began, I was holding each word by its hand and helping it cross over. Sometimes it was a safe passage, but at times it was a violent struggle. In their English garb, the meanings of the Bengali words seemed to have taken on another life. Editing and revision ensured their clothes fit them properly and if one happened to be ill-fitting, it had to be discarded. But clothes do not make a Bengali ghost. As these words were strung together, sentence after sentence began to make up a story that seemed to recall their past in the Bengali original. However, creations are shaped by their environment. If we consider the act of translation to be of a creative nature, then it follows suit that the English translations do become different entities compared to the originals. The creative control and strategies of the translator determine how much should remain of their former selves and exactly how to get them across. The ghosts in the ghost stories do not exclusively belong to the respective writers. They belong to anyone who reads them and wants to write about them, and translation opens them up to the world that becomes theirs for the taking. It is the act of translation that truly makes them my own rather than merely assuming them to be a part of my cultural heritage. It follows from the Classical Latin “translatus,” past participle of “transferre,” from “trans” (across) and “latus” (borne) or “carried.” It is through translations that one bears their stories across time, like heirlooms, from the past on to the present. Even the various meanings attributed to the Middle and Old English variants offer several definitions for the act of translation, such as, to change, to explain, to expound, to interpret and most importantly, to engage.

Death and the afterlife are universal conceptions that have been formulated across cultures, but there are particular differences which we must translate for one another. These differences are not only inter-cultural, but also intra-cultural. Just as no two human beings are the same, similarly, neither are two ghosts alike. It must be reiterated that this difference persists not only within two separate cultures, but also within the same culture. This difference occurs due to the passage of time. As Lefevere and Bassnett observe, "History has turned out to be the ghost in that machine, and as the ghost has grown, the machine has crumbled" (1). The world of the supernatural in these bhooter golpo is shaped by the world of the living, which is often ridiculed for its staleness of belief and the transience of life that somehow seems to make it stationary, characterized by a rigidly stratified and normatively constructed society, with its inevitable culmination in death. However, the afterlife carries a promise. It is in the afterlife that we come to see movement, growth, change, transition, a procession towards another point in the journey. The world of the bhoots, the para-normal beings of Bengal, may have been constructed and limited by the conceptions formulated in the living world, but death frees them into a singular kind of existence that is also pluralistic at the same time. Stemming from this point, the ghosts speak to us in the specific voice of a land, its people, their social groups and beliefs, and all the miscellaneous and disparate cultural elements that are constitutive of any sociocultural milieu. Simultaneously, they mark the changes that have taken place since the time of the setting of these stories. Thus, in the act of translation, the translator not only travels from one language to another, but also back and forth in time, mediating between two cultures in the process, such that the moment of translation marks a return as well as a rebirth. In the words of the poet Agha Shahid Ali,

> Memory…has no translation. We knew it in a loved version…we knew it well in the desolation…so many summers, so many monsoons, dimmed on Time's shelf, return, framed by the voice you gave to each story. ("Summers of Translation" 255)

To briefly outline, the Introduction focused on looking at death as an act of translation between the two realms of life and the afterlife, as well as the ramifications of such an approach towards analysing Bengali ghost fiction. Chapter I will look at life from a thanatological perspective, that is, a study of the Bengali sociocultural imagination in relation to the concepts of death and the afterlife as imagined in these "bhooter golpo." Chapter II will offer a picture of life as translated into the afterlife, through an analysis of the stories in the original language of

composition and in English translation. Chapter III will be a meditation on death as translation and vice versa. Furthermore, the third chapter will also focus on death as an act of creating a future for the past, through translation. If one looks at the translated text as the afterlife of the original text, then the task of the translator is to help the text gain passage on to the next realm. That is, to bring them into the domain of another language, marking a return and a rebirth. The task of the researcher would be to explicate upon and outline the efficacy of such a project.

CHAPTER I

Life: A Thanatological Approach

Truth is rarely pure and never simple,[8] much like death, which is never death plain and simple.[9] This must come across as a startling analogy for that inevitable and ineluctable truth of life, that is, death. However, death itself presents the most baffling and challenging hermeneutical paradox: it is a fact that constantly begets fiction. To understand death is to accept that there are no definitive formulations of it. Instead, there are several approaches towards this truth and interpretive dilemmas afforded by the paths taken.

It is the horror of death which generates fantasy, illusion, and history, whether it is in the construction of mausoleums to the dead, magical transformations into eternal life, or belief in fictive realities like afterlives and resurrections (Piven 4). Social mechanisms, religion, culture, ideology, and the various belief systems that pervade human life undertake the task of mitigating the terror of death, decay, and annihilation. As Piven observes, these palliative measures are "imagined" to cope with and alleviate the terror of death. Perhaps in lieu of this statement, an intellection on ghosts and the afterlife would now seem much less a trivial comedy for serious people.

Death induces us to imagine the unimaginable, the oxymoronic state of being dead, which has been conceived of as the Abyss, the Night, the Deserts of the Divine nature, into which the soul must descend with agony, abandonment, barrenness, taedium vitae, shuddering, and shrinking from the loss and deprivation of self-hood and obliteration of personal identity (Otto 108-9). Thanatology, derived from the name Thanatos, the god of death, is a branch of science that studies death, especially its social and psychological aspects. Death is named Thanatos, the twin brother of Hypnos, the god of sleep, in Greek mythology. The mission of Thanatos is to accompany the departed to Hades, the underworld, where the ancient boatman Charon ferries them across the River Styx, which separates the underworld from the world above (Tamm 670). In the illustrations on Greek vases, Thanatos and Hypnos are depicted as two young men; the former often portrayed as an earnest, winged youngster holding an extinguished

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[8] See Jack's dialogue, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, Wilde 54.

[9] See Piven 7.

flare. But if we shift our focus from the images and conceptions of death in western cultures and strike a Bengal light[10] on the east, it is then that we arrive at the protean nature of this truth.

Death is also the source of the creative impulse, the site of gestation for an array of divergent sociocultural beliefs and conceptions of what happens after death. Therefore, death is life-giving. It is a continuing and intriguing source of human debate and wonderment (Kellehear 448). The truth of death is that it is a site of contesting beliefs, a constellation of ideas and a fundamental determinant in shaping cultures across the world. It is death which brings to the fore the state of disputatious harmony in which cultures exist, and thus to look at life from the perspective of death is to arrive at it thanatologically. Rajshekhar Bosu in "Bhushondir Maathe," which I have translated[11] as "The Field of Bhusaṇḍi,"[12] writes that it is common knowledge that human beings turn into ghosts after death. But the question that he poses is that if it is so, then how does one make the theories of heaven, hell, and rebirth agree with such a concept. In Bosu's formulation for the story, the natural explanation would be that atheists do not have a soul and transform into gases like oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen after their death. Those who are believers among Christians do possess a soul, but they do not believe in rebirth. Their ghosts congregate in a large "waiting room" after death, where they await the last judgment. Once the judgment has been passed, some ghosts are placed in heaven, while the rest find shelter in hell for eternity. It must be noted that the power that they had enjoyed in life is greatly diminished in their spirit state. Foreign ghosts and spirits are bound to the waiting room. Bosu adds that those who have seen séances are aware of the fact that it is very difficult to call upon the spirits of western ghosts. But the system for Hindus is different, as Bosu writes,

> There is a separate system for Hindus because we believe in everything ranging from rebirth, heaven, hell, destiny, Rishikesh, nirvana, mukti and so on. When Hindus die, they first turn into ghosts who can now live their afterlife in complete independence and according to their tastes and preferences. Occasionally, they can also contact the mortal world, which is a great advantage. However, this state is transitory. Some are reborn just after two or four days of being here, some in ten or twenty years while there are others

[10] Bengal light: light produced by a mixture of sulfur, saltpetre, and orpiment. These blue lights, as they were called, were and still are often used at sea for signaling and illumination. They were also known as Bengal lights, probably because Bengal was the chief source of saltpetre. (http://www.britannica.com/technology/Bengal-light)
[11] It must be noted that all the translations from Bengali ghost stories into English are by the author of the dissertation unless otherwise stated.
[12] See entry on Bhūśaṇḍī, *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary*. Digital Dictionaries of South Asia. Web.

> who might be stuck in this state for a few centuries. Sometimes, ghosts are also sent to heaven or hell for a change of air. This is good for their health because they can enjoy themselves in heaven while a visit to hell ensures that the sins of their past lives are expiated and their subtle bodies become lighter, not to mention the opportunity to meet some distinguished personalities while they are there. But those who are fortunate enough to make a pilgrimage to Kashi or Nepal's Pashupatinath, or get a chance to see Vishnu's reincarnation on the Rathyatra chariot, or those who absolve themselves of their sins at Rishikesh, there is no rebirth for them-they cut straight to salvation. (90-100)

The translated passage illustrates some of the differences in the conception of death and the afterlife within Hinduism, and also when viewed in juxtaposition with other religions. It also demonstrates how a cultural system is a tissue of interlacing beliefs born out of the syncretism inherent in religions and the cross-pollination of ideas amongst various social groups. These external structures are imperative in our understanding of the function of death because of what Peter Berta refers to as the "cognitive ambivalence of death" (13). Human consciousness cannot access one's own death as an inner experience. Thus, to effectively abate the anxiety emerging from this ambivalence, every culture is bound to attribute some meaning to it. However, the cultural polysemy in the conception of death and the afterlife might not come out clearly if we take recourse to the archetypal formulations offered by the major world religions. In order to locate the function and influence of death in a particular culture, one may avail of the resources presented by overarching religious traditions and systems of belief. But to clearly comprehend the meaning attributed to it by a particular culture, I propose to follow the emic approach. Emic is a term in the social sciences, pertaining to the analysis of a cultural system or its features from the perspective of a participant in that culture.[13]

Myriad theories attempt to explicate the influence of death anxiety, ranging from the Freudian conception of thanatophobia which postulates that the logical culmination of life is death, to the one offered by Ernest Becker's 1973 book, *The Denial of Death*, wherein the fear and anxiety emanating from death becomes an active agent, people's most profound source of concern (Kastenbaum 30). Kastenbaum writes, "Ritualistic behavior on the part of both individuals and social institutions generally has the underlying purpose of channeling and finding

[13] For definition of "emic," see *Advanced English Dictionary*.

employment for what otherwise would surface as disorganizing death anxiety" (30). Thus, one looks at death not as an inevitable culmination of life, or placed within a teleological framework. Instead, death is located within the continuum of life and acts as a stimulus for the living. The afterlife then, emanates from the need for a social construction of reality that is reassuring, accessible, and perceivable by human individuals, involving a "unique" concept of death and afterlife (Berta 15). Arnold van Gennep writes that the most widespread idea is that of a world analogous to ours and of a society organized in the same way as it is here (152). In a way, the afterlife is a reflection of and also reflects upon life, holding up a mirror to it.

Hence, the ground is laid for an enquiry into the "unique" concept of death and afterlife in Bengali culture that will be undertaken from an emic perspective. However, even such a position is problematic, as will be illustrated in Chapter III with its attendant notions of familiarity and foreignness because of the changing nature of cultural beliefs. The bhooter golpo (ghost stories) of Bengal, which initiated my foray into this field, are in a narrative genre that is itself in an undefined zone, somewhere between children's literature and popular fiction for adults. Seldom do these trivial reads invite serious academic investigation, especially into the causes of their genesis and the particular figures that populate these stories. These stories serve a specific function, posing the same difficult questions regarding life and death that have haunted philosophers and theologians, but in a palliative mode, cloaked in the garb of entertainment and pleasure, which is the primary function of these narratives.

Humayun Ahmed, in his introduction to an anthology of selected ghost stories of Bengal, *Amar Priyo Voutik Golpo,* reminisces over the normalcy of accepting the presence of paranormal beings in the fabric of everyday rural life in Bengal. In the villages of Bengal, the presence of ghosts was a routine occurrence, considered to be "gharer manush" or part of the household, which encompassed the entire village community. Ahmed recounts an incident from his childhood when he had gone to visit his maternal grandfather, and a guest had arrived for a meeting one evening. The flow of conversation was smoothly continuing between the two of them until the guest suddenly lamented, "A petni[14] (pretni) has been disturbing us a lot of late." Ahmed's voice takes over the narrative, telling us how this petni (female ghost) had been disturbing the guest and his family. The nature of the disturbance was such that if one fried fish

[14] Colloquial pronunciation of "pretni" in the Bengali language.

in the house, then the pretni would extend her hand through the kitchen window, and try to snatch the fried fish. Upon failing to get her hands on any of the fried fish, it would entreat upon the family in a nasal voice. Ahmed observes that the most intriguing thing to note was that no one in his family was either surprised by this story or found it unusual. It was commonly reported and widely believed that prets (spirits) preferred fried fish, and it was completely natural for them to disturb the living in order to procure the said delicacy.

These elements of continuity bridge the gap between life and the afterlife with certain caveats in place. For instance, the fact that ghosts, who are essentially devoid of life, still continue to have an appetite for fish (the Bengali affinity for which is world famous),[15] but they cannot fry the fish because fire is considered to be a divine element. Ahmed's tale also curiously points towards the processes of acculturation that operate irrespective of different religious ascriptions within a social community. Firstly, Bengali Muslims have no prohibitions against shrimp and other forms of seafood unlike those belonging to other parts of the world (Roberts, Taylor Sen 252). Secondly, the incidence of prets for Ahmed's family is more a matter of sociocultural belief than religious faith. Although religion is also a crucial element in the structuring of society and cultural life of its members, such that, the Bengali afterlife has a figure called the Mamdo Bhoot, the ghost of a Muslim man, which is simultaneously a denial of the deceased individual's self-hood, as well as a re-affirmation of the social categorization in life. Thus, death is conceived as less of a breach in society and more of a different rendition of human life.

In Monoj Bosu's short story "Laal Chul" (translated as "Red Hair"), the deceased bride becomes the inhabitant of a "sheemahin ashroyhin bipul shunnyota," translated as "an infinite, shelterless, vast emptiness." The following excerpt has been translated from the story,

> His bride-to-be was now deceased. Adorned in her red Benarasi sari, his bashful bride was meant to have taken her rightful place next to him. However, her destiny had changed in a moment's notice and she was now the inhabitant of an infinite, shelterless, vast emptiness. (134-145)

Thus, she had passed into a realm of an ungraspable nothingness, an abysmal chaos as opposed to the social order, cognizable structures and spatiotemporal coherence of human life.

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[15] For further information on the role of fish in Bengali culture and cuisine, see Roberts, Taylor Sen 252-258.

This realm of existence that is after life and beyond the order of human comprehension, without any systematic social structure, begs the need for one. It necessitates the production of another order, for the comfort of those who survive the deceased, as well as for the deceased, if death is seen as a "transitory state" leading to a journey on to another realm. Thoughts about human life have experiential bases that cannot be extended to the realm after death (Obayashi x). The human imagination about death and afterlife thus becomes an extension of human thoughts about life, and the task here is to analyze and interpret these elements in order to glean insights into the construction of life itself. In the case of death, there is no "empirical familiarity" for the human understanding. It lacks an "empirical basis" or the "conceptual tools" which lead to the encounter with that ungraspable "nothingness." Therefore, we have no choice but to deal with it as yet another form of life- afterlife (Obayashi xi). It is important to note that notions of family and belonging are intricately woven into the processes of socialization of an individual such that, it also colours the afterlife. The afterlife is predominantly a social requirement (Obayashi xii) even though it stems from an emotional need to visualize the departed loved one within a familiar setting, of order, family, and society, rather than conceptualizing an entity in an endless orphaned eternity.

If the individual's life is socially produced in and by society, the afterlife is also a meticulous creation, produced through a complex set of rituals, set into motion by the death of the individual. In ritual Vedic tradition, the cremation of the earthly body was a necessary step in order to establish the departed in the "World of the Fathers" (Hopkins 148). As Hopkins outlines, the developed ritual tradition added the need for a special set of post-cremation rituals to the early Vedic understanding, termed as the "sapinḍikaraṇa," to facilitate the transition of the individual to its ancestral world after its demise. The word, "sapinḍi" (or sapinda), means a kinsman removed not before the seventh upward generation or related by the "same body." The term "jñāti" is synonymous with the term "eka-deha," "eka-sarira," and most importantly, "sapinda." All these terms refer to the group of people "sharing the same body" relationship (Inden, Nicholas 13). The word "karaṇa" stands for an act or a deed performed by the kinsman, while the word "pinḍi" or "pinda" means a lump of food offered to the spirit of a deceased person. A human being has to perform several "samskaras"[16] during the span of his life. Every samskara is regarded as a transformative action that "refines" and "purifies" the living body,

[16] See Chapter III for a detailed discussion on "samskaras."

initiating it into new statuses and relationships by giving it a new birth (Inden, Nicholas 37). The samskaras of the dead body entails a transformation of the bodily substances and their codes for conduct. This causes a disturbance in the relationship between the living and the dead that has to be addressed by post-death funerary practices to restore balance.

In order to elucidate upon these transformations, I will extensively refer to Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas' seminal work of cultural anthropology, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (1977). They begin with the conception of the human body in Hinduism, in which a living body is believed to be constitutive of two complementary parts, a "sthula sharira" (gross body) and a "suksma sharira" (subtle body) (63). It is believed that the latter combines with the former during the formation of a human being. The subtle body consists of the mind, the five sense organs of knowledge: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin, and the five organs of action: voice, hands, feet, anus, and genitals. The subtle body contained within the gross body is in turn entrusted with an even subtler substance, the conscious self ("atman" or "atma"). Death leads to the incineration of the gross body during cremation. The subtle body of a person is released from the gross body once the period of "karma" or life is over. The period of death impurity begins after this release. It is believed that a portion of the subtle body is attracted to a new embryonic gross body that suits the subtle body and is reborn as a consequence. The other part continues to persist in the subtle form and is known as the "prēta-sharira" or "departed body." It is this preta body which has to be nourished as a living body during the post-death rituals. During the period of death impurity, the sapinda must offer the preta of the deceased, ten balls of cooked rice.

Once the period of death impurity lifts, the first of a series of funerary rites are performed known as the "ekoddista sraddhas." The term "shraddha" (respectful offering) in Bengali is derived from the term "shroddha," which is the Bengali word for "faith." Hence, the offering is made with faith towards the departed. The symbolic action of the "sraddha" is the "gift of a body of food" or "pinda-dan," the offering of a ball of cooked rice, serving dual functions of symbolizing the unformed body (for the next life) of the deceased and nourishing that body at the same time. It may be rightly conjectured that this belief stems from the fact that Bengalis (Hindus mainly) refuse to believe in the cessation of life even after death. Instead, they regard death as a state of preparation for the next stage rather than a termination. The initial sraddha is performed on the day after the impurity of death has been removed. It is followed by a monthly shraddha in each subsequent month on the lunar day of the death, and in the sixth and twelfth

months by a special six-monthly shraddha. On each of these occasions, the "preta-sharira" is fed with pindas intended exclusively for its benefit. However, on the first anniversary of its death, the pinda for the preta is mixed with the pinda offered to the ancestors of the dead ("pitr") in the sapindakarana shraddha. Once this offering is made, the deceased is thought to take its place among the ancestors and to rejoin the body of his clan's male seeds (Inden, Nicholas 64). What this lengthy reference to post-death rituals intends to show is how death and birth can be conceptualized in similar terminology. Any act that changes the status of a person by transforming the body is classified as an act of birth. Thus, all the samskaras meet this qualification. As Inden and Nicholas observe, birth in the restricted sense of parturition is important for the simple reason that it is the act by which a person becomes established on earth. The other samskaras merely change his earthly status to being born or established on other planes of existence. Even the samskara of the dead body is considered to be a form of birth, or, more accurately, a rebirth (Inden, Nicholas 66).

Thus, these rites, which are performed after the individual's death, involve the social community and facilitate the perpetuity of social structures, collectively produced by the social imaginary even in the afterlife. These rituals are followed by another set of rituals, performed a year later, both for the most recently deceased and the generations of prior ancestors. They serve to establish a continuity stemming from life into the afterlife.

> Afterlife is thus not a matter of individual effort alone, but depends on the ritual performances of one's immediate and later descendants to establish and sustain it…From the perspective of this tradition, worldly life and afterlife are on a continuum, linked by the process of ritual cause and effect that brings rewards both during and after one's lifetime. (Hopkins 148-9)

It is through a constant and ongoing socialization that the individual is "created" in society. The afterlife too is a product of similar forces of socialization that act upon the individual in death as in life. The post-cremation rituals reassign the body after death to another social order, "albeit imaginary" (Bloch, Parry 4), which is demonstrated by the bhooter golpo of Bengal. The afterlife in Bengali fiction and social imagination is a richly illustrated realm. In order to understand the socialization of the afterlife, one must begin at the end, that is, the death of the individual. In their introduction to *Death and the regeneration of life* (1982), Maurice

Bloch and Jonathan Parry elucidate upon the rituals concerning death and the regeneration of life in the afterlife. They write that the deceased person was not only a biological individual, but also a social being grafted upon the physical individual. In that case, death is a form of destruction that is tantamount to a sacrilege against the social order. "Society" responds to this threat by recovering what it had given of itself to the deceased by re-grafting it on to another host. Hence, there are two phases to the mortuary rituals, which Block and Parry outline as a phase of "disaggregation" (represented by the temporal disposal of the corpse) followed by a phase of "reinstallation" (represented by the secondary burial) which signals the collective social triumph over death. They add that this dual process mirrors the beliefs pertaining to the fate of the soul and the ritual condition of the mourners.

> It takes time for the collectivity to readjust to the death of one of its members, and this finds expression in the idea of a dangerous period when the departed soul is potentially malevolent and socially uncontrolled, and in the separation of mourners from everyday life…The final ceremony, however, involves the reassertion of society manifested by the end of mourning and by the belief that the soul has been incorporated into the society of the dead and has settled down-in the same way as the collective consciousness of the living has been resettled by the funerary rituals. It is not, then, a matter of the fate of the soul determining the treatment of the corpse, but rather of the nature of society and the state of the collective conscience determining both the treatment of the corpse and the supposed condition of the soul. (4)

This tends to explain the rather "nonpersonalistic" ascription of identity, largely social in character, to the ghosts in Bengali fiction. The preoccupation with the continuity of the social order even after death can be seen in the light of this statement, as death is taken to be the expiration of the biological individual, not the "social body" that was grafted on to it. Hence, ideas of life continue to exist in the afterlife, which is further socially produced, with a separate genealogy of ghosts, their own order, norms, customs, rules, and values, taken largely from life, but in translation. The death of the corporeal frame necessitates the mounting of another picture; the demise of the individual creates a void that has to be balanced by the birth of another body, a *ghost* body, on the other side of life, such that, the balance of social order is always maintained. It is interesting to note that the term "bhoutik deha" not only means a "ghost," but also an "elemental body or a mortal frame" because the root word "bhu" refers to the earth, the world or

that which comes from the land.[17] In this sense, the ghost in the Bengali sociocultural imagination is a creature of the land since its body is also constituted from the elements of the earth.

Bengal is known for its rice cultivation, the pinda is made from balls of rice, a product of the land. Hence, the being after death is in that sense, an elemental being, a “bhoutik deha” because its body is formed from the produce of the land. The symbolical meaning attributed to rice is crucial in understanding the way in which the ghost body is conceived. The pindas are fed to the crows, to a cow or thrown in the river for the fish, marking the re-entry of the being into the frame of the corporeal world. The social fabric of the agricultural society of rural Bengal is an accretive enterprise, deeply imbued with the traditional cultural beliefs of the land, colouring the rituals and rites associated with birth, death, and the regeneration of life. Arindam Samaddar in his study of agricultural as well as cultural rituals associated with rice production in Bengal, points out that often the whole community participates in the celebration of such rituals, “embodying a shared body of meaning and communal aspiration.” These activities carry the weight of symbolic action that are deeply formalized, leading to Samaddar’s formulation that these rituals are born of particular environments and occur in time with changing season (112).

I posit that the ghost is a purely social being in this regard, without even the necessity of a corporeal visage. It is a socially produced body divested of the natural biological processes of life. However, a ghost also serves as a carrier of all the social ideas infused by the imagination of the collectivity. The ghost “body” exists as a pure manifestation of the social imagination. Its identity is mapped and marked by collectively performed rituals. In order to understand this disembodied “body,” let us take a look at one of the rituals performed during the transplantation of rice seeds from the seedbed to the field.[18] The ritual is conducted to beseech the gods to send rain as the monsoons are crucial for the cultivation of rice. In the case of little to no rain during the months of Ashar (June–July), Shraban (July–August), and Bhadra (August–September) pertaining to the Bengali calendar, the villagers collect money as subscriptions from all of the families in the village, irrespective of caste, creed, and gender, for the worship of the god Shiba (the tribal incarnation of the Hindu deity Shiva). During the worship, the laya or the village priest

[17] See entry on “bhu,” *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary.* Digital Dictionaries of South Asia. Web.
[18] See A. Samaddar 114.

applies clay on a small horse and implores the gods to send rain so that the clay is washed away from the body. This clay is the symbolic representation of the village deity.

Another instance to be noted is that of the Narayan Shila. Narayan being a manifestation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, the root word "nar" also means human being, thus, the most supreme of all human beings. The "shila" in this case is a stone or a rock that is supposed to represent the deity that is carried by priests into ordinary households if there is a puja (worship) to be performed. These disembodied deities are imagined in such a way that their elemental connection with the earth is preserved, but this form of embodiment also frees them from the limitations of corporeality. The world "bhuti" refers to birth or origination, but disaggregation of the word to "bhu+iti" can lead us into interesting directions of thought. For instance, the "iti" of "itikatha" (tale, legend, and history) or "itihaash" (history) can be interpreted as an existence that predates the present conceived order of the world, in short, the past. Thus, one may look at bhoots and the world of the afterlife as a future for life that can also construed as the past. The word "bhoot" itself means the past as well as supernatural entities, not existing in nature or subject to natural laws of material existence. If they do not have a physical existence in nature, it can be argued that their existence is in the same realm as that of ideas, discourses, and the imagination that has come to acquire social meanings. The word "bibhuti" refers to godhead, divinity or the special powers of Shiva, whereas the word "bhoot" also refers to the class of supernatural beings who attend upon Shiva. The god of the cremation ground is Mahashashaneshwar, another name for Shiva, who is believed to be a deity predating the incidence of Hinduism in India (Flood 201).

> The avatar of Mahadev who presides over this particular cremation ground, Shashaneshwar Mahadev, is considered to be the most watchful deity in these parts. Although we have never received any evidence to confirm if this apparently watchful deity actually is keeping a watch on us all the time or he is to be found immersed in a trance. A majority of the population refuses to believe otherwise. It is their unshakeable faith in that divine grace which has given an exalted status to the cremation ground in our village.
>
> Translated from "Aguntak" (The Untimely Visitor) by Premendrakumar Ray. (22-27)

The importance of the cremation ground in Bengali life and culture will be gradually taken up in the discussion on liminality. At the moment, let us continue to dwell further on the plurality of meanings inherent in words. The word "brahman" means the divine absolute, the supra-personal Brahma,[19] as well as individual consciousness, referring to the indissoluble union between the two (Otto 204). Similarly, the word "deha" refers to the body in life as well as to the corpse in death. "Dehanta" refers to death whereas "dehantara" means rebirth or the transmigration of the soul to another body, to be born again. The term "dehadhari" refers to human beings or those who possess a body, whereas the term for ghosts in Bengali is "ashariri," or those without a body, thus disembodied. The bodies of the disembodied are creations of the collective social imagination. In death and the afterlife, we deal with the death of the individual and the life of the "social body" grafted on to the deceased individual. In this case, death is carefully incorporated into the social processes of life, marking its continuity through the sociocultural elements of life that are reconstituted in the afterlife. For instance, a deceased Brahmin will become a Brahmin ghost, the Brahmadaitya. He is one of the most powerful ghosts, entrusted with maintaining the order of the ghost world. The following passage is from the story, "Brahmadaitya" by Jibonmoy Guha, to illustrate the characteristics of this particular class of bhoots.

> …Tutul's grandmother tried frightening him to shut him up, "See that palm tree over there? Do you know who stays on top of that tall palm tree?"
>
> Through the window situated on the bedside, one could see dense foliage, the field, a farm, a pond and an orchard of areca-nut trees. A short distance away, there was a tall palm tree situated close to the pineapple orchard. Tutul pointed to that palm tree and asked, "Who stays there grandma?"
>
> "Brahmadaitya."
>
> "What is that?"
>
> "A giant demon."
>
> "How does he look?"

[19] For the significance of Brahma in the pantheon of Hindu gods, see Brockington 119.

> "Scary. Two horns on his head, radish-like teeth, and two saucers for ears. Long hands, short legs, large nails on his fingers. And his eyes, they are like two balls of fire." (291-293)

These stories have often been dismissed as parables for children, but we may look at them from a different perspective in order to see how they serve as markers of change for societies and the cultures in which they are incubated. In the story "Aadhibhoutik" by Santoshkumar Ghosh, the very title has multiple meanings, ranging from that which originates from the elements of the earth or pertaining to organic life, to one whose existence is purely elemental, or affected or produced by a living organism. The story is a reflection on the vagaries and vicissitudes of life after death, conducted in the dialogic mode between a writer and a ghost, punctuated with astute observations on the differences between the conception of life before and after death. The title of the story "aadhibhoutik" serves a crucial part in the explication of the nature of ghosts in the Bengali sociocultural imagination. The ghost in the story could either be an elemental being, or an invention by an individual or a social imagination. Towards the end of the story, the ghost opines:

> "Since our form is not fleshed out properly, it is but natural that we will be intangible. Is it not so? We have died, thus you can say that we are not conventionally historical, but in a sense each of us represents a separate history. Think how many of us have been there since the beginning of this earth to now. Truth be told, we are the actual majority, we are far more in number than your kind. Doesn't your received wisdom tell you that those who have the numbers will be the ones to exert their authority?" (1-11)

The ghost's observation of each of them being a separate history is important in understanding how the conception of the afterlife is also integral to the formation of a past. If becoming a ghost is the outcome of death, it is also a process of history's becoming, keying into the continuous cycle of life and death. For instance in the story, "Bhootoore Pathshala" (The Primary School for Ghosts) by Sunil Jana, the headmaster of the school for ghosts, Goda Bhoot comments, "I have to take birth as a human being once again and build a new school there. Apparently, there is a dearth of good teachers in the human world…" (157-160). Thus, death is reduced in its capacity as a disruptive force and incorporated into the cycle of life. These ghosts may be considered to represent a "separate history," creating a contiguous social order that

extends from life to death to afterlife, and then on to another life, and so on. This facilitates the process of an individual belonging not only to a social order in his present life, but becoming part of a larger cosmic chain of continuity, such that his existence post death can also be a precursor to his next life, a "history" so to speak. The tradition of these bhoots then serves as a parahistorical account of the Bengali society and sociocultural imagination.

The word "paralaukika" refers to phenomena which concern the next world, conducive to life in the realm after death, thus, a world which is coterminous with the human world. This brings me to the formulation of the word "para" whose original Greek meaning was "side by side."[20] It is also the case in the "pāra" of "paralaukika," a class of beings, paranormal if you will, which exist side by side with the normal or the normative world of human beings, such that even their norms are taken from our world of human existence. The word "loka" refers to a person, a human being, or mankind in general, which also forms a part of "aihalaukika," that is the world of life bound by a temporal order. Hence, if we were to study the genealogy of ghosts in the Bengali world, it has to be a form of history that cannot be established within the order of human history. However, human history is fundamental to and also influenced by these paranormal beings. Therefore, ghost fiction can be supplemental to cultural histories, or provide a parahistorical take on Hinduism and the diverse undocumented practices that might have been prevalent over the ages but have now ceased to exist.

Often the world of the living and the world of ghosts overlap and inhabit similar spaces,

> The bel tola was the biggest haunt of all kinds of ghosts. There was a Gechho Bhoot, the tree-climbing ghost, a Mechho Bhoot, fish eating ghost, a Mamdo Bhoot, the ghost of a Muslim man, a Shitke Bhoot, a stealthy ghost and a Shankhachunni, the ghost of a married woman, and all of them used to assemble under the bel tree.
>
> It was a bel tola just in name because other kinds of trees were also to be found aplenty, such as the hijol, tetul, taal and tamal trees. All those trees which were known to be favoured by ghosts and sprites grew there. The place had become a popular haunt for ghosts.

[20] Refer to Paraclete, or The Holy Ghost, from Old French paraclit, from Late Latin paraclet and Latin paracletus ("advocate, defender, helper, protector, conforter"), from Ancient Greek παράκλητος (paraklētos, "called to help, helper"), from παρά (para, "beside") + καλέω (kaleō, "I call"). *Advanced English Dictionary.*

Translated from "Bhooter Khoppore" (Ghost Trap) by Robidas Saharay. (115-118)

This "geography of haunting" (O. Davies 45) is crucial in our understanding of the significance of liminality in the conception of the afterlife and their connection to liminal spaces. Davies writes that the concept of liminality pertains to the state of being on the border or threshold of two defined states of existence, which is also considered to be symbolic of transitional stages when undergoing rites of passage. For instance, it is believed, as Manik Bandopadhyay's story "Holudpora" demonstrates, that the dead cannot harm the living within a year of their death because they are at a stage where their post-human bodies have not yet formed as they await the ritual performance of the sāpinḍīkaraṇa.

> There is no doubt that Balai Chakraborty must have murdered Shubhra but he would not have been able to do so directly. This is because disembodied spirits cannot harm the living within a year of their death. It is only if the necessary funeral rites are not performed that the power to harm human beings directly is born within them. Balai Chakraborty must have possessed a living human being and perpetrated Shubhra's murder from inside him, by that person's flesh and blood hand.
>
> Translated from "Holudpora" (The Burning of Turmeric), Manik Bandopadhyay. (146-153)

To continue with Davies' formulation of liminal spaces in relation to the geography of haunting, he writes that it is also a way of understanding how we formulate the relationship between life, death, the afterlife, as well as the borders and boundaries between natural and man-made features. Davies refers to natural features like rivers, which are considered to be liminal spaces, where two worlds meet and people gather to reinforce the separation of the two states of being or to facilitate a crossing over. The Baitarani River is a mythical river that the spirits of the dead have to cross in order to reach the abode of the dead which reminds one of the rivers of the underworld in Greek mythology. The Styx is one of the five rivers of the underworld that separates Hades from the world of the living. The word "styx" comes from the Greek word "stugein," which means "hateful" and is expressive of the horror of death. The other rivers are Acheron (the river of woe), Cocytus (the river of lamentation), Phlegethon (the river of fire) and Lethe (the river of forgetfulness) (Boucher 123).

The Lethe is a personification of oblivion, from which the souls of the dead have to drink to forget their past lives, while the Styx is representative of the terror of annihilation. However, oblivion is not the preferred or even sanctioned mode of existence in the case of the afterlife in the Bengali sociocultural imagination. Moreover, the presence of this afterlife is a denial of annihilation as the continuity of the life cycle takes precedence. In the story, "Poroloker Haarir Khobor" (translated as "News from the Afterlife") by Ashapurna Debi, the beginning of the story offers a description of the Baitarani River through the eyes of one Botokeshto, an inhabitant of the land of the dead. The story begins with Botokeshto sitting on the other side of the Baitarni River, watching the commerce of men coming over from the other side. He remarks that it was his favoured pastime to keep an account of those who came over, and to identify if there were any familiar faces amongst the incoming crowd. He also observes that the traffic of men coming over was ceaseless. He describes the afterlife as a realm outside the temporal order of human beings. In that realm, things happen irrespective of seasonal changes. It is constant, continuous and imbued with a sense of timelessness. Eventually, Botokeshto manages to spot an old friend of his, Gajagobindo, and they are reunited in the land of the dead.

This possibility of reuniting with old friends and loved ones on the other side of death is a predominant theme in most of the stories of Bengali ghost fiction. This reunification holds out a promise, remembrance is comforting and oblivion is not an option as even the ghosts are part of the cycle of life, death, and regeneration of life after death. Ghosts are also found to become nostalgic,[21] as there is a possibility of rebirth and return. Hence, oblivion is not part of the scheme of things in the notion of death and the afterlife in the Bengali sociocultural imagination. As Davies points out, the boundaries which afford liminal spaces can be natural as well as man-made because the word "liminal" comes from the Latin "liminalis" from limen, meaning "threshold." Hence, the actual threshold of the house or the lived world becomes important in defining the borders between the two worlds.

One of the key stories for the dissertation was "Aguntak" (The Untimely Visitor), which places the village community on the margins of the well-lit urban society. The village, as if in half-light, is conceived of as a liminal space on the borders of the modern, urban community of the city. In the unenlightened darkness of a village, places such as the village cremation ground

[21] Nostalgia: from nostos, return to home, algos, pain. *Advanced English Dictionary*.

become the fertile breeding zone of supernatural phenomena. The following is a translated excerpt from the story, which illustrates the darkness of the rural landscape as a fitting abode for these ghosts:

> The city dwellers of Calcutta cannot possibly imagine the ghastly monstrosity that is a great cremation ground in a village. A visit to that place in the quiet stillness of the night is akin to the experience of a hair-raising encounter with the supernatural. While the yellowing moon's sallow light reveals mysterious shadows, the faint glow of a lantern or two fails to pierce the heavy darkness. The wind comes alive with the last wheezing breaths of the dying patient and listening to that, the giant trees, like black demons, tremble and cry out to the wind, fearfully and clamourously. Scattered here and there and moving around aimlessly like ghostly apparitions are those human beings who are alive and their total number can be counted on the digits of one hand. One or two or at the most, three funeral pyres can be seen flaring up at a time, flashing in the dark like the scorching crimson tongue of a wrathful hell's serpent. Out of nowhere comes the baleful screech of a solitary owl, shattering the silence of the night and startling the souls of those who are alive. Along with the piled-up broken pitchers and accumulated ashes, one can find the charred remains of dead bodies lying on the ground. It must be noted that unlike in the cities, the cremation process here is not as quick and efficient. Sometimes the shadowy forms lurking here and there that come into the range of our vision could very well be dogs and jackals scavenging and fighting amongst each other over those charred remains, poisoning the environment with their sinister cries. Far beyond this place where human eyesight refuses to travel and the heart becomes suspicious of what it might reveal, the dead move around restlessly, reluctant to leave this world which has no place for them. The living are left stupefied at such a sight, their body comes to a standstill. A colony of bats, a dark and ominous blotch against the night sky, flies overhead. The dictionary has another name for a cremation ground, 'pretbhumi' or the land of spirits. The name befits the place. A cremation ground in a village seems like the land of spirits, full of moving shadows. (Ray 22-27)

In other words, the "paraloka" is the land of moving shadows, shadowy forms of disembodied beings, those intangible creatures that are elusive and obscure because they stem from the indeterminacies of imagination. On the one hand, there are natural borders, trees, rivers,

and spaces such as the cremation ground, and on the other hand, borders and boundaries drawn by human beings.

> The bamboo stick was placed by her in such a way that it touched the margins of the bedroom and the kitchen from end to end. The two ends of the raw bamboo stick had been burned slightly. This ritual was performed to ensure that the disembodied spirit could not cross the threshold under any circumstances.
>
> Translated from "Holudpora" (The Burning of Turmeric), Manik Bandopadhyay). (146-153)

The disembodied being in the story is the vengeful spirit of the aforementioned Balai Chakraborty who possesses the body of the murdered girl's brother to wreak greater havoc on the villagers' lives. The measure to ward him off is taken up by the sister-in-law of Shubhra, the dead girl, because it was believed that things that sprouted from the earth, such as turmeric[22] and mustard[23] had the power to keep evil spirits confined to their realms. She draws the physical margins between the two realms of the living and the dead through the bamboo stick, with its ends burned slightly as fire was considered to be the sacred symbol of the god Agni, in order to demarcate the two modes of existence. The ghost cannot cross the threshold[24] that has been clearly demarcated; the boundaries drawn between the liminal and the material. In this regard, it is important to note that the woman protects the bedroom and the kitchen, both the places symbolic of life, fertility, and regeneration. Due to the absence of corporeality, procreation is not possible among ghosts, even though they may continue to have filial ties. The kitchen, however, is far more crucial because food is a key element in the nourishment of life. By denying the ghost an entry into the kitchen, the woman seeks to put a stop to his nourishment that is considered to be important even to ghosts.

Samaddar highlights the central role that agriculture plays in Indian society and the importance of rice cultivation in shaping the culture of Bengal. Rice is considered to be the main

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[22] Turmeric is derived from the Latin term terra merita, which means "meritorious earth" referring to the colour of ground turmeric which resembles a mineral pigment. See entry on "turmeric" Parthasarathy, Chempakam, and Zachariah 97.

[23] In the story "Bhooter Khoppore" (Ghost Trap) by Robidas Saharay, Haru Thakur who knew a lot of spells and incantations takes a handful of mustard seeds, blows a spell over them and scatters them under the bel tree. This seals off the escape route for the ghosts on that tree and the ghosts hop down, jumping around and crying in pain due to the potency of the mustard seeds.

[24] On the significance of the threshold, see Eliade 25.

staple food of West Bengal, which permeates the material, social, and cultural spheres of Bengali life and culture (A. Samaddar 108). A multitude of cultural norms and values have accrued over time in relation to rice and its cultivation because of the role of rice in religious attainment and spiritual liberation. As it has been already discussed, the "pinda dan" also consists of balls of rice, which leads us to the formulation of how rice is crucial in the attainment of a form after death and in the continuance of the cycle of life, death, and regeneration of life.

In *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, Inden and Nicholas observe that of all the symbolic activities, the sharing of food ("ekanna") is what expresses and sustains the shared body relationships of persons of the same family (17-18). Bengalis reaffirm the unity and solidarity of a family by saying that the family eats from one single pot, or "eki haarite khaye." Sharing the same house is of secondary importance to the sharing of food in sustaining the family. Upon death, this practice of the sharing of food is continued such that the living relative offers the food to the deceased person's spirit. A sharp contrast is drawn between ordinary cooked food ("bhaat," "anna," or rice) and special foods that are served on certain occasions and made with care to perform the rites of hospitality for the guests. Specially cooked food ("ghi bhaat, pakvanna, payash, paramanna") which is considered to be "richer" and lasts longer is fed to "kutumbas" or one's kin. Ordinary cooked foods such as boiled rice, lentils, and vegetables are deemed as sufficient for the complete nourishment of a person's body.

Hence, the pinda is made with the simplest unit of the Bengali culinary system, rice, to reinforce the ordinariness of human death that has already been illustrated to show as a point of transition from one state to the next. This simple offering of rice takes on a special significance because here the key is to establish the relationship between the living and the dead, both belonging to the same "jnati" (clan). However, in most stories, the ghosts are shown to seek out food that is considered to be of a higher grade in the culinary system, such as sweetmeats and fried fish. These ghosts cannot ask for rice from those who are neither kith nor kin as it can only be dispensed by someone related to them. Since their origins are unascertained, such a task becomes difficult unless someone voluntarily offers to do so, disregarding caste differences.

The act of eating is symbolic of life, while the cessation of the consumption of food should be automatically emblematic of death. However, that is not so. Ghosts in Bengali ghost fiction continue to harbour their love for food even after death. Perhaps this is an effort to firmly

situate them within the contours of life and reduce their otherness. Although they acquire nutrition second-hand, they actually consume the same foods that human beings do. Some stories do give us an interesting description of the possible foods preferred by unearthly beings, but that could be the true flight of an author's imagination, unfounded in the collective beliefs centered on the habits and practices of the Bengali's afterlife.[25] I posit that this distinctive feature also ties into the discourse of death as integral to the continuity of life, devoid of oblivion, as one carries on with the habits of life in the hereafter in preparation for the life after that.

Bengali ghosts cannot let go of their weakness for fish.[26] This love for fish is so pervasive that it continues to afflict the ghosts, crossing the borders of mortality. In another story by Monoj Bosu, "Mechcho Bhoot" (fish-eating ghost), the fisherman Ishaan is faced with a strange predicament whereupon his livelihood is endangered by the presence of this Mechcho Bhoot that was known for its unusual affinity for consuming fish.

> "…this sounds like the task of a Mechcho Bhoot. Some amongst those who suffer a death by drowning while out fishing turn into these fish-eating ghosts. A characteristic of them is that they cannot bear to live in the vicinity of human beings. Once upon a time, they used to inhabit the mangrove forests, or so I have heard from the stories told by the old guardians of this land. But nowadays, hardly anything is left of the Sunderbans; the forests have been cut down to a negligible size. Thanks to all the boatmen and fishermen, the bauls and the woodcutters, and the government officials and clerks, these lands are now teeming with a human population which has encroached upon the mangrove forests. The Mechcho Bhoots used to live deep inside these mangrove forests but now it seems, they have had to relocate themselves close to the rivers and streams." (46-50)

It seems as if development and modernity has not only encroached upon the habitat of earthly beings such as animals, but also endangered that of the unearthly beings. Colleen Taylor Sen observes that the Bengali's most coveted fish is the hilsa, a shad-like sea fish that swims upriver to spawn. The hilsa, or "ilish" as it is referred to in Bengali, is rich and oily in texture. The classic way of eating it is by lightly coating the fish with turmeric, chili powder, and salt,

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[25] "…preparations for the funeral feast, there were large plates of mankochu leaves with the delicacies served in human skulls. Curried worms, gravy of dead rats' meat, kebabs made of dried dead crows and so much more." Translated from, "Bhooter Khoppore" (Ghost Trap) by Robidas Saharay.

[26] See Taylor Sen 117.

after which it is fried (Taylor Sen 117). In the story, “Bhootera Shatar Jaane Na” (Ghosts Don’t Know How to Swim) by Samaresh Mazumdar, the writer uses this opportunity to make a pertinent comment on human life. The following passage is a translated excerpt from the story,

> “Satish Master used to be our Mathematics teacher. He died when a bus ran him over,” I said.
>
> “Yes. Khokon is not on good terms with him. Satish Master has become very greedy. Khokon said that Satish Master won’t utter a word of help unless he is paid to do so with a khoka ilish. Khokon will deliver the payment but it seems unfair that he will do something for us and not get anything in return. Therefore, he should also get a khoka ilish for doing us a favour. Now the problem is how to get a pair of khoka ilish when it’s not in season?” pondered Jhari Kaku, exasperation etched on his face.
>
> This was a matter of grave concern indeed. “How about we buy one and ask them to divide it amongst themselves?” I asked.
>
> “No, they aren’t like human beings who divide up everything amongst themselves.” (423-427)

They are not like human beings, but the presence of such entities leads us to ponder upon the primitive conception of the soul. In *The Idea of the Holy* (1936), Rudolf Otto refers to the mystery and wholly otherness that was integral to the formulation of the soul. This fact was obscured as the soul later became a subject of empirical enquiry. It came to be increasingly rationalized, while its origin in magic and mystery was obfuscated with a plethora of concepts, scholastic terms, and classifications.

> Soul or Atman is properly the thing of marvel and stupefaction, quite undefinable, outsoaring all conceptions, wholly alien to our understanding…The note of magic and mystery is very palpable in them…a thing of wonder or marvel…the wholly other…that which is incomprehensible by thought. In this it is exactly like the fundus animae , the spark ,Synderesis, or Inner Abyss of our own Western mystics. In both cases we have, surviving in an ennobled form, the primal awe and shrinking before the presence of ascaryam and adbhutam, the haunting presence that prompts the earliest numinous feelings. For, as an old mystic tells us, the soul and its bottommost depth lie hidden away,

> ineffable as God himself so that no human skill ever attains to be able to know what the Soul is in its bottommost depth. For that a supernatural skill is needed… (199)

This "wholly other," which arouses our "primal awe and shrinking," is sited by Otto within the human body. It leads us to wonder about the nature of this other, whether it is a wholly other or a holy other, or perhaps both. Death facilitates the dissolution of this shared body relationship, which sets into motion the processes of transformation, depending upon which there is either salvation or a return to life in another form. However, ghosts engender a different process. Kastenbaum writes that ghosts were believed to have unfinished business to complete or an inability to move on (329). "E-kuei" or hungry ghosts are believed to be Chinese Buddhist ancestors in constant torment because they are starving and thirsty, but cannot receive nourishment. Food or drink bursts into fire and turns into ashes when they attempt to consume it. The Festival of Ghosts is celebrated to specifically provide them with sanctified water, accompanied by incantation and magic, which is supposed to release them from their terrible plight (Kastenbaum 328).

To find new readers for the ghost stories of Bengal, and to espouse the cause of their translation, is thus, to design a Festival of Ghosts for the entities of the Bengali afterlife. Human societies and their cultural beliefs are dynamic, evolving organisms, constantly reconfiguring themselves throughout the passage of time. It is not only an individual who can die, but also human societies, to rejuvenate themselves and to be born anew. Culture is self-cultivating. It does not mean that they have forsaken the older elements that were constitutive of that past. Whereas, to assume that one is born with the knowledge of those elements because of this shared culture is to relegate human society to an enervating staticity. The ghosts of Bengal are like hungry guests, who demand nourishment, reaffirming the mutability of sociocultural beliefs and challenge monolithic assumptions of tradition, whether it is narrative or historical.

> *Strange, it was so strange*! His body was as thin as it was tall and lanky. He was shirtless save for a new piece of cloth tied at the waist and barefoot. He did not have any flesh on his body; it seemed as if his skin was a light sheet covering his bones. The colour of his skin was jet black. He had long hair on his head, ruffled and unkempt. His cheeks were sunken and his two front teeth seemed to protrude through his dry lips, as if he was starving and stricken by the famine. He also had such a *hungry stare* in his eyes.

Translated from “Aguntak” (The Untimely Visitor). Premendrakumar Ray. (22-27) (Italics my own)

“Who are you?” asks the narrator of “Aguntuk” to which the untimely visitor replies, “I am a hungry guest…The hungry do not care about being timely or untimely. I am not only ravenous, but also stricken with cold. I am shivering in the cold. Please shelter me in your house, I cannot stand the cold anymore.” It is the question which the wholly other compels us to pose, “Who are you?” The “aguntuk” is a visitor, a guest, a stranger, a foreign element from outside, yet one whose call compels us to respond, to put forth that question. As Ricoeur observes in his work *On Translation*, one’s selfhood is a matter of inner translation, entailing a translation between the self and others, both within the self and outside the self. One’s cultural identity also involves a discovery of these wholly others within the very depths of that cultural self, to act as readers and authors of these narrative identities, and to eventually, translate ourselves. Perhaps, the very ethos of a culture lies in the exchange of memories and narratives between imagined communities of people, both corporeal and spectral. But with language and sociocultural beliefs always ever-changing, it is these very ghosts which make a case for translation, as each encounter serves to challenge the boundaries of the known worlds and realms of knowledge.

CHAPTER II

Bhoots of Bengal: The Spirit(s) of a Culture

The imagined community[27] of spectral presences in the ghost stories of popular Bengali fiction poses a peculiar conundrum- perhaps in line with the peculiarities of their creators, that great species called the Bengalis. For instance, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a Bengali ghost in possession of a human being or without it must be in want of fried fish. Bengali human beings and their ghosts are quite like each other; gastronomically inclined, thus, suffering from the scourge of the Bengali stomach- chronic indigestion, so much so that a ghost dies of it and tumult ensues over his funeral ceremony. They have filial ties within their sphere, some are identified by the religious faith they ascribed to in the mortal world, some do not know how to swim, and others cannot let go of their weakness for sweets.

However, there is a distinction drawn between the two worlds in spite of their similarities, most importantly on the basis of the body: a human being is referred to as a "dehadhari" (bodied), whereas a ghost is called "ashariri" (bodiless). Yet the disembodied cannot be imagined without a body. The ghosts have a sense of smell as the pungent aroma of turmeric, mustard or chillies is highly injurious to their health. Their visage bears markers of the caste[28] they belonged to in life. Their eyes breathe fire, they can shorten or lengthen their limbs as they wish, and are believed to dwell on trees,[29] abandoned houses, fields, or water bodies. Here I posit how the physical body is integral to our imagination even in visualizing the non-physical, as we need some form to imagine, to clothe with our ideas, to flesh out with our conceptions, in spite of that very power and its consequent product being limitless and formless. It is through the analysis of these ghost bodies that I seek to elucidate upon the processes and conditions through which the "body" of the ghost is conceptualized from the perspective of the afterlife.

Consider the jaular bhoot (swamp ghost), in the eponymous story by Shailendranath Guin, who lives in a lowland that is seasonally flooded (characteristic of the geography of Bengal). Small bubbles form on the surface of the swamp water as Shashthicharan, the human

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[27] Term borrowed from Benedict Anderson's formulation in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.
[28] See entry on "Churel" in *Folklore* 168-171.
[29] For more information on the association between trees and ghosts, see Haberman 123-4.

character, looks on. The boy mistakenly assumes it to be the work of fishes in the water and throws fistfuls of puffed rice into the water to feed them. But in a distracted state of mind, he also throws a few pieces of jalebis (sweets) that he was eating and the following scene ensues:

> Shashthicharan watched in amazement as the puffed rice sank into the water along with the jalebis. Puffed rice was so light that it was supposed to float on the surface, then why did it drown, wondered the boy. Had fishes been the culprit, he would have seen them nibbling at the surface. Shashthicharan was wonderstruck and puzzling over this matter when a large head of hair floated up to the surface exactly where the bubbles had been forming. Oh no! Shashthicharan thought of making a run for it but it was too late now. The head was out of the water up to its neck. There was such an ugly moustache on that head! The head cackled loudly and began to talk in sonorous voice, "Your jalebis are very good. Throw some more into the water," said the jaular bhoot. (394-6)

This sense of being "wonderstruck" and puzzlement is neither the hysterical instability associated with possession, nor the fervent rationalization of spiritism. The indigenity of these ghosts is embedded in our response to the mysteries of nature. It gradually began to take an easily cognizable anthropomorphic[30] shape as our multiple modernities encountered each other. Early modernity and colonial modernity started interacting with each other, at times forming a single architecture[31] of sociocultural beliefs. Death plays a distinct role in a land now "possessed" by a foreign element, a "bhoot sahib." It becomes "the way through which new life could come" (R. Samaddar 188), a freedom that can be attained in death if not in life. The afterlife in the Bengali sociocultural imaginary is often characterized by ironic inversion of social reality rather than being a distortive representation. For instance, the ghost in charge of the administration of the spirit realm is a "bhoot sahib" in "Bhootoore Pathshala," but one who has merely assumed a role or "filched" his identity from a white man.

> Bhoot Sahib was not the ghost of a white man as you might think. He was very much the ghost of a native man, pitch-dark in complexion, a member of the indigenous species.

[30] On the necessity of anthropomorphizing, Peter Berta writes that more or less the whole process of the construction of knowledge on the nature of death is permeated by the epistemological imperative of anthropomorphizing. The essence of this mechanism, necessarily resulting from death as an empirical taboo, is that individuals essentially perceive death and afterlife on the pattern of their life in this world, by the projection of their anthropomorphic categories and relations (14).

[31] See R. Samaddar 188.

> Once upon a time, he had come across the grave of a white man and succeeded in filching his old coat and pants. Since then, he had taken to wearing the dead man's clothes and paraded himself as a sahib. (157-160)

Education of the natives was a pet project of colonial modernity. However, the objective of this education was less about historical self-discovery and had more to do with creating a class of people intellectually attuned with the masters they served. The received modes of knowledge and cultural wisdom were inadequate in fulfilling the task of, what I shall refer to as, colonial re-education. Hence, in the afterlife, one had to unlearn the education received in the "schools" of life and go back to the "pathshala"[32] in death. Perhaps it was believed so with the hope that their education in ghosthood should at least be authentically Bengali. Thus, ghosthood was not to be taken lightly. Hence, Goda Bhoot (the ghost of a corpulent man) undertakes the task of priming ghosts on how to become proper ghosts in "Bhootoore Pathshala." The phrase "path kora" means to recite, pointing to the orality of instruction, such that education was an effort of memory and retention, characteristic of the primary schools in the villages of Bengal. This is in line with a human child's first step towards education, which was to listen to recitations of scriptural books by the women of the household. Therefore, an education in Bengali ghosthood had to be steeped in the traditions of the Bengali afterlife, and the customs and practices expected of Bengali bhoots. The following passage is a translated excerpt from the story, elucidative of the curriculum for Bengali ghosthood:

> Goda Bhoot's Primary School for Ghosts was renowned across the village; there was so much to learn there. Little ghosts were taught how to jump into a putrid pond and fish out crabs. They were taught how to produce scary sounds by playing on broken pots and pans, gauge the hour of the night by listening to the jackal's cry and take the form of any animal, cow, goat or black dog. They were also given lessons on how to steal fried fish from the kitchens of human households. Students were taught different kinds of tricks that could be employed to fool the country quacks who were summoned to exorcise them. The Primary School for Ghosts was also rumoured for teaching their students how to make human beings unconscious by blowing their icy cold breaths on them. (Jana 157-160)

[32] Pathsala: primary school.

Towards the end of the story, the headmaster is called upon to return to earth as there was a dearth of good faculty in the schools of the mortal world. The education of the two little ghosts in the story is transferred to the mortal world as the headmaster takes them along with him. It can be conjectured that the young "ghosts" of Bengal will now receive secondary education straightaway without being primed in their cultural identity. One day they too might have posed the question that I will pose now: what does it mean to be a Bengali? Is it a form of cultural becoming or a question of one's individual being? We are all bhoots as the ghost wife in Crooke's story had observed, constantly engaged in the task of self-translation, a being alien[33] to ourselves and living under the alias of our cultural identities. The formation and comprehension of the present, and even its validation, are outcomes of a series of reminiscences, remembrances, memory-making and decoding. Such that even the afterlife is a translation, and identifying Bengali bhoots is a self-referential exercise. What is a Bengali ghost? The easy answer would be the ghost of a Bengali person. But what if we were to interpret it as a Bengali who has become a ghost to his own culture? This second question is highly problematic because it hints at a Bengali culture with a capital C, a solid monolithic entity that is lying in wait to be discovered. However, culture is seldom so. It has its own processes of becoming which renders it into a protean, ever-changing mass of identities, shaped by a gamut of ideas, discourses and histories. It was in this *chiaroscuro* that life and death played out their distinct roles, and the story of a Bengali identity was shaped in that background of darkness and sudden shafts of light (R. Samaddar 188).

Thus, self-discovery is recognition of this plurality of meanings and finding equivalences with our several pasts, using languages as a tool of discovery. I have referred to "language" in its plural form because formulating answers to the questions posed earlier involves decoding cultural idioms, as well as translating them into linguistic modes of articulation. Translation is not necessarily about speaking to others from the comfortable place of our fluency in a particular culture or cultures. Instead, it is to render oneself into a liminal zone, in Ricoeur's words, to look at "oneself as another." Translation is a task of deliberate estrangement,[34] perhaps even a morbid

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[33] Alien: Old French alien, aliene, from Latin aliēnus ("belonging to someone else, later exotic, foreign"), from alius ("other"). *Advanced English Dictionary*.

[34] In my case, it will be through the mode of language, as I shall be translating from Bengali to English with the latter offering me a surer footing than my own language (if one may call it so, as language can seldom be "owned"). However, it also points towards the dynamism of cultures, as these ghosts are now more a part of my cultural history than present cultural identity.

one, because it is akin[35] to death. To see the entire spectrum of a culture, its values, qualities, ideas or activities, one must acknowledge that they are "dead" to that cultural self, and that every articulation henceforth would be a translation, even to oneself. In a way, translation is proof of the fact that we are all bhoots. It is as much about speaking to oneself as it is about speaking to others. It is also about speaking to the others within oneself, to the ghosts of our pasts, and our social, cultural and historical inheritances. In translation, one poses the question, is our identity nominal or is there something numinous in it? The word "numinous" means of or relating to or characteristic of a numen, a spirit believed to inhabit an object or preside over a place. Hence, I have chosen my line of enquiry into the spirit of a culture through the spirits of that culture.

The body of ghosts in Bengali literature offers us an insight into the conception of the "body" of a ghost, retaining social markers, religious ascriptions, idiosyncratic individualities, and more often than not, in a tangible form, most surprisingly in a realm that ought to be free of such corporeal associations and limitations. However, as Moo Chou-Poo observes, the fact that each cultural system produces its own version of the world after death, and its distinctive ghosts, suggests that although the need to imagine might be similar among all societies, the actual imagined result may differ according to specific cultural/local conditions (10). Thus, death marks the beginning of a life after life, which necessitates the birth of a body for the disembodied. These ghost bodies become the embodiment of our distinctive conceptions of the body, conditioned by our sociocultural environment and systems of belief, an imagination that is rooted in that which is concrete, physical, and graspable, and for want of a better word, "real" in a post-human life.

Social ascriptions and class distinctions are an integral part of any society, in turn influencing cultural beliefs. It is interesting to note that these elements of the mortal world also find resonance in the imagination of the afterlife. For example, in some Catholic cemeteries, people are as stratified in death as they are in life, and the location of their burial is often based on ethnicity, religion and social class (Reimers 117). In *The History of a Bengal Rayat*, Lal Behari Dey offers a catalogue of the indigenous ghosts of Bengal. He refers to the Brahman bhoot, the Brahmadaitya, who is said to inhabit the banyan tree or a wood-apple tree, considered

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[35] Akin: Prefix a- ("for, of") + kin. (*Advanced English Dictionary*)

to be “the object of the fear and reverence of common ghosts.”[36] Sarmistha De Basu in her reading of these folktales points out that the Brahmadaitya is depicted as living a spirit-life of unblemished purity, while the Kayastha, Vaishya and Sudra ghosts become “common ghosts.” They “live a life of plebeian squalor. These are the skinny fellows, unusually tall and sinewy. These are lascivious and impure, and do not dare to frequent a holy worship house (mandir)” (De Basu 20). Social status in Bengal is often a matter of conflating two categories, that of caste and class. The privileges accorded to the members of the upper class are usually due to the fact that they belong to a higher caste. Hence, these notions are also carried over in the social imagination of the realm after life. The Brahmadaityas form the pillars of the ghost society, while those of a lowly birth are considered to be ruffians and miscreants. These ghosts, born into lowly stations in life, continue to be in a state of servitude even in death.

> It was a special night. The gunins[37] of our village were supposed to set out three days prior to that night for an all Bengal conference of gunins to be held at Uttarpara, near the city of Kolkata. It was a night of revelry for the ghosts of our village. Those who belonged to the class of custodians of bhoot society, such as the Brahmadaitya and the Mamdo ghosts, who usually did not tolerate the antics of the ruffian and miscreant class of ghosts, were also distressed wondering about what was in store for that night. They had already warned the children and youths of their (bhoot) families to maintain peace and not create any chaos. The warning was especially given to those who used to slave for the gunins as they were the ones more prone to mischief. But they were such uncouth creatures that it was not even possible to speak to them in a civilized manner.
>
> Translated from “Ratandiyar Bhoot” (The Ghosts of Ratandiya Village), Himanish Goswami. (118-127)

Shekhar Bandhopadhyay points out that while class had taken over the political debates in the public arena, the concept of status based on caste was still pervasive in the mental world of the Bengali Hindus (246). In the conception of the afterlife too, there is no easy answer to the componential parameters of social stratification. One can argue that the afterlife did incorporate a certain amount of fluidity to the notions of identity. However, the fact that the Brahmadaitya is

[36] See Dey 201-208.

[37] Gunin: a man with an occult power; an exorciser; a sorcerer.

still accorded a higher status in bhoot society points towards the afterlife being a differential manifestation of the social reality, in a translative sense.

> In the villages the politically and economically entrenched middle peasant castes would still be pre-occupied in mentally translating their secular status into a language of ritual hierarchy through observance of Vedic rituals, the rules of endogamy and deference to the Brahman priest. In other words, the ideology of hierarchy and its association with the relations of power, which constitute the essence of the caste system, are yet to lose their relevance in a hybrid modern Bengali Hindu culture and society…the caste system in Bengal has managed to sustain its essence and in that sense Bengal is no exception to the general pan-Indian pattern. (Bandhopadhyay 247)

For instance, Taradas Bandhopadhyay's story, "Bhootera Ekhon" (The Status of Ghosts Now) shows how the ghost of a woman, who was born into a lower class in life, admonishes her son for wanting to eat rotten fish. As per the aforementioned characteristic feature of these stories, that is, the ironic inversion of the customs and beliefs of the mortal world in the afterlife, rotten fish is considered to be a delicacy for ghosts. The consumption of rotten fish is depicted as a privilege preserved for bhoots of a higher class such as the Brahmadaitya, or reserved for special occasions. However in real life, as a meal without a fish course is considered to be incomplete for most Bengalis, people from impoverished households who cannot afford a whole fish or pieces of it, flavour their dal (lentil soup) or vegetable dishes with fish scales sold in the market for that purpose (Roberts, Taylor Sen 255). In the story, the brother ghost of the protagonist, little Nonta, seated under the shyaora tree,[38] pesters his mother for rotten fish, "I want to eat rotten fish. O Ma, I want to eat rotten fish…" To which his harried mother, Porani, replies,

> "I cannot take this anymore! This boy has been pestering me since evening! Are we Brahmadaityas or Mamdo ghosts that we can afford such expensive foods? We are ordinary ghosts of simple households; it is not within our means to eat delicacies like rotten fish every day. Here, eat two fresh fish for now, in the evening you can fill up your stomach with all the rotten fish you want at Khedi's wedding." (189-192)

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[38] Shyaora: (শেওড়া, শ্যাওড়া) a kind of wild tree.

Along with the Brahmadaitya, the Mamdo bhoot is also considered to belong to the ruling classes. This requires a brief recapitulation of Bengal's sociopolitical history that heavily influenced its cultural systems. The Bengal referred to in this context is the combined Indian state of West Bengal and the sovereign country of Bangladesh that was formerly known as East Bengal. This erstwhile Bengal often poses a problem in the conceptualization of its cultural identity when religious and racial factors are taken into account. Ranabir Samaddar writes that in the generic nature of such an inquiry, there are two terms that must be taken into consideration: "bidharmi" and "jati" (192). Bidharmi refers to one with a different religion, as opposed to "adharma" which is a loss of one's religion by committing some sin, defilement or sacrilege. It is not clear if the interaction between a bidharmi is also an act of adharma. One must discuss,

> …the issue of bidharma and adharma, and the question as to whether or not universalism and cosmopolitanism can rid the Bengali of this problem. Siraj[39] is bidharmi. But does that mean he is not of Bengal? The matter of language is less important here, because Persian was the accepted language of administrative and court work in Bengal. And even the local and small princes would have followed many of the protocols in dress and custom as practiced by the nawabs or, previous to that, the imperial aristocracy. So are the Bengalis a nation or a jati (jati meaning here not caste, but people)? (R. Samaddar 192)

In the light of this view, the syncretism in the afterlife begins to make sense, as the conception of the imagined community of ghosts in the Bengali afterlife borrows heavily from the concept of the Bengali "jati." Jati could mean "identity of a population group by land, language, religion, caste, colour, etc, yet not all at the same time, or fixed in usage at any one time" (R. Samaddar 192). This plurality of meaning is also translated into the afterlife, which reflects the complex web of values and categories pertaining to social customs. Thus, it could be said that in imagining the Bengali afterlife, the community of ghosts is more in tune with the conception of the Bengali as a people, sketched in a way so as to keep in mind the complicated interplay of social, religious, and cultural identities.

Owen Davies observes that the social, educational, and religious experiences of a people were key components in imagining the nature of ghosts and how and why they are thought to

[39] Reference to Mirza Muhammad Siraj ud-Daulah, more commonly known as Siraj ud-Daulah (1733 – July 2, 1757), was the last independent Nawab of Bengal.

manifest themselves (9). It is the composite experiences, beliefs and legends of the particular culture that people belong to which shapes the behavioural patterns, and physiognomies expected of their ghosts. A "shankhchunni" is a female ghost, or as Lal Behari Dey refers to it, a "she-ghost." Clad in a white sari, she waits under trees in the dead of the night in order to pounce upon unsuspecting victims. Lal Behari Dey was believed to have collected most of his folktales from an old woman who was called Shambhu's mother, considered to be the best story-teller in the village (De Basu 20). Hence, his tale, "The Ghostly Wife" also brings to the fore, the common presumptions regarding the countenances and capabilities of these ghosts. The word "shonkho" means the "conch," or conchshell, a musical instrument that is sounded by blowing into it. The blowing of the conchshell is an auspicious activity performed during the household worship, or while observing communal religious festivities. It is also a reference to a kind of bangle, a "shankha," white in colour and made from conchshell, worn by a married Bengali woman as a signifier of her marital status. The shankhchunni (colloquial appellation) or shankhachurni is thus, a woman who died while her husband was still alive and turned into a female ghost. She is differentiated from other female ghosts, for instance, a "petni" which is a general term for all female ghosts or specifically, ghosts of unmarried women. The other signs of a married Bengali woman are vermillion on her forehead, a red bangle "pola" that is made from red corals, and a "loha," a metal bangle, none of which are found on the shankhchunni. Her only markers are those that are of the colour white, the shankha and the white sari.

Ghosts are often portrayed in white clothing. White is considered to be the colour of mourning in Hinduism; it is a cooling colour, associated with death and ashes (Muesse 164). In Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay's story "Climax," the stranger who breaks in upon the solitary reverie of the protagonist, on a deserted stretch of land close to the village he is visiting, is also clad in white. "The man was clad in a white sheet from head to toe, which also covered his head," as a white sheet covers a corpse. The colour red signifies life, power, and heat, while white is symbolic of death and the coldness of existence without the fire of life. In Hinduism, the principles of creation are as follows: the masculine principle or Shiva is passive, or even lifeless, when it is without Shakti, the feminine principle. Shiva without Shakti is "sava" or dead, a lifeless state (Muesse 164). This principle of the masculine and the feminine is also seen in Greek tradition where life is personified as feminine and death as masculine (Kellehear 448). The goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are essential to the gods' function, as their dynamic power

is the source of creation. However, without form and restraint, the energy embodied by these goddesses can lead to chaos. Hence, the cooling masculine principle is deemed to be fundamental to the maintenance of balance. Life is personified as heat, while death is cold, as the untimely visitor in the story "Aguntuk" exclaims, "I am stricken with this bleak cold and an insatiable hunger" (22-27).

I had earlier referred to the interpretive dilemmas in response to the identity of a "Bengali ghost," which is further problematized by the concept of possession. However, in Dey's story "The Ghostly Wife," there is no possession, but the she-ghost merely dresses up as a human woman. A Brahmin's wife accidentally brushes past the she-ghost, a harmless action that surprisingly enrages the shankhchunni (perhaps a reflex action to the fear of contamination even in death), leading her to seize the woman by her throat and thrusting her whole into a tree. Then, the she-ghost attires herself in the clothes of the woman and enters the Brahmin's household. Neither the husband nor the mother-in-law has any inkling of the change. It is not until much later that the mother-in-law notices her "constitutionally weak and languid" daughter-in-law was finishing her chores at an astonishingly fast pace. This constitutional weakness and languor has often been regarded as the mark of a properly behaved woman, her docility and submissiveness considered to be a virtue. A frenetic behaviour and/or exhibition of strength often invited speculations of being possessed in the villages of Bengal (McDaniel 8).

The story brings to the fore certain common assumptions about the ghosts of Bengal. These assumed behaviours are as follows: ghosts can lengthen or shorten any limb of their bodies; they cannot come anywhere near fire; they cannot tolerate the smell of burning turmeric which is considered to be the infallible test; and that all ghosts speak through their nose and have a strong nasal accent. An ojha[40] is finally called forth to exorcise the ghost and banish it from the household. This banishment of the ghost became more pronounced and widespread as colonial ideology promoted an absolute disjunction between India's "irrational, oppressive, retrogressive elements"[41] of traditional Indian culture and its official cultural historiography. This banishment perhaps is the reason for my own exilic condition, culturally and linguistically speaking. These figures of the Bengali afterlife are akin to objects on display in a museum for me. They are imbued with a sense of history, as I become a beachcomber collecting these ghosts as one

[40] Ojha: an exorcist.
[41] See Nandy, A, "Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest."

collects seashells. It is us, who must make meaning, interpret the ideas impearled in these objects and imagine their world. As mentioned before, so much of history depends not on what we unearth, but in listening to the past as it speaks and in carrying on a conversation. The following passage is a translated excerpt from a ghost story that illustrates the nature of an encounter between the living and their ghosts:

> I saw the figure of an old man reduced to a mere skeleton, a bag of bones, crouching upon his knees with his palms flat on my bed and glaring at me. The emaciation of his face was akin to that of a terminally ill patient, the skin of his cheeks was loose and hanging and his toothless gums had sunk upon themselves. The fine white hairs on his head were standing up. His eyes were on fire, burning with wrath, hatred and disgust. I *shuddered* from head to toe after looking at him.
>
> Translated from "Ekti Bhoutik Kahini" (A Ghost Story) Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay. (48-53)

This shuddering can also be referred to as a form of religious dread or awe (Otto 14). In relatively modern languages, such as English, the words "awe" and "aweful" in their deepest and most special sense are said to approximate the meaning, to be in awe of something that is far greater than a human being, whether divine or daemonic. This "higher and riper form of emotion" under consideration has a mysteriously impelling power. It leads to a physical reaction that is also unique, not found in any natural fear or terror.

> We say: my blood ran icy cold, and my flesh crept. The cold blood feeling may be a symptom of ordinary, natural fear, but there is something non- natural or supernatural about the symptom of creeping flesh. And any one who is capable of more precise introspection must recognize that the distinction between such a dread and natural fear is not simply one of degree and intensity. The awe or dread may indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man's hair bristle and his limbs quake. But it may also steal upon him almost unobserved as the gentlest of agitations, a mere fleeting shadow passing across his mood. (Otto 14)

This strange, queer, odd feeling is also expressed through the word "adbhoot" (adbhuta) in which the experiential connotation is that of encountering something strange, extraordinary, astonishing or perhaps, simply odd-looking. Interpretations of how bhoots came into existence

varies by region and community, but they are usually considered to be perturbed and restless due to some factor which prevents them from moving on, whether it is through transmigration, non-being, nirvana, or heaven and hell, depending upon traditional beliefs (Kuharik 26). For Frederick W. H. Myers, ghosts serve a different function, their numinous presence, through reason, instinct, or superstition, testifies to a life beyond the life human beings know (101).

> This material world constitutes, in fact, a “privileged case” a simplified example among all discernible worlds, so far as the perception of incarnate spirits is concerned. For discarnate spirits it is no longer a privileged case; to them it is apparently easier to discern thoughts and emotions by non-material signs. But they need not therefore be wholly cut off from discerning material things, any more than incarnate spirits are wholly cut off from discerning immaterial things thoughts and emotions symbolised in phantasmal form. “The ghost in man, the ghost that once was man,” to use Tennyson's words, have each of them got to overcome by empirical artifices certain difficulties which are of different type for each, but are not insurmountable by either. (278)

To encounter these ghosts, these paranormal beings, is to pose the question of one’s own ontology. The Sanskrit term “bhuta” is connotative of the “past” as well “being,” which finds resonance in other languages, such as, the Irish “bha,” the English “be,” and the Persian “budan” (Kuharik 26). The presence of the bhoot is also ingrained in our consciousness, finding expression in language. Bhoot dekha, to be suddenly frightened is a figurative usage. Bhooter begaar, a profitless toil or venture; bhoot shonchar howa, to be possessed by a ghost or an evil spirit; bhooter moto dekhte, a person of an unusual visage or ridiculously dressed; and bhooter baaper shraddha, which is also a figurative usage, referring to an extravagant wastage of resources.[42] In the story, “Bhooter Khoppore,” (Ghost Trap), the character Haru Thakur is actually charged with the task of performing the funerary rites for the ghost father of a ghost.

> Haru Thakur exhibited a great pretense of grief upon hearing the news and said, “Alas! Your father died so early. He was a great spirit.”
>
> The ghost was quite pleased to hear that and concurred, “Yes master, father was very affectionate towards you. That’s why we want you to perform his last rites.”

[42] See entry on “bhoot” *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary.* Digital Dictionaries of South Asia. Web.

> Haru Thakur was astonished to hear such a thing. "What do you mean? What are you asking me to do?"
>
> "We would like you to perform the funeral ceremony in a sacred manner. We don't know any of the mantras and tantras. Therefore, you have to officiate over the ceremonies."
>
> Haru Thakur's heart began to beat wildly upon listening to the ghost's request. Hey bhagwan! I will have to perform the last rites of a ghost as a human being, thought Haru Thakur with widening horror.
>
> He seemed to have lost his bearings, the world of the living and the dead got muddled up into one big melee of confusion for him. (115-118)

This comical inversion of the practices of the human world in the ghost world is further affirmed by the ghost who remarks, "Human beings have their funeral ceremonies in the daytime. For ghosts, our ceremonies begin after dark." This transposition of earthly practices is also seen in the way in which ghosts are said to walk, with their feet facing backwards. Kuharik observes that this could be due to the fact that the earth is regarded as sacred or semi-sacred. Hence, the bhoots who are non-divine beings go to great lengths to avoid contact with the earth, often floating above it. In most of these ghost stories, the ghosts prefer to take up residence in trees, as the Bhoot Sahib in "The Primary School for Ghosts" story opines, that there are "so many thickets and bushes, forests and jungles" in the villages of Bengal that it ought to be easy to find a home for ghosts. There is a tree for every kind of ghost. Even the top of a guava or eggplant tree, both short in height, can serve as residences for the two little baby ghosts in the story.

The bhoots are also assumed to alter their form and take on the form of human beings, or become animals at will. In the story, "Bhooteder Maan-Samman" (A Matter of Ghosts' Honour) by Prochet Sengupta, an old grandfather ghost experiences an insatiable craving for rabri[43] because he has only been surviving on air for a long time (98-99). He calls out for his grandson ghost, giving him two coins from the Sher Shah era, and instructs him to go to the city to procure the sweets. The young grandson ghost, clad in a freshly laundered shirt and half-pants, takes the form of a little human boy for considerations of normalcy in human society. Bhoots are also

[43] Rabri: A kind of sweetmeat. The Bengali variety of the rabri is made by heating sweetened milk in a kadai until it becomes thick and creamy.

believed not to cast any shadows, which is self-explanatory as they are shadow-like themselves. The word "ghost" is said to derive from the old English term gāst which means, "breath, soul, spirit, ghost, being" from the Proto-Germanic gaistaz ("ghost, spirit") derived from Proto-Indo-European *ǵ^{h}eizd-, *ǵ^{h}izd- ("anger, agitation")/ *ǵ^{h}eysd-, *ǵ^{h}isd- ("anger, agitation"). It cognates with the Scottish ghaist (ghost), Dutch geest (spirit, mind, ghost), German Geist (spirit, mind, intellect), Swedish gast (ghost) and the Sanskrit हेड (heḍa, "anger, hatred").

However, none of these words seem to encapsulate the gamut of meanings contained in the word "bhoot" with its lexical plurality that stands for the past as well as a future after life. The reason I have translated "bhoot" as ghost or come to refer to them as such is because of the way in which the ghost has been conceived in Western culture, and the spirit of resonance between the two terms which refer to the spirit by way of breath. "Gast" originally referred to a terrifying rage, such that the word aghast is still used for a person who experiences shock and terror. Even in the Hindu pantheon of gods, there are deities who personify this conception of rage or wrath, besides having other merciful or grace-dispensing avatars (Otto 18). This wrath is said to have no concerns with moral qualities. It is like a hidden force of nature, "stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon any one who comes too near," incalculable and arbitrary, such that this wrath is often manifested in the form of mere caprice and willful passion (Otto 18), a definition that could very well suit ghosts.

Similarly, a connection exists between this wrath of the divine and the rage of the daemonic. Especially, the fact that one of the meanings of the word "bhoot" is a class of supernatural beings who attend on Shiva, the god who can wreak havoc or "pralaẏa," universal dissolution brought about by his cataclysmal dance. One experiences "adbhuta" in the presence of such dreadful power, which Otto defines as the "inapprehensible, inexpressible," as they are marvels of transcendence, putting us under an attractive spell and arousing an element of fascination. Kastenbaum writes that the breath is seen as life, and expelling the final breath is "giving up the ghost." It is a signal that the spirit is on its way, while the body stays behind, such that in most traditional accounts even though the spirit is breath, it is also more than breath, a subtle, immaterial essence that departs from a person at death.

This idea is at the core of theological dualism, the belief that a person is composed of a material, perishable body and an immaterial, imperishable essence. Greek and Christian

> thought held that imagination, judgment, appreciation of beauty, and moral sense are functions of the spirit within humans. The spirit is an individual's higher self, something of which survives bodily death in many religious accounts. In Western societies, people tend to speak of this surviving element as the soul. Ghosts, however, do not necessarily emanate from the refined spirit of divinity within. It is fairly common among world cultures to believe in another spirit that accompanies them throughout life. (Kastenbaum 327)

This "shadowy sort of spirit" is more of a "biopsychosociocultural" phenomenon (Farberow 800). In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto refers to the complex of emotions that are generated by the "daemonic-divine" object. It may appear to the mind as an object of horror and dread, but it also possesses a potent charm of its own, such that the same creature, in which it creates that horror and dread, is always at the same time impelled to return to it, "nay even to make it somehow his own." Otto observes that the supernatural, or the unexplained (incognizable), is what leads religions to formulate doctrines on life and death because of the questions it poses by its very existence, which is beyond the realm of morality and rationality. Without the presence of such "daemonic-divine" entities, Otto observes that religions tend to become a fallow ground of "arid rationalism." As Gauri Vishwanathan comments in "Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism," the chaos of India is best represented by the metaphysical and aesthetic insufficiency of its religions which is a compound of the "primitive, tribalistic and animistic" beliefs at the root of its traditions (24). From a flourishing life in the lived realities of everyday life, there is a reason why these ghosts of Bengal have receded into the abyss of human memory. To investigate the causes, we must take into account the enlightenment project of rationality undertaken along with the development of modern India. Localized sociocultural beliefs were at odds with the progressive outlook of modern India, and as Vishwanathan observes, most native South Asian cultural practices were deemed monstrous and inappropriate for modern civil society.

> A Vedantic concept of Hinduism was already in the making, as an abstract, theistic philosophical system came to represent Hinduism, while all other popular practices were denounced as idolatrous. The splitting of Hinduism into popular and intellectual systems contributed to a parallel splitting of anti-colonial responses into those for whom popular beliefs and "superstitions" were an essential part of Hindu identity and those for whom

> Hinduism was purged of some of its casteist, polytheistic, and ritualistic features. (Vishwanathan 35)

These ghost stories are in fact elucidative of those very "casteist, polytheistic, and ritualistic features," not to forget the categories of gender and class, which goes on to show that these elements were at the very heart of the formation of one's sociocultural community. So much so that it was greatly influential upon the sociocultural imaginary. They point towards how the nation (or its constituents) and its culture has changed and is still changing from its agrestic past to its urban present. The fact that there are a variety of figures in the afterlife even within Hinduism and across regions shows that cultural differences are crucial in the formation of a religion. Hinduism or for that matter most religions, are an umbrella term, its present variety enshrining itself to be a highly rational, theistic, theological, a more abstract variant than it ever was, whereas it actually grew out of and encapsulates an array of divergent beliefs. Hence, to inquire into the past and the formative processes of one's cultural identity is perhaps to set oneself on a collision course with one's own ghosts. "This is shown by the potent attraction exercised over and over by the element of horror and "shudder" in ghost stories, even among "persons of high all-round education," to quote Rudolf Otto. The central thesis at the heart of this statement is the possibility of discovery offered by the afterlife, a realm that feeds the imagination by its absence of presence. It is after all, in spite of being a translation of a particular social reality, still a changeable, uncertain, imagined community, and death here acts as a catalyst for such transformations.

Perhaps it is that very belief in the continuity of life even after death and the notion of shared-body relationships that also insidiously fills up the Bengali afterlife with similar social structures as they do in life. It is a world on its own, a "paralok" (a world parallel to ours), with its own societal workings, sometimes referred to as a "bhooter shomaj" (society of ghosts), with elements borrowed from earthly life. For instance, in the story "Bhooteder Maan-Samman" (A Matter of Ghosts' Honour) by Prochet Sengupta, there is a description of the normal and paranormal beings living together with societies of their own.

> In this small town of ours, a small number of ghosts had been coexisting with the human population in peace and harmony since time immemorial. We had cordial relations with them. The ghosts used to live deep in the forests, located on the northern fringes of the

> town. In the agreement signed between their Ghosts' Organization and our Town Committee, it had been stated clearly that neither side could harass each other for any reason whatsoever. We never went to their side of the forests except for picnics. The ghosts also kept to their end of the bargain, if they ever had to come into town, *they would take the form of human beings so that normalcy was maintained*. In spite of the agreement, some misunderstandings did occur and that led the ghosts to feel affronted. Their pride and prestige would not allow them to continue living with us, so they left our town to go away somewhere else. (98-99)

The need to understand one's cultural affiliations is often a pre-requisite in not only decoding universal questions of selfhood and identity, but also one's own personhood. More so in a culture where the "self" and the identity of an individual are not simply and inevitably linked to any one body (D. Davies 189). The basic tenet[44] of Hinduism is the belief that the life force underlying human existence is not encapsulated in one life. A human being undergoes numerous transformations that may also involve non-human forms. This contiguity in the conception of life incorporates every kind of organism, from the lowliest insect (sometimes the vegetable and mineral kingdoms) to Brahma, the highest of the gods, as all are involved in the process of transmigration.[45] Hence, the notion of incompletion[46] is immanent to our being, as we are always works in progress, in varying stages of translation.

Inden and Nicholas (99) observe that the body is the central symbol of "kinship" in Bengali culture as stated earlier. However, it is not to be assumed that the nature of this body remains static or unchanging, rather it is continuously transformed and refined throughout life. Socially speaking, through a series of "symbolic actions," which the authors refer to as "samskaras," or life cycle rites as per the anthropological definition. They "translate" a person from one well-defined status to another one by means of a symbolic passage. These may be comparable to the sacraments of Christianity, except that they are thought to operate on the whole body of the person and not just the spiritual or moral dimension. The complete cycle of samskaras comprises ten rites. Each ritual has its distinguishing characteristics, but at its core is

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[44] See Hopkins 148-9 and Moreman 106.
[45] See *Students' Britannica India* 330.
[46] "Under history, memory and forgetting/ Under memory and forgetting, life. / But writing a life is another story./ Incompletion." Paul Ricoeur (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 506)

the single paradigmatic action, birth. Birth is conceived in the sense of a passage out of a woman's body into the world, the way in which the person is thought to obtain his own body.

Hence, birth is seen as the central symbolic act in Bengali kinship, according to Inden and Nicholas. This leads me to connect how birth and death are both seen as translations, a form of passage and more importantly, associated with notions of impurity as both birth and death are considered to be events of nascency. Death is an event that sets into process the rites and rituals required for a passage into another realm, which is characterized by a period of impurity, leading to parturition of another kind of body that is to be born anew from the offerings of life. Each of the samskaras is an overt act of birth in symbolic disguise, observe Inden and Nicholas. In Hinduism, there are no monuments for the dead, whose ultimate destiny lies in the future and not in some past (D. Davies 189). In order to understand how death is seen as another form of passage and not the irrevocable termination of life, we must take a look at the notions of births and deaths that are seen within the lived mosaic of life.

Marriage is one of the first samskaras that involves a "rebirth," a notion that is crucial to our understanding of how there is no overtly special significance accorded to rebirth after death. Birth, death and rebirth must be seen in the continuous cycle of life, and the eventual task is to attain salvation from this cycle. The rebirth in marriage involves both the husband and the wife. A man's body is thought to be incomplete and not qualified to make offerings to the deity unless he is married. It is through marriage that he passes into the "householder" or grihastha stage, and is reborn as a complete and autonomous man. His wife at the same time is reborn as his "half-body" (Inden, Nicholas 92). Previously of her father's clan, marriage enables her transmigration into a person of her husband's family and clan. Marriage is important as one of the major samskaras because it is perceived as a union of the husband and wife for the purpose of procreation and perpetuation of the family line, leading to the beginning of a new cycle of samskaras.

In the story, "Bhushondir Maathe" (The Field of Bhusaṇḍi) by Rajshekhar Bosu, the protagonist Shibu is driven to such heights of desperation by his shrewish wife, Nrityakali, that he embarks on a journey from his village to Kalighat, the sacred temple of the Goddess Kali in the city of Kolkata, to pray for his wife's early demise in order to be freed of her. Shibu is freed of his wife, but not in the way that he had wished for because he ends up dying after a brief spell

of sickness. As a ghost, he leaves his village and takes the form of a Brahmadaitya, taking up residence in a bel gaach (wood-apple tree) in the field of Bhushandi. As he gets used to the ease and comfort of an existence devoid of his wife, he also begins to realize that this freedom comes at a price. Shibu is assailed by an acute loneliness, which leads him to search for a companion even in the ghostly realm. He finally selects a Daakini[47] as his bride-to-be who turns out to be none other than the ghost of his wife, Nrityakali. However, on the night of their marriage, the couple encounters the spouses of their former lives in the spirit realm and bedlam follows,

> Shibu's wives of his three past lives and Nrityakali's husbands of her three past lives became locked in a cataclysmic battle, leading to the incidence of floods, fire and earthquakes in the mortal world. Bhoot, pret, demons, vampires, betaals, everyone came to watch the spectacle. Spooks, pixies, gnomes, goblins, and other foreign ghosts were also delighted to behold this scene of utter madness. Djinns, African ghosts, Kabuli ghosts, were also looking on with relish along with every conceivable form of Chinese ghosts. (90-100)

This communal scene not only breaks down the temporal order by bringing together several pasts, but also seeks to establish a shared realm of the afterlife, simultaneously positing cultural differences. The word "redeath" is important in this regard because it outlines a situation whereby an individual dies and ascends to the spirit realm, lives there for a time, and then dies again, preparing the ground for its rebirth (Muesse 66). In India, the idea of rebirth has become the fundamental assumption of most religious traditions, the Hindu tradition(s), Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, with the return of the revenant scripted into all of these, albeit in varying avatars. The basic idea as Muesse writes, is characterized by an endless series of births, deaths and rebirths. The term used by these traditions to denote this cycle is "samsara." The phonologically accurate pronunciation of the word in Bengali would be "shongshar," which means a variety of things: the world, the earth, earthly life, domestic life and family. While "shongshar kora" means to lead a domestic life, "shongshar jatra" refers to one's mortal existence, thus expanding the notion of life beyond the mortal realm and placing it in a larger cosmic chain without the constraints of time. Marriage, as one of the first samskaras (Bengali

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[47] Daakini: a female goblin attending upon Shiva (শিব) or Durga (দুর্গা); also, refers to a witch, a mortal woman believed to possess supernatural powers (daini), *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary.* Digital Dictionaries of South Asia. Web.

"shongshkar") is a facilitator of this cycle of births, deaths and rebirths, which comes under the rubric of samsara. The links of social continuity are not lost in death. These links trascend temporal orders, as was illustrated by the translated excerpt from the story "Bhushondir Maathe" earlier on, albeit in a humorous manner, but in the process questioning our very beliefs concerning samsara. If one was to go through a continuous cycle of this birth, death, and rebirth, with each life different from the other, then the realm of the afterlife would indeed be rife with strife amongst the husbands and wives of past, present, and future.

The Grhya Sutra in the Upanishads lays down the rites of burial and marriage. For instance, the offering of three meat balls in the anniversary rituals of one's three immediate ancestors (Witzel 88). This offering is important because of the transformations created by death on the shared body relationships that are set into motion at birth (Inden, Nicholas 92). Such as, when a father dies, it is the duty of the son to burn his "gross body," which Hopkins terms as "earthly body," thus liberating his subtle body (146). The son, who was nourished and looked after by his father in life, is expected to dispense similar duties towards his father in his death, thus further affirming the cyclical continuity of one's social life. In a series of offerings called shraddhas, the son honours and feeds the subtle body of the deceased father until he is able to join his ancestors. The fact that the rest of his family takes it upon themselves to create a new body for him can be understood in the context that the living body of the man was considered to be the source of unity for his family. In his death, he creates a void in the circle that must be duly filled up. The absence of the body is felt in his emotional relationships, as well as in his social relationships, such that, upon his death, the sources of unity are taken away. The "jnati"[48] class is defined by shared bodily substance and engenders a corresponding code of conduct while the "kutumba"[49] class is defined by a body given and accepted in marriage, thus, initiating a separate code of conduct enjoining the exchange of gifts, write Inden and Nicholas (20).

To continue on the note of absence with reference to the conception of the bodily form of ghosts, the afterlife is more of a realm of imaginative fecundity than what is usually conceived of death. Death is the absence of life, and yet that which gives meaning to life.[50] For instance, note

[48] Jñāti: n a kinsman (*fem*: a kinswoman)
[49] kinsfolk and other relations through marriage
[50] See the discussion on Ernest Becker's central thesis in his 1973 book *The Denial of Death* in Kastenbaum 30.

the meticulously fleshed out "baby ghosts" in the translated excerpt from the story, "Bhootoore Pathshala":

> There really used to be two little baby ghosts a long time back. No more than tiny toddlers. They had recently learned how to prattle a little in their typical nasal tones. They had also just started trying their hand at scaring the little ones of human beings, tiny tots or at the most, small kids. They could stretch their hands and legs a little longer than the normal length whenever they wished to. They could make their eyes change into little balls of glowing crimson and occasionally, blow fire from their mouths. They would also flash their sparkling white teeth in the dark and cackle a little, 'he he he.'

These ghosts were just babies after all, so they were still scared of climbing on to the topmost branch of a tree, the usual favoured spot of ghosts. They were afraid of sitting on the cornice of old dilapidated houses with their legs dangling. The owl's screeching late in the night would set them quaking with fear. Adult human voices would take them by surprise. They were not yet old enough to jump across fields and dash off in a wild sprint or suddenly disappear into thin air in front of one's eyes. They were even unaware of the fact that ghosts were not supposed to utter the name of Ram, the god. Blissfully ignorant, these two little baby ghosts would merrily sing along with the Hindusthani sepoys, joining their voices in calling upon the god, "Rama ho-Rama ho-o-o-o-o." At this juncture, we encounter the question of their ghosthood and the dilemmas posed in the Bengali afterlife:

> Who was supposed to teach them the dos and don'ts of ghosthood? Poor baby ghosts. They had no one to call their own. No father ghost, no mother ghost, no brother, uncle or aunt-no one kith and kin of the ghost kind. No one knew who had left them behind, where they might have gone to, or if they had been reborn as human beings, nothing was known about the baby ghosts' antecedents. In fact, no one had even bothered to give them so much as a name. What would they do with themselves?

In his introduction to the book, *Amar Priyo Bhoutik Golpo*, Humayun Ahmed comments that ghosts are close to his heart, and the afterlife, a constant impetus to his imagination. It is a realm as well as a type of existence which cannot be seen, and that which cannot be seen impels us to imagine it. These beings cannot be touched; they can only be imagined as being excessively cold because death is when the normal processes of life cease to be. There is no fire in the belly

because there is no body *as such*. This ghost "body" is created with the tools of one's imagination, elements taken from the sociocultural aspects of life, with a tissue of meanings woven into the fabric of their existence, as varied and plural as human life. Thus, a plurality of equivalence is achieved in the act of translation from life to the afterlife. The ghosts live as long as the social imagination that had fed it is alive, and as the sociocultural imagination is constantly changing, there is a time limit attached to it.

Davies writes that the shelf life of ghosts, with reference to his research based in England, pointed him towards the theory that people's perception of historic ghosts depended on their sense and knowledge of history (O. Davies 41). Most ghosts cannot be dated because they are creations of a "folk memory," and hence they have been extant since "time immemorial[51]." These figures cannot be put down in the annals of history. Their existence might be said to predate institutionalized religion, showing a deeper connection between tribal paganistic beliefs and sociocultural elements of lived life, coloured by the mysteries that abound in nature. They also mark the evolution of society, the growing influence of religion and social systems, as no two ghosts are or remain the same. Just as a person's life can serve as a tapestry of stories and histories, so can a ghost's life, taking us to a time when things were conceived differently. Ghosts can also die, as that particular social imaginary dies out, thus, becoming markers of change and shifting currents in the lived world. Hiroshi Obayashi writes,

> …although thoughts about human life have experiential bases, the same cannot be said about death. The human imagination about death and afterlife often is not only an extension of human thoughts about life (sharing the same experiential foundation) but also the source of novel insights that shed new light on our understanding of life itself…With death we have no such prima facie empirical familiarity…neither an empirical basis nor the conceptual tools needed to penetrate the veil. Therefore, we have no choice but to deal with it as yet another form of life-afterlife. We use all the familiar features extrapolated from our own lives in an attempt to understand and comprehend death by inference. (x –xi)

This afterlife is not merely an extension, but a translation so to speak. In fact, it can be interpreted as a different narrative tradition that offers a parahistorical take on the development

[51] From Bhooteder Maan-Samman" (A Matter of Ghosts' Honour) by Prochet Sengupta

of human societies and cultures. It is created through the confluence of a collective memory and imagination, bringing together elements of social, cultural, and ancient textual traditions. As we have no foreknowledge of death other than its certainty and inevitability, this mortal condition in itself becomes the driving force that nourishes the imagination and consequently, the afterlife. It is also meant to reaffirm the social structures. One must work towards a "good death" and dispense all the post-cremation rituals, failing which their existence shall be relegated to the sidelines of the samsara. The afterlife could be conceived of as an ouroboric practice of socialization and hence, a necessity.

> …the socially disruptive effect of death is sought to be softened by proper burials and ensuing rituals by translating death itself into a continued form of life. (Obayashi xi)

In certain parts of European peasant cultures, there was a custom of feeding the returning soul that is a symbolic form of eating or providing nourishment (Berta 15). The returning soul was fed on the steam of the food, as it could not have consumed food in the same manner as the living. For this to happen, the ghost would have had to possess an actual material body whose reality is mostly negated by experience, otherwise rendering the validity of such beliefs to be questionable. "The soul must be fed in a primarily symbolic way because the worldly concept of eating needs to be adjusted to the physiological changes induced by death as well, so that it would also seem real and authentic for the living," writes Berta (15).

In the story, "Bhootera Shatar Janena" (Ghosts Don't Know How to Swim), there is an interesting reference to the "body" of the boy ghost, who is capable of drowning in a river.

> Jhari Kaku threw the second fish. As the fish hit one of the branches of the plum tree and fell into the water, it seemed as if someone dived in after it from the sound of the splash. Jhari Kaku began to shout immediately, "Oh no! Did you catch it? He fell into the water! Get up, get up! What? You don't know how to swim? Oh my poor Khokon, you are floating away!"
>
> Jhari Kaku turned to me in a frantic state of agitation and said, "Calamity has befallen Khokon once again. The boy fell into the water while trying to catch the fish and drowned after he was unable stay afloat in the current. Now he will never be able to tell you the questions you wanted to know."

"He drowned? In this little water?" I asked, completely puzzled and trying hard to see where the ghost could be.

"Hmm. *The poor thing has a little body and no strength of its own*. That's why they don't know how to swim!" bewailed Jhari Kaku, in a voice full of compassion for the ghost who didn't know how to swim. (423-427)

The fact that the "poor thing" is believed to have a little body and no strength of its own, takes us back to the discussion on nourishment in the afterlife. For those who become ghosts, a spectral entity caught between two stages of life, I posit that their bodies are not products of transubstantiation, rather their state can be explained by the fact that these bodies have been nourished by the foods of thought, of a sociocultural imagination, carrying "embodied materialities and socialities" (Mascia-Lees 2). These ghosts are texts translated from life; however, they are devoid of the corporeal dimensions and practices. As explained before, a good death is that which is followed by the necessary rituals of parturition, a bad death is that which leads the being into a state of limbo.[52] Hence, this becomes an impetus towards imagining an alternative existence. These ghosts thus provide a separate history created by the people and for the people of the land.

The Vedas, Upanishads, or Puranas, provide a framework for understanding life, death, and the afterlife within the rubric of a specific religion. However, the body of ghosts and the bodies of ghosts are creations of the land and its people. It must be noted that any work of creativity and imagination is also sufficiently influenced by elements of one's sociocultural environment and can also in turn be seen to influence it. They can be seen as a tool to trace the trajectory of the chronological history of the land. The fact that the ghost seeks out nourishment can be traced to the fact that it is not offered any food, and food is central to the continuation of life so these ghosts must want to be fed. However, they cannot cook for themselves because fire is fundamental to cooking and also considered to be a divine embodiment of the gods, therefore, excluded from the ghosts who must necessarily not ascribe to such beliefs. For instance, they cannot even take the names of gods:

The ghost said, "My father passed away."

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[52] Limbo: 1. the state of being disregarded or forgotten. 2. An imaginary place for lost or neglected things. 3. From Latin limbus ("border") (cognate with limp), notably in the (ablative) expression in limbo ("on the edge"). *Advanced English Dictionary.*

"When?"

"This Tuesday, on Amavasya."

"What happened to him?"

"He had gone to possess the body of Elephant-headed Bagdi from Bagdipara."

"Elephant-headed Bagdi? Who is that?"

"Don't you know him? You human beings have a strange penchant for naming people after your gods and we can't utter those names, it's the name of that doped god's son…"

"Oh! Are you talking about Ganesh? Ganesh Bagdi?"

"Yes! My father contracted a stomach ailment while trying to possess that fellow and died that very night."

Translated from Bhooter Khoppore," (Ghost Trap) Robidas Saharay. (115-118)

Fire has a specific connotation in the context of understanding life processes in Hinduism. At the end of life, fire itself is considered to be the medium by which the body is offered to the gods as a kind of last sacrifice (Douglas 189). Hence, the performance of funerary rites is an enabler of the processes construed to come after the incidence of one's death. The Vedic Aryans considered the domestic fire to be more than a hearth for cooking food. It was the locus of the performance of ritual rites, and hence came to acquire a symbolic character (Madan 291). The shankhchunni in "The Ghostly Wife" cannot light the fire of the hearth for cooking food due to its symbolical connotations of sacrality. Agni, the Vedic god of fire, is deified in the form of "fire," one of the few gods actually present and visible on the offering ground. He receives and transports the offerings to the gods (Witzel 72). The kindling and worship of fire is present in all of the rituals because of this reason (Witzel 74). The fire god Agni carries the offerings to the gods and the fire transubstantiates the offerings by a conversion from a raw, uncooked state into a palatable, cooked one. In a way, it is symbolic of the transformation of the mundane substance into one with divine characteristics.

Food takes up new shapes such as, its smoke and aroma, which travel towards the gods for their gustatory appeasement, while the remaining portion is a return gift from the gods who have tasted the food while sitting at the sacred fire, rendering it consumable by human beings.

The central process of the body is considered to be digestion. The Sanskrit words for the processes of digestion imply the notion of "cooking" or "burning" (Madan 78). For instance, as Wujastyk writes, fire in one's belly is the metaphor for hunger. Once food has been eaten and cooked by this digestive fire, it is believed to turn into the first of the seven "dhatus" or "body tissues." Food in the stomach is reduced to chyme or chyle ("rasa"), a pulpy juice. The other principle of heat in the body is choler ("pitti"), which goes to work so that chyle is transformed into the next body tissue in the chain, blood. Blood transforms into flesh, then tissues, fat, bone and marrow, and eventually, generates the highest essence of the body, semen (Wujastyk 398). It must be noted that this view does not accommodate the transformative processes of a woman's bodily substances as more often than not, society and social processes are conceived along staunchly patriarchal lines.

Birth also presents an equally complicated picture like death. The womb is a liminal place, which contains a being of the world that is not yet in it. The question then is can the foetus be truly regarded as a human being if it is still in a state of transition. This would lead us to the necessity of socialization for an individual to consider a person to be eligible for inclusion in society. Birth as a rite of passage incorporates both life and death, as much as death means the setting into motion of transitioning into another life.

> The possibility of death posed by childbirth is very real. The possibility surrounding birth for Hindus (twenty-one days) and Muslims (forty days) derives from a similar source, dread of the *pret* (wandering soul) and the *pretas* (malignant souls). Though Muslim fundamentalists criticize the general mass of Muslims for such local syncretism, the fear of these uncontrollable spirits, the *pretas* and the *bhutas*, is greater than the criticism and the rituals surrounding life cycle rites…The mother, as well as the child, because of impurities, are socially ostracized from the rest of the society. They remain in seclusion (in a neutral state) where only a low caste woman can touch them without adding or creating problems of pollution because of their specific caste occupation (as removers of pollution). (Fruzzetti, Ostor 191)

Many local goddesses and female ghosts are worshipped in the villages of West Bengal, writes June McDaniel (65) as they serve the dual roles of being preserver and destroyer. These folk goddesses took on the roles of guardians, located in the cultural fabric of rural life.

However, the crucial difference between folk goddesses and female ghosts are that while the former's blessings are sought, the latter's worship is required to avoid bad luck and the evil eye. McDaniel adds that women who died during pregnancy or childbirth were considered to be highly dangerous as they had the potential to lure children into the world of death. Their earthly frustrations are believed to be carried over into the afterlife. "Possession is also relegated to villages and small neighborhoods…worship of nature deities is less popular in urban areas than Vedanta philosophy and science, and hard to maintain when villagers have moved away from sacred ground for the sake of jobs and wealth" adds McDaniel (66). Most female ghosts are believed to live on trees, and in the case of possession, a successful exorcism indicates the fact that the ghosts promise a particular tree will fall down as a symbol of their departure. Case in point, the sheora tree, called the "ghost tree" in Bengali folklore, which is unattractive and crooked, and the favoured haunt of female ghosts and demons (McDaniel 212). These trees were worshipped for safe childbirth and other boons. "For trees could speak in those days," writes Lal Behari Dey in his anthology of folktales, as life was believed to be able to take any shape, from the human form to that of insects, vegetables, animals, trees, ghosts, gods, all were considered to be a part of the samsara (or Bengali "shongshar").

It was earlier observed that the womb is a liminal zone that facilitates birth, marking the gateway into the world. In concurrence with this formulation, death also serves a similar function. The goddess Kali is considered to be the final destination, a release from samsara, as she prefers to live on the cremation ground (Oestigaard 205). Shashan Kali's followers are not only restricted to the material realm, but also include ghosts and gods. The goddess, in her most terrifying avatars of Shashan Kali and Chinnamasta[53] (she of the severed head) dwell on the cremation ground, along with the presence of the male principle, Shashaneshwar Mahadev (Shiva). If creation is a union of the male and female principles, so is death. In the act of birth, the woman is considered to be the field ("khettra"), while the cultivator (husband) provides the seed and "cultures" the field (Fruzzetti, Ostor 107). Thus, both the "ground" of the womb and the cremation ground are crucial as preparatory grounds for birth (the Proto-Indo-European bʰr̥tis, from bʰer-, which meant 'to carry, bear').

[53] For more information on the Chinnamasta avatar, see Oestigaard 205.

Both birth and death not only become acts of transition, but also of translation, a carrying over as well as a consequent reconstitution in another realm. Such a conception is integral to the genesis of the spirits of a culture. Here again we shall encounter convolutional notions of selfhood and identity. It is supposed that people everywhere understand that biological bodies die, but what is more difficult to imagine is the death of personal agency since it is immaterial (Pyysiainen 94). However, it is that dead biological body which impedes our cognitive processes of grasping death and becomes a formative influence on conceptualizing what happens after death. While the material "body" is "present" in front of us, it is the "person" within who has ceased to be or is absent. Thus, the deceased's biological body makes "death" conspicuous by its presence while the "life" inside is what becomes translated on to another realm. This "life" cannot be conceived of without a body to bear it. Hence, cultures across the world cultivate "disembodied bodies" to breathe "life" into it. It is the materiality of death that facilitates our belief in the continuum of life, even if some of the forms are not perceivable in the same frame of reference as human beings are to the human eye. However, these are also beings, ghosts, and spirits, nourished and nurtured by human beings, by the people of a land and considered to be "living" in the realm of memory and imagination, where our past eventually comes to dwell.

> Souls of the dead thus are often regarded as an important part of human communities. In nondoctrinal traditions, it is difficult to differentiate between spirits of the dead and gods. Because pure mentality is difficult to imagine, spirits are often combined with something physical: a "subtle" body resembling mist, clouds, or vapor; the grave as the place where the dead agent is dwelling; the house a dead agent keeps haunting; and so forth. (Pyysiainen 94)

There is always an ever present, or in this case, an "absent" other. "Ab-" means "away" in Latin, but perhaps never too far from our senses of perception and cognition. The belief in these spirits, the belief which has materialized from human life and the spirit(s) which has emanated from human beings, then serves the dual function of engaging with the world outside and within one's being, for the task of self-translation. As a translator, undertaking the task of translating these stories is also a matter of my self-translation. The process of translation is akin to making the past speak *to* the present, not *for* the present. Translation must not be an exercise that serves the purpose of validating the past. Rather it is to re-member, to remind ourselves of who we are and to seek membership again of that community. It is to acknowledge the fluidity of

boundaries, whether it is in defining the self or a community, when what is known confronts what can be known. Translation is the creation of something new from something old, a process of transmigration so to speak. As is death, so is translation, an act of birth. In the translated text, the "something old" is not a vestigial organ, but the very spirit of the text. Thus, translation can be construed as the rite of passage for literature and cultures across the world, for their continuance in the cycle of life.

Death renders us into a biologically immobile state and metaphorically becomes a state of impasse, challenging the society to prove its unity and continuity in the face of loss of life. However, death at the same time prepares our passage from this state by enabling transition into another realm. It also mobilizes us to re-engage with ourselves and renew our beliefs, ties, and faith. It provides an avenue for the society to regroup as well as for self-attestation, to bear witness to the past. Thus in human belief, change is the most fundamental element of death, not disablement, or cessation, or a complete stoppage. Death, like the act of translation, enables us to see[54] the familiar as if through a foreigner's[55] lens. The eyes are the same, just the perspective has changed, and in the case of the ghosts, the bodily form which contains them. We are already removed from the past; we are already foreigners to what was once familiar. Death is constantly in life. Thus, we are all bhoots in some way or the other, and our bodies (including our mind) are zones of liminality. We can become ghosts to our former selves and ways of life.

Just as in death there is a moment of silence observed by the living, which is a part of the mourning process as well as a period of reflection, so is it in translation.[56] Like death, like translation. As soon as we become quiet, the voices of our past travel to us, sounding a little far-off, as if we were on a long-distance call with the past. Our quiet carries the promise of their speech to come. Hence, the past and the present unite in the translator's mind, to create the future, that is, the translated text. The question that impelled me to take up the task of translation was, will the bhoots of Bengal, like the trees in Dey's story, be confined to speaking only in "those days?" Or, could I make them speak to us as well? And what would they say if they could speak? The answer is only just beginning to form, as the voices begin to speak and it promises a

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[54] "See": From Middle English seen, from Old English sēon ("to see, look, behold, perceive, observe, discern, understand, know")

[55] Foreign: from the Middle English forein, from Old French forain, from Vulgar Latin forānus, from Latin forās ("outside, outdoors"), also spelled forīs ("outside, outdoors"). *Advanced English Dictionary*.

[56] See *On Translation* 3-5

lot more to come. The spirit of a culture is as protean as the beliefs it generates and the forms to which it gives birth. More importantly, the spirit of a culture is as multivalent as the spirits of a culture. If death is a challenge to the continuum of life, translation is a challenge to the continuity of beliefs in life, and both promise a renascence.

The Ghost in Man, the Ghost that once was Man,
But cannot wholly free itself from Man,
Are calling to each other thro' a dawn
Stranger than earth has ever seen; the veil
Is rending, and the Voices of the day
Are heard across the Voices of the dark.

"The Ring," Alfred Tennyson[57]

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[57] From *poetrycat.com*. Web.

CHAPTER III

Translation as Thanatopsis

Go forth under the open sky, and list

To Nature's teachings, while from all around—

Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,--

Comes a still voice…

-"Thanatopsis" by William Cullen Bryant[58]

It is late at night. There is lightning in the sky filled with clouds. It seems as if the very heart of Bhairav[59] is in a state of cataclysmic turmoil. The waters of the river are breaking down the barriers of time as it surges past in a roaring rush. Benudhar[60] begins to call out at all the banks of the river. In this absolute moment, the border between the land of the living and the land of the dead dissolves in the deluge. On earth, this moment comes every day. The day ends in evening and then night begins. The heart of night starts beating faster in anticipation of that moment. It eventually arrives at midnight as a star crashes on to earth at lightning speed and at once, the gates to the land of the dead open resoundingly. The people from *the other side of the world* descend in flocks and take their place by the side of those on earth. They look after their loved ones, caress them, and speak about so many things in our dreams.

Translated from "Laal Chul" (Red Hair), Monoj Bosu. (134-145)

(Italics my own)

[58] See Byrant, William Cullen. "Thanatopsis." *Yale Book of American Verse*. 1912. Ed. Thomas R. Lounsbury. Bartleby.com. Web. 28 Jun. 2016 (www.bartleby.com/102/16.html)
[59] Bhairav: a manifestation of Shiva
[60] Benudhar: the note of a bamboo-flute, (benu: a kind of thin bamboo from which flutes are made, a reed; a flute made of this bamboo, a pipe). Like Orpheus, Benudhar plays a similar role in the story, seeking for his deceased bride. In Greek mythology, Orpheus was a legendary musician and poet, who attempted to retrieve his dead wife, Eurydice, by charming those who held her in the underworld with his music. However, his divine music could not be heard by those in the land of the dead and he eventually failed to bring home his wife.

In Greek mythology, Thanatos, the god of death, was regarded as the twin brother of Hypnos, the god of sleep. These twin states of death and sleep induce us into a state of unconsciousness. In that moment out of time, they also offer us with an opportunity to step out of this comatose state and to become conscious of "the other side of the world." It is an absolute moment, stranger than earth has ever seen, as the voices of the day are heard across the voices of the dark and we must listen closely. This "dark" is the darkness of our conscious not knowing, of our not wanting to know, as we are content to exist in the contracted forms of our selves. Thus, the ghost in man, the ghost that once was man, also becomes the ghost that *is* man. Translation then is an exercise in self-reflexivity.

The task of writing can be considered to be an embodiment of the human condition, in the sense that human life seems to be a manuscript for being *a* human. There is a lack of finitude in the process of becoming. There are constant erasures and deletions, and revisions and editions, the Bengali term for it being "bidhatar lekha." The word "bidhata" refers to Providence personified, believed to write down the future of a newborn child on its forehead at the time of its birth, which brings us to "lekha" or "to write, to compose" as in a book. However, it is our fragmentary selves which heralds the end of the book. A human being from the time of his birth is an expanding universe, parts of us dispersed within us in the process. Hence, we are all works in progress. Similarly, there is no finality in an act of writing. Even a text is not a complete being. Its chief characteristic is its incompletion heralded by the very possibility of translation and numerous interpretations. This incompletion is a promise of its becoming, of constant change. Texts are not self-contained units of fixed meanings. They are also an ever-expanding universe engendering heterogeneity of meanings. As is man, so is a text, part of a continuous life cycle, where death of its being is not an end, but a beginning of its becoming something other than itself. We are our own bhooter golpos (ghost stories) such that becoming is simultaneously a task of self-translation and a textual exegesis. Friedrich Nietzsche writes that man is "himself an artistically creating subject" (119):

> What does man actually know about himself? Is he, indeed, ever able to perceive himself completely, as if laid out in a lighted display case? Does nature not conceal most things from him-even concerning his own body-in order to confine and lock him within a proud, deceptive consciousness, aloof from the coils of the bowels, the rapid flow of the blood stream, and the intricate quivering of the fibers! (Nietzsche 115)

This is because language is a tool of othering. The narratives of the world and ourselves are constructed through this language. “Is language the adequate expression of all realities?” asks Nietzsche (116). Perhaps not, as every utterance of words always contains ghosts of other meanings that remained unexpressed. Knowledge, in any form, whether it is self-knowledge, sociocultural beliefs, religious ideas, political philosophies, and so on, are far from the realm of gnostic truths. To hold on to these as unquestionable heirlooms that must also be passed on to others, heralds a false dawn of consciousness. It is like being under the influence of Hypnos, the twin brother of Thanatos, of being in a state of conscious darkness such that even waking up is not an awakening. “Language…is the most salient model of Heraclitean flux,” writes George Steiner in *After Babel*, “It alters in every moment in perceived time…When we think about language, the object of our reflection alters in the process” (18). The task of translation then is to get a “minute within existence” (Nietzsche 114), as time is out of joint, and to see the world as the ephemeron that it is, before it has hardened and congealed in our consciousness. To study the world through words is to trace its historical becoming at the microscopic level.

Steiner observes that language is the highest and everywhere the foremost of those assents that eludes articulation solely out of our own means. To understand the world through language(s) then is a Sisyphean ordeal. However, the task of translation is not a form of mountain climbing, a movement only in one direction. Imagine the translator then to be Sisyphus on a boat in the middle of a river, and the task of translation to be a simultaneous movement in both directions, towards the source and target languages. This is the dilemma of the translator. He becomes aware of the duplicity engendered in language(s) and the constitutional fragility of our most trenchant and intractable cultural assumptions. In such a case, translation then might be in danger of becoming impossible and futile as we are so much more than any articulation could possibly encapsulate. But this is the true awakening. Steiner writes that translation is a task of interpretative transfer, which is mistakenly simplified as a model of encoding and decoding to get the message across. That is so, but this process is also “operative within a single language…here the barrier or distance between source and receptor is time” (28). This is what gives translation its bidirectionality, a parallelism of movement occurring on both the banks of the river commencing from a multiplicity of choices to be made. The inconstancy of language is what gives this task the impetus to progress and must impel the translator to refrain from

impetuosity in his work. Translation was never meant to be easy. It is an arduous mnestic[61] practice, where we muse upon the wor(l)d at length. The translated text becomes a precipitation of all the clouds of thought that had gathered above us, the distilled spirit of the original.

In Bengali mythology, the spirits of the dead have to cross the Baitarani River, in order to reach the abode of the dead. This is where the temporal order of human conception and cognition stops. On that other side of the world, time as we knew it becomes non-existent, "abartaman kal," or in Nietzsche's words, "such a fable." But "kal" that is "time," is time nevertheless. The word "abartaman" is the antonym of "bartaman" which means the present. Thus, "abartaman" means that which is *not* the present. Hence, it could mean both the past and the future. This minute in existence is when we realize that both the realms are in a way realms of the dead. And both the realms of the past and future can become accessible to us in this "abartaman kal." Time here is a "factor of dissemblance, of divergence, of difference" (*Oneself* 117).

As Steiner writes,

> …our consciousness of past being comes on a *blank space*. We have no total history, no history which could be defined as objectively real because it contained the literal sum of past life. To remember everything is a condition of madness. We remember culturally, as we do individually, by conventions of emphasis, foreshortening, and omission. The landscape composed by the past tense, the semantic organization of remembrance, is stylized and differently coded by different cultures. (*After Babel* 29) (Italics my own)

The translator is caught in the no man's land, where no man can live because it is not a land, but a river. A river entails movement and passage. The translator is unlike Charon because if one thinks that the task of the translator is to train the keen eye of Charon on his own language in considering what is translatable on to the other realm, he is mistaken. The translator realizes that there is nothing called his "own language." That is the translator's nightmare. He is caught in the crossfires of meanings from both the domains of linguistic and cultural plurality. However, it is the mutability of language, in its metaphorical nature and conceptual structures, which makes translation not only a possibility, but a necessity. Translation as interpretation is what

[61] Mnestic: of or pertaining to memory. From Mnemosyne, the Titaness who was the goddess of memory; mother of the Muses in Greek mythology. *Advanced English Dictionary*.

gives life to language, beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription (*After Babel* 27).

"It is because we think and speak in concepts that language has to repair, as it were, the loss caused by conceptualization," writes Ricoeur (*Oneself* 28). For Ricoeur, the task of outer translation is echoic of inner translation, involving the discovery of an other within oneself. This other exists in a plural form. The polysemy of otherness is even indicated in language, such that the question posed is, "who *are* you?" Ricoeur considered this question to be the fundamental question of human identity. "Are" is the second person singular simple present tense of the verb "to be." It can thus be construed that the plurality of existence is implicit in this enquiry of the other, strangely enough in language. Therefore, it is that very polysemy of otherness that could lead one to conclude upon the polysemy of ourselves. We are units of our own history, a self-text so to speak. One operates both as an author and reader of one's own life. So much so that Ricoeur writes that when considered from the angle of the power to produce ideas, just as the idea of him as a human being, the idea of God was also born and produced with him when he was created (*Oneself* 9). "Better: the idea of God is in me as the very mark of the author upon his work, a mark that assures the resemblance between us," he adds. In Bengali belief too, one's life is the "bidhatar lekha" and in that case, growing up since the moment of our birth has been a task of self-translation. Similarly, cultures and languages, systems of creative construction, much like us, also undergo stages of evolvement. Translation becomes a mode of hermeneutical self-inquiry, an exegetic form of engaging with oneself and the world at large, with a view to expand our universe of meanings.

Translation is the initiation of a dialogue, a dialectical teasing out of truths, "a playing with seriousness" (Nietzsche 123), inasmuch as it is a play of words between history and our stories. To validate the present by holding up the past as proof is a myopic exercise and often, nothing more than chicanery. It brings to the fore a rising doubt in oneself, a faint notion of the duplicity of our beliefs. "What then is truth?" asks Nietzsche, "a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms," that is, "a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be *fixed*, *canonical*, and *binding*. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions-they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no

longer as coins" (117). The interrogative principle must then form the core of translation, in a dialogic mode of educing knowledge, if truth is to be a fertile ground which makes its own development and variance possible. It is in the act of translation, that absolute[62] moment, when one becomes aware that there is nothing that can be fixed, canonical, and binding. Translation, is thus, a breaking free from the "the idea of perfection that founds it in its condition of finite being" (*Oneself* 9).

As a thanatopsis, that is an essay expressing a view on the subject of death, I have already likened translation to death. To explicate further, we must look at our own narrative identities. The manuscript of our life is constantly under the revisory gaze of one's social community and environment, eventually our lives becoming a "sociobiographical" (Dillon 220) narrative. In the hour of our death, it is this narrative which is at stake of becoming lost to oblivion. Our bodies have by then become a socially inscribed text, and hence, death must now serve the purpose of translation. Translation, in Ricoeur's words, is the work of remembering and the work of mourning. The work of remembering the socially constructed narratives of our "self" and the task of mourning the death of our individual biological entities, which cannot be retrieved due to death *as such*. However, 'death' much like Walter Benjamin's formulation of translation is also a "mode," going by Harry Zohn's translation (Benjamin 70), or a "form" as translated by James Hynd and E. M. Valk (Weissbort, Eysteinsson 298). There is a paradox inherent in death. It is a conceptual structure that is characterized by an absence of conceptualization. From various formulations of what happens after death in different cultures, it also signifies a mode, of travel.

It is in this sense that we can continue to appreciate Hopkins' formulation of death not being a final stopping point. The corporeal frame remains the untranslatable, while that which is translated is a narrative of that self, not a self-narrative. The untranslatable need not necessarily be a hindrance to translation; rather it could act as an impetus. Benjamin quotes Mallarme in his seminal essay "The Task of the Translator," referring to the imperfection of languages and the consequent diversity of idioms on earth which acts as a deterrent towards the materialization of truth in one single stroke through utterance (77). This leads us to formulate how the inherently pluralistic structure of languages and cultures necessitates translation. It creates a confluence of

[62] Absolute: From Middle English absolut, from Middle French absolut, from Latin absolūtus ("unconditional; unfettered; completed"), perfect passive participle of absolvō ("loosen, set free, complete"), from Latin ab ("away")+ solvo ("to loose"). *Advanced English Dictionary*.

truths as envisioned by various cultures, pertaining to questions of life and death. Translation enables communication between cultures, languages, and periods of time, where time itself ceases to exist as a historical entity. The bhoots of Bengal, as spectres also serving the function of spectators, offer a separate history, rather a parahistorical account of sociocultural development. For instance, literary works are not only cultural commentaries of their environment, but also a reflection upon their creators. Similarly, the afterlife in Bengal can also be read in a similar vein:

> They inhabit the same spaces as human beings, our villages and settlements with their distinct boundaries. Their place and time is the same, what separates their society from ours is that they belong to a different stratum and dimension of existence. There are so many stories about them, a multitude of tales and legends, rhymes and discourses. Both the societies have been doing well for themselves, existing side by side since time immemorial. The society of bhoots can be dated back to the same time as the inception of human society. In spite of being neighbours to each other, there has been very little interaction between the two. There used to be some interaction earlier on, now they rarely get to set eyes on each other due to the light of enlightenment and the cacophony of civilization. This is a cause for concern.
>
> Translated from "Bhootera Ekhon"(The Status of Ghosts Now), Taradas Bandhopadhyay. (189-192)

It is a cause for our concern indeed because it brings out a fundamental aspect of human civilization, change. As Benjamin has pointed out, the mother tongue of the translator itself undergoes a transformation over the centuries (73). Hence, translation cannot be defined as a "sterile equation of two dead languages" (73), but becomes a process of identifying the translator's estrangement with his own culture, which is in itself an impetus to the task of translation. "While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal," writes Benjamin (73). A culture is always in a "constant state of flux." Translation is then coming to terms with one's own foreignness to their culture. In his "On the Different Methods of Translating", Goethe comments:

> On the one hand every man is in the power of the language he speaks, and all his thinking is a product thereof. He cannot think anything with great precision which would lie outside the limits of language; the shape of his concepts, the nature and the limits of the way in which they can be connected, is prescribed for him by *the language in which he is born and educated—intellect and imagination are bound by it*. (206) (Italics my own)

For those of us who are post-midnight's children,[63] this is an unlikely situation. I was born, if one can be so, in Bengali but educated in English, which has predominantly shaped my intellect and to which my imagination is bound. The social imaginary which created the bhoots of Bengal is largely alien to me, such that I look upon these figures as foreign. The act of translation places me in that liminal space, which can also be occupied by these ghosts. These spectres are spectators of the historical becoming of a specific culture, in this case, Bengali. The task of translation also leads the translator into a similar state. The engagement with two languages brings out the plurality of meanings not only pervasive between two cultures when it comes to finding equivalence between words, but also an awareness that there is an intra-cultural plurality that is made possible due to the passing of time. A translator is an interlocutor of history. The texts of our past speak to us, adding coins to the ever-flowing stream of thought that has brought us to where we are now. Much of translation is also the collecting of these coins, offering us with the scope of giving them newer forms of cultural currency. Language enables conversations between history, philosophy, religion, culture, and society, and words are the nodal points for these illuminating connections. Worlds collide and confront each other in words; each word is a bearer and marker of historical currents of change. To translate is to be aware of this unfolding spectacle.

In this context, let us draw our attention to two words, "spectre" and "spectator."[64] The first word comes from the French "spectre" and Latin "spectrum" meaning appearance, apparition, a ghost. The second word "spectator" comes from the Latin frequentative verb "specto" (watch) from "specio" (look at). Both the spectre and the spectator perform the function of viewing but not participating. They stand as witnesses to the events that unfold. The link that I wish to draw here is that these spectres, which "haunt"[65] the Bengali afterlife, perform

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[63] It is a reference to Salman Rushdie's seminal postcolonial novel, *Midnight's Children*.
[64] See entries on spectre and spectator, *Advanced English Dictionary*.
[65] See "haunt" in *Advanced English Dictionary*.

a similar function as that of a translator. Much has been said about how translation entails a bringing forth from one language to a going across to another. The etymological origin of the word "haunt" comes from Middle English "haunten," which means to reside, inhabit, use or employ, from Old French "hanter" (to inhabit), which has its Germanic origin in "haimatjan" that is to lead home. It comes from the Proto-Germanic "haimatjana," or to house and again, bring home, from the "haimaz," which means village or home from the Proto-Indo-European "kōim" or village." Even "haunting" then is a call to return to that agrestic past.

Translation is as much a bringing forth of these stories and figures as it is a return to a time and a space which was my own, to a village from where we might have all come. These ghosts have in a way led me home, to a language in which I was born and since then, have spent my life constantly moving away, as is the nature of our becoming. Translation makes me a revenant, a person who returns after a lengthy absence, and in this case, it is these revenants of Bengali bhooter golpo who have facilitated this return. Translators are entrusted with the task of performing the function of cultural mediators, translating the distinctive cultural grammars that govern a shared system of common symbols. However, it has increasingly become evident that a culture is a tapestry of stories, a narrative that is collectively woven together. This leads me to explain how the narratives of the afterlife offer us something that is untranslatable. The untranslatable is that social imaginary which created these figures that pervade the stories, and has ceased to exist due to change. In a way, translation is not only a cross-cultural communication, but also an intra-cultural dialogue. Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinsson observe, translation is the principal arena in which differences may be explored, appreciated and interpreted or understood (5-6). Cultures may be more internally divisive than is apparent, thus, it can be construed as a discovery of the other that resides within us (2). In this way, it is a communication between the self and the others, both within the self and outside of it.

As individuals, we exist in a web of connections, each filament of identity connecting us to a plurality of meanings inherent within us and in relation to the world around us. Death is not an absenting of those meanings. It is the absenting of the biological body that comes to be the repository of those meanings. Death creates a void that must be filled up and a centre must be found to hold on to those floating strings. Identity is not an overarching categorical status of the individual (Dillon 220), but a spectrum of pluralities, in relation to gender, sexuality, race, or social class. These differentiated identities point towards what gets translated by the Bengali

sociocultural imagination from life to the afterlife. That is, an identity that exists within a particular frame of time and mind, leading to distinctive formulations.

> To talk about identity then is not to talk about some static or essentialized status but to recognize that identity, while relatively coherent and providing individuals with a relatively ordered, sociobiographical narrative…is also dynamic. Identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well of 'being.' It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical they undergo constant transformation. (Dillon 220)

Hence, the afterlife is a biography of an individual, written by society in the hour of one's death that is illustrative of the social reconstitution of the afterlife. The "individual" from the Medieval Latin "individualis," which is derived from the Latin "individuum" or "an indivisible thing," is quite different from the human being, or "manush." One is not born human; one becomes a human being, or "manush howa" in Bengali. It means, to be brought up or to grow up to become a proper adult or human being, which is the product of the process of socialization. Thus, in the hour of death, society does not hold on to the individual, but stakes its claim on the narrative it had constructed. The individuality of a human being or the singularity of his existence is untranslatable in broad social terms. Hence, what is translated is the narrative which is grafted on to him, that is social in character, embodying all the markers of one's social identity, religion, class, caste, gender and so on. Hence, the ghosts are not translations of the specific individuals who died but the social characters that were ascribed to them, the way society had seen them or had given them a place in life. The afterlife is a re-assignation of that social self to another order, to maintain the structures of society and even to support it, to aid in the perpetuation of those beliefs that serve as a cornerstone for the social imagination. Translation of these stories is an exegesis of Bengali society and cultural beliefs from the perspective of these para-normal beings. Moreover, it is an attempt to answer the universal and atemporal questions regarding life and death that persist throughout cultures, but are answered differently.

> Culture…denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men

communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz 89)

It is important to note as Geertz points out that human behaviour is so loosely determined by intrinsic sources of information that extrinsic sources become vital (93). Or, that the other is not only necessary, but also crucial in the identification of the self. To extend that further, perhaps one's own culture could be better understood or appreciated by looking at it in conjunction with other cultures, for that is how the differences emerge, a process that is intrinsic to translation. If construction of identities involves recognizing our own othering, then so should it be in the construction of cultures. Benjamin also writes that the afterlife could not be called so had it not been a transformation and renewal of something living, undergoing a maturing process (73). However, translation is neither a total transfer nor a mere transmittal of subject matter. Rather it is the untranslatable that lends itself to translation whose task is to produce in it the echo of the original (Benjamin 76). This echo comes from the Ancient Greek ēkhō which means "sound," a voice from the past that comes back to speak to us. But much can be lost in this communication, which might not necessarily be the fault of the process at hand or the processor, rather the very act entails this loss. Translation, if considered, a hermeneutical activity, the origin of which lies in "ermeneus" (translator, interpreter) and "ermeneuo" (to translate, to interpret) could point towards its own interchangeable functions, that of interpretation as well as translation. To look at translation as a form of interpretation will take us to the task of translation as producing an echo of the original as enjoined by Benjamin. In both metaphrasis, sense for sense translation, and paraphrasis, word for word translation, the word phrasis, which means "speech" in Ancient Greek, forms the nucleus of the words. Thus, translation is in a way an activity which involves making the past speak for itself, not for the present, to raise the dead from their state of dormancy. The afterlife is like a dormant volcano waiting to erupt. Translation is what helps it to break out and become visible.

This speech, the sound that is produced, can be interpreted as an echo of the original text, which travels through time and history to come to us in translation. Therefore, by very definition of those who return from the dead, a translation is a text of the afterlife because it contains voices of the past life and life that is past. Hence, translation is not merely an activity of delivering the past. Instead, it is the task of making the past speak for itself to the present, a "punarjanma" of the past so to speak. Benjamin stresses on the reciprocity between languages so that translation

can serve the purpose of initiating a dialogue, rather than a mere transference of knowledge from one language to another. It is a two-way street, with a constant confluence of otherness and familiarity converging upon each other at the interstices of one's lived identity, as one navigates through their sociocultural spheres. "Languages are not strangers to one another," writes Benjamin, perhaps far less than we are to them, "but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express"(72).

The word "punarjanma" can be understood in relation to the rites of life that are associated with death and the afterlife in Bengal. A human being has to perform several samskaras during the span of his life (Inden, Nicholas 37). The word samskara means to "complete," "prepare," "make over," "fully form," and above all, to "purify" (shuddhi), a transformative action that is meant to initiate the living body into new statuses and relationships by giving it a new birth. This constant yearning to return to a primordial purity is ingrained in Hindu religious philosophy. Hence, transformation is a necessity in every stage of life. And every stage is seen as a stepping stone towards a rebirth that is also a return.

> Each samskara in the sequence prepares the person for the next: all of them cumulatively prepare him for the penultimate goal of attaining "heaven" (svarga), "rebirth" (punar-janma) in a higher caste, or becoming a proper "ancestor" (pitr), in preparation for the ultimate goal of "release" (mukti, moksa) from the cycle of birth and "life in the world" (samskara) by the separation of the person's atman from his body and its union with brahman. (Inden, Nicholas 37)

The word "punarjanma" is a lexical Mobius strip, which is also the symbol for infinity that renders the compartmentalization of time into past, present, and future as fictive truths. The word "punarjanma" not only means "former" but also a "new birth," much in the same way as "bhoot" means "ateet" or "past" and a future state of existence for human beings after death, though conditions apply. Hence, offering a sense of time folding back on itself such that the past becomes indiscernible from the future. "Punarjanma" means "rebirth," a task that requires nourishment, which is unusual considering the fact that death, means the cessation of corporeal activities such as consumption and digestion of food. However, if we look at the conception of life and death in Fruzzetti and Ostor's 1984 book, *Kinship & Ritual in Bengal*, birth in Bengal is viewed as putting one step in the land of death and the other in the land of the living, rendering

the very act of birth into a zone of liminality. Birth as a rite of passage incorporates both life and death because there was a very real possibility of death posed by childbirth, either to the mother and/or to the child itself (191). This interchangeability in perceiving life and death necessitates what Ricoeur calls the work of remembering and the work of mourning, tasks which are characteristic of death as well as re-birth.

Ricoeur likens translation to parturition (*On Translation* 4), a process that leads language to reflect on itself and words offer the food for thought in this regard. It is through translation, through the test of the foreign that we become sensitive to the strangeness of our own language. We realize our own linguistic and cultural polysemy in the very act of their transference from one language to another, which can also be an impediment considering that they open up "new sources of ambiguity" (*On Translation* 27). Translation is therefore a pause, a stepping point, a moment of reflection for the translator rather than cessation of the text in one language and its birth in the other, instead it is a rebirth in both. It promises a renascence of both the languages as "the determinations of the self in this work are found to be intensified and transformed by the recapitulation" (*On Translation* 25).

> The social structure we are born into and socialised within is a set of assumptions about what we should say, do and even think in given situations, but it does not determine our behaviour. Everything we do is informed by learned social structure, but the structure itself is only transmitted through time and space by real people as they repeat what they themselves have learned, or react against it. It has no independent, extra- human existence. Our own input into this process will affect it, perhaps ever so little; but in the course of just a few years completely new ways of thinking about society may appear…it is the combination of pre-existing rules and individual actions based on them which transmits and transforms structure through time. (Morris 6)

In Ricoeur's formulation, translation concerns the dual task of broadening the horizon of one's own language together with a formation, a reconfiguration as well as an education of the self. It leads us to the discovery of one's own language and of its resources that have been left to lie fallow. Translation endows us with numerous possibilities of growth. It can enable us to be reborn in one's own language. This in turn is followed by a mode of educing knowledge if we are to follow the Socratic definition of education, which is to draw something out of the mind

rather than forcing something into it, as per Kastenbaum's analysis (770). Translation is meant to raise questions; it heralds an aporia (Latin aporia from Ancient Greek aporos, impassable from a+poros "passage") that engenders a promise of deliverance from that moment of impasse. It is an aporetic activity, which forces us to regard oneself with uncertainty as to how to proceed. This is because it is in the moment and act of translation that one encounters the foreign in the familiar and the familiar in the foreign. In a way, translation brings home the "truth" that we are in a constant state of change. There is no fixity to a moment in life, and we are always caught in Steiner's Heraclitean flux so to speak. Moreover, texts also lack fixity of meanings, being as they are accretive by nature. "Culture" is a "relatively ephemeral, accidental, epiphenomena," writes Ian Morris in "The anthropology of the dead world" (5). Thus, translation is an exercise in attestation,[66] bearing witness to change. In the story, "Aadibhoutik" (Elemental) by Santoshkumar Ghosh, the ghost and the writer persona engage in a dialectical conversation on the nature and meanings of life and death, while the latter attempts to write a ghost story for a magazine. However, as the writer persona realizes, the task is not easy as his knowledge, beliefs and assumptions are turned on their head. Following is a translated excerpt from the story which will serve to illustrate my point,

> "Then you are dead," the ghost said and I retorted, "Like you?"
>
> The ghost continued unfazed by my remark, "You are dead too. The things that you read every day, the things that you see, hear, the actions of human beings which surprise you, do you understand their meaning immediately? No. That means you are not in the moment anymore, there is no present, you have already become the past. You do know that one meaning of the word "ateet" is bhoot? It means you are also one."
>
> "You intend to say that I am also a bhoot?" (1-11)

The ghost answers, "abikol," which is a Bengali word that means "completely," "entirely," "resembling in all aspects," and "true to the model." Thus, the act of interpretation is what renders us into the past; it points towards our spectrality in our lived existence. Hence, these bhoots, to quote Ricoeur, "are not foreigners admittedly, but already others, other close relations" (*On Translation* 25), as in spectres/spectators. In the essay, "Reflections on Spectral Life," Akira Mizuta Lippit brings out the spectrality inherent in thought, referring to the revenant

[66] See Ricoeur on "attestation" in *Oneself* 21.

as a ghost of thought, while reflections are thoughts that return, like ghosts, akin to images of thoughts. Lippit observes that life and spectrality are surfaces that refuse penetrations of thought, turning thoughts into reflections, crystallizations of thought as images, but also rendered spectral simultaneously (244). Our anthropomorphic construction of the afterlife best substantiates how death also becomes an act of reflecting upon life, as it serves as a mirror for ourselves. The study of what happens after death is just as complex and lacking in explicit certainties. “We cannot barge in and assign meanings, even on the authority of ancient texts; we must move within systems of practice, looking at all the evidence. It also makes our task much harder. Even small shifts through space or time, or from one group of observers to another, can totally transform the symbolic systems,” writes Morris in his analysis of the “dead world” in ancient cultures (18). It is our belief systems that continue to give life to the world after death. “In archaeology, all inference is via material culture” (Morris 23), while in literature, all inference is via immaterial entities.

In my thanatological approach towards the task of translation, our attention must be on that moment which is ephemeral and transitory, the moment of translation like the moment of death that entails a simultaneous crossing over as well as a bringing forth. The afterlife in these ghost stories of Bengal can be understood as a construction of another form of social reality, in another congruent and concurrent sphere though human laws of time do not operate here. It is indicative of an effort to map the “blank space” territory of death into cognizable structures, in order to facilitate a re-cognition of life, in spite of the ungraspable reality of death. Each culture creates its own afterlife, such that there is a constellation of beliefs and a richly detailed topography of death that underlies our most ancient traditions (textual and otherwise), rituals, and customs concerning life. Translation is placing oneself within this expanding universe. This in turn makes us sensitive and receptive to sociocultural changes that might not register in the broadsheets of history. As Geertz observes,

> …the odd, strange and uncanny simply must be accounted for-or, again, the conviction that it could be accounted for sustained. One does not shrug off a toadstool which grows five times as fast as a toadstool has any right to grow. It threatened their most general ability to understand the world, raised the uncomfortable questions of whether the beliefs which they held about nature were workable, the standards of truth they used valid. (101)

Cultural truths or shared sociocultural beliefs of a particular group can often be lost in the annals of history, yet mistakenly considered to be inheritances for later generations. Therefore, they must be constantly examined and questioned, brought to light for further speculation. These ghosts have haunted me for a purpose. Their call is the call of the familiar which time has made foreign to me. To take up their translation then, is to answer the nishi's dak,[67] the night's call, the voices of the dark, or to meet one's metaphorical death. This process takes place due to the multiplicity of the meanings of being concealed behind the question initially posed by Ricoeur: what sort of being is the self? (*Oneself* 297). Bringing them to life is akin to a formation of a separate narrative tradition. As Ricoeur writes, texts are part of cultural groups through which different visions of the world are expressed, visions which moreover can confront each other at the confluence point of different linguistic systems, such that what one calls the national or the communal culture becomes a network of visions. The word "vision" also has an inherent duality; it could mean the action of seeing from the verb "videre," which means "to see," as well as that which is seen from the Latin word "visus." Thus, these visions, spectres, ghosts, and bhoots, carry within them the impetus to disperse thought in different directions, and this dispersion entails the task of the translator to come down from level of the text, to the sentence, to the word, which Ricoeur refers to as "veritable atoms of thought" (*On Translation* 17). The Bengali word for translation is "anubad" which means both translation as well as interpretation, in a way pointing towards the selectivity inherent in the process and the distillation of meaning while rendering it into another form. The word "anu" means very small or minute, the subtlest or smallest part of anything, to concur with Ricoeur, perhaps as small as an atom. Hence, in translation, the translator engages with the text at its minutest or subtlest level, and the translation of these bhooter golpo from Bengali to English also serves a similar purpose. It is to place a cultural microcosm under a linguistic microscope.

These ghosts are the distilled spirits of a culture. The ghost is created in part by way of spirit and spirit by way of breath. The widespread belief concerning the incidence of life and death is that each newborn becomes a human being by drawing its first breath, while each dying

[67]"A tantric has come from Pashupatinath Mountain for this task. He will smear himself with a paste of vermillion and oil and set out to sound the night's call between 12 o'clock and 2 o'clock in the night. He will be carrying a green coconut in his hand, open at the mouth and filled with water. He will call out the names of everyone in our locality one by one. Each and everyone's name will be called out thrice. If anyone answers to the call of his name, the tantric will immediately shut the lid of the green coconut, capturing the life of that person in the water." Translated from the story, "Nishir Dak" (The Night's Call), Sanjib Chattopadhyay.

person leaves the world by exhaling the last breath. Thus, breath is seen as life, gradually becoming a subtle, immaterial essence that separates from the person at death (Kastenbaum 327). To look at life from the perspective of the afterlife, to understand human beings from the vantage point of ghosts, and to undertake the task of translation, travelling from conceptual clouds towards the precipitates of words, are all exercises in a return and a rebirth. Geertz observes that certain elusive phenomena within the sphere of culturally formulatable fact makes man chronically uneasy because it points to a realm that is beyond the relatively fixed frontier of accredited knowledge (102). There is a trend where translated works are juxtaposed with the texts in their original language which brings to mind the work of a mirror, of being reflected, but also being aware that it is a reflection, as most images are distorted in a mirror, hence not quite the same.

Absurdities like these are what propel us to question the staticity of our received cultural beliefs. They impel us to engage with the polysemic structures of our thought which informs our imagination. It is what is "looming as a constant background to the daily round of practical life, sets ordinary human experience in a permanent context of metaphysical concern and raises the dim, back-of-the-mind suspicions that one may be adrift in an absurd world," as Geertz beautifully articulates (102). Translation as thanatopsis brings out the "cognitive ambivalence of death," to add to the multifarious understandings of death, and to conceive of it as an impetus towards work, which is a human activity.

A ghost presents itself, as an opportunity perhaps, to lead us to question its very appearance. It is the absurdity of its non-existent existence that pushes the boundary of our imagination. It leads us into inquiring after its genesis. Visible ghosts are often elusive, appearing only in glimpses, like the sparks of thought. These thoughts take us back to their moment of creation, enabling us to wonder about their origin. Its very existence invites exegetic engagement. Kastenbaum writes that specialists in folklore and paranormal phenomena tend to speak instead of apparitions (from Latin for 'appearances' or 'presentations'). He continues, "Apparitions may include ghosts of deceased persons, but can also represent living people who are physically absent, animals, objects, and unusual beings that resist classification. Phantoms can also include visions of either a deceased or an absent living person. Specter and shade, terms seldom used in the twenty-first century, refer to ghosts or spirits" (328). This plethoric quality of references widens the scope of understanding our conceptions of the afterlife. It is believed that

ghosts have an unfinished business, their transitional status is dependent upon us, and their being seen depends upon whether we can see them or not. However, it is to be noted, as Jiri Levy opined, that in the continuous development of the social consciousness of the nation in which the work was created, some elements in its content will, in the course of this development, cease to be wholly comprehensible even within the context of its native literature, or perhaps their sense will be distorted; among these elements are time-related facts, human relationships, etc (Weissbort, Eysteinsson 434). Thus, as in my case, one can become estranged from their own ghosts as Walter Benjamin points out in "The Task of the Translator:"

> The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone con- verge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly. (77)

Translation is a meditation on death, a thanatopsis, and an introspection of the ghost that is represented by the "I." To come to the question of English as my chosen medium for translation of these stories, points to the historical becoming of myself as an individual in the interstices of historical development. My history of becoming is not scripted in any official historiography, much like the bhoots of Bengal. However, we are both part of it, as are our lives. If narratives of history are the official language of communication for the past, then stories can be interpreted as dialects, the local idiom which is derived from and also influences the dominant language. Translation in this respect can be a critically annotative enterprise, expanding the discourse of history. In the essay, "The Story of 'Battala' Power in Print," Anindita Ghosh writes that literature as an entry point into the mental worlds of different groups that it represents is yet to be fully explored (4336). This is where translation comes in. English is important, not only due to the fact that it is the lingua franca, but also because it has been more my language than Bengali. There was more of a going across than a bringing forth at first, the latter happened thereafter. In translation, the translator becomes aware of his own self-othering. There is no

fixity of meanings that can give him a solid assurance that his translation is right. However, his Sisyphean ordeal is to persevere with the task in spite of this knowledge and perhaps more so because of it. To be a translator is to open multiple channels of communication, to place the text in another stage of the life cycle process, as the task of interpretation and further translation begins anew. This is how a text lives, this is its afterlife. As Ricoeur writes,

> It therefore seems plausible to take the following chain of assertions as valid: self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. (*Oneself* 114)

What do these ghost stories constitute of and what do they say about us, was the question I had formulated. These stories abound in the world of Bengali fiction, with special editions focused on them published in popular children's literary magazines like *Anandamela* and *Shuktara Shonkolon* during the Pujas. To cull a few from the plethora of these stories which could be illustrative for the purposes of my research was a daunting task in itself. It is human nature to be fascinated with "the macabre, the ghoulish and the supernatural" (O. Davies 65) as long as the experience is vicarious, and in some ways collective. One of the earliest memories I have is of my grandmother narrating such stories to me as a child, replete with intriguing bhoots. She did not have any particular text in hand, but referred to the vast catalogues of her mental library, the stories of her childhood in a village in Bengal. These were stories from life that were embroidered with the fantastic as much as the village was: stories of possession, of ghosts soliciting help, and about the different kinds of ghosts that abound in the Bengali imagination.

Much later, when I could read a few of them or have them read to me by my father from the aforementioned anthologies, I realized that these ghosts have a life of their own. Although several writers have written about them, there are no distinctive or definitive versions of them in any of these stories. For instance, ghosts like Brahmadaitya, Shankhachunni, Gechho Bhoot, Mechho Bhoot, Mamdo Bhoot, Skondhokata, Nishi, Bhulo Bhoot, Jaular Bhoot and so on were not exclusive creations of the writers, but seemed to dwell in the realm of the collective imagination of the people and could be written about to one's will and fancy. These ghosts

represent a possibility of communication between different realms of knowledge, perhaps even pushing the boundaries of such processes. Owen Davies comments that ghost-belief is a reflection of how people can cope with multiple realities, even though the first question asked by most people is, "are ghosts real?"

Is the reality that we know real? Isn't learning a cross-examination of received truths? It is precisely in this way that our consciousness and these ghosts, the creator and the creation, both exist on the same plane of existence, where the nature of truth is both illusive and elusive. "The various languages placed side by side show that with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise, there would not be so many languages," writes Nietzsche (116). The task then is to realize that we stand on the brink of a precipice overlooking an abysmal chaos, and yet continue to strive towards some sort of order. This order is what constitutes meaning-making, of interpreting and translating, which must not stop. It is to realize that we might be caught in a hypnotic trance even as we believe that we are conscious. This is the Bhulo Bhoot's trick, a form of duplicity, such that it can prove fatal for the person under its spell. In the story "Bhulor Chholona" (The Bhulo's Illusion) by Tarashankhar Bandopadhy, the writer paints a portrait of the Bhulo Bhoot as one who is neither a human being nor is it the name of a dog. Bhulo means an illusion, that which makes one forget. It leads on a person under a false notion. In Bengal, writes the author, the Bhulo is a type of ghost. Just like the Brahmadaitya, Mamdo, Shankhchunni, Godana, and Galaidhar, Bhulo is also a kind of ghost. The Bhulo is quite like the Nishi. The Nishi's dak (night's call) is either heard at dawn or at midnight. But the Bhulo's play is without any constraints of time. However, it is when the evening begins to darken that the Bhulo's play becomes serious. In this it is similar to most ghosts and spirits. What sets it apart from the Night's Call is that the latter calls when a person is in a state of sleep, while the Bhulo preys on people in their conscious state of being awake.

> Suppose there is a human being walking through a field in the evening, deep in thought over a friend or a loved one. Suddenly, the person in their mind will present himself in front of the thinker. The person will say, "Here I am." The poor guy will not even have the opportunity to think twice about where his friend came from. This is Bhulo's illusion. Much later, the dead body of the human being will be found in some ditch or on the banks of the river. The man will now have become the Bhulo Bhoot's companion. His haunt will be where he had died while the Bhulo goes back to where it had come from. At

night, the two of them together would search anew for someone else as their companion. Failing which, as night gathers around them, they may start dancing and singing,

> "The game of illusions is a mighty game
> come with us, if you want to play,
> like a charm, you will trust my illusion
> and forget all the sufferings of this world." (72-81)

To forget is to commit a grave mistake. Hence, translation is a task of remembrance, an avowal of the relationship with our own selves and the world, and to not seek companionship with illusions. The song and dance of bhoots is also quite characteristic of the Bengali afterlife. The afterlife in that sense is a state of childhood, of starting over afresh, as it is for a translated text. This kind of life starts after the "life" we have known. It is the life in another language after the translated text's metaphorical death in one language. Thus, the ghosts are all in a state of infancy, the promise of their nascency is our opportunity to learn anew. After all, the child is the precursor to man, a beginner in the journey of seeking knowledge. To translate is to die and to be born again in the same skin, but to be changed immeasurably.

Translation is an act of awakening, of learning anew, of starting afresh, of beginning a new journey all over again. The blank space of death is as smooth as a white sheet of canvas, for another story, and other possibilities. There are two words beautifully inscribed in invisible ink. If held up to the light, it may be read as "what if" or "after life." That is how most stories begin their lives. What is a story then? Stories help us imagine lives other than our own lives. In this context, a ghost story may help us imagine "lives" that come after lives. Hence, these stories are like water-colour paintings on the infinite, shelterless, vast emptiness of death's canvas. Translation in this regard is painting with light, each word a luminous bloom, shedding light upon an ungraspable nothingness.

CONCLUSION

Afterlife: A Self-Portrait of Life

In the mind of the living, death is an inconceivable illusion. As death came into the world, like a stillborn child, it marked the moment of man's coming into being. Then felt man, like some watcher of the skies, when a new planet swims into his ken.[68] Death has steered the course of human life, shaping the potter's clay. In spite of its formlessness, death orders the structures of human society and cultural beliefs. More importantly, death gives life to thought. The knowledge of our death is the profoundest initiation into the human condition. Furthermore, the discovery of death is also the invention of the afterlife.

Death is the chasm, the metaphysical cleft between the two planes of existence, life and the after-life. For a student of literature, one can imagine death as a caesural break in a line of verse, not a period, but a pause for breath and reflection. Mircea Eliade writes that death is the preliminary condition for any mystical regeneration, followed by a spiritual maturing or an altogether new birth (190). For Eliade, death, like darkness and night, is personified in the paradigmatic figure of the dragon, the primordial snake that symbolizes chaos, formlessness, and the unmanifested. In short, it is everything that has not yet acquired a "form" (Eliade 48). Thus, the act of creation becomes a task of overcoming this indeterminacy that poses a threat at the contours of our known world. Eliade writes that everything outside this "known world," that is, our ordered cosmos, is considered to be an "other world," conceptualized as a foreign and chaotic space peopled by ghosts, demons and even "foreigners" (29). The mythical dragon rebels against the order of the cosmos and brings chaos into the fold. As a result, the parameters of our "known world" are irrevocably changed. Hence, the dragon must be conquered and dissected, so that the cosmos may re-order itself for a new birth.

For instance, as Eliade states, it was from the body of the marine monster Tiamat that Marduk fashioned the world, while Yahweh created the universe after his victory over the primordial monster Rahab.[69] Closer home, there is the story of Krishna's banishment of Kaliya, the hundred-and-one headed snake, whose hoods were crushed by the ancient Being's

[68] See "On first looking into Chapman's Homer," Keats 198.
[69] See Eliade 55.

"wondrous dancing" (Bryant 126-127). Krishna was initially imitating a helpless human being, lying impassively in the clutches of the fearsome serpent. However, as he realized that the people of his Gokula community were looking to him for deliverance from this evil, Krishna assumed his true potential as a divine being and slayed the demon. This destruction is considered to be equivalent to a new act of creation for society and a means of gaining passage from a dreaded formlessness to that which has form. However, this is not a one-time process, the act calls for continuous repetition and consequent renewals as time passes. In Eliade's view, every existential crisis is an opportunity for interrogating the reality of the world and man's presence in it (201);

> …it also effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes…makes possible ontological passage from one mode of being to another. (63)

In Bengal, Durga Puja[70] is celebrated once every year as a reaffirmation of the triumph of good over evil and to mark the mother goddess' annual return to earth. The Bengali community participates in the festival to celebrate the deliverance of the world from the brink of chaos and the restoration of order, through the timely intervention of goddess Durga. Festivals offer us with the opportunity to create a break in the everyday order of time. This leads to a quietus for the past and heralds a fresh new birth for the future. It is an occasion for renewing one's ties with their community and unpacking our own identities from the "chaos of memory."[71] As stated in the Introduction, the task is to find new readers for the ghost stories of Bengal, and to espouse the cause of their translation, that is, to design a Festival of Ghosts for the entities of the Bengali afterlife.

The dissertation was predominantly concerned with mapping the field of inquiry- the afterlife, from a specific cultural perspective (Bengali), along with a meditation on the nature of translation as thanatopsis. In this regard, it must be reiterated that death, the afterlife, and translation, are interrelated concepts. If language is the mental being of things, as Walter Benjamin writes,[72] then like any other being, it is also a being toward death. Conversely, it is death that opens up this being to translation. It is through the otherworldly light of translation that one can dispel the conscious darkness. A word is a distilled spirit of an idea, such as a ghost is of a culture. Each word becomes a fruit of light, containing the seeds of knowledge,

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[70] For more information see Roy 5-7 and Rodrigues 7-1.
[71] Quoted from "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, page 60.
[72] See "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" 112.

undergoing several processes of maturation over time. According to Benjamin, the act of translation heralds a "continuum of transformations" (*One-Way Street* 117). As we have seen, this continuum of transformations is also integral to human life, society, and culture. Mark Hulsether writes in his essay "Religion and culture," that culture may refer to anything that we can analyze like a language, read as a cultural text, or understand as a discourse (489). Culture comprises a vast catalogue of sociohistorical experiences, and a compendium of the transnational flow of ideas, beliefs, and discourses. Moreover, it can also serve as a framework to understand the formative influences and constitutive principles of human society.

Ghosts are cultural barometers, as well as texts shaped through the links between personal, social, and historical memory. Each of the bhoots who have been at the most introduced in the course of my research invites further in-depth analysis. These ghosts are not only symbols or ideas taken from life, but also tissue[73] texts containing citations to various strands of inquiry, emanating from the thousand interstices of a culture. We may look upon them as contested spaces just like human beings; their identities shaped by the same social, cultural, and religious beliefs, as well as notions of caste, class, and gender. In Chapter I, we looked at the sociocultural environment that lent a form to these ghosts, imbuing them with the social ideas and cultural beliefs of the collectivity. As language and sociocultural beliefs are changeable, it is these very ghosts which make a case for translation, as each encounter serves to challenge the boundaries of the known worlds and realms of knowledge. Chapter II was a closer examination of these ghosts and their various avatars. It focused on the dissection of death in the vocabulary of life, while bringing to light the resonances between human beings and their multifarious ghosts. Both the chapters also worked towards constructing a different understanding of death, as well as its ramifications on defining the task of translation. Like death, like translation, as stated earlier. Chapter III took off from this formulation, developing into a meditation on translation as an instrument for understanding the human condition. It also served to strengthen the argument that the paranormal beings of Bengal offer a parahistorical account of the development of Bengali society and culture. More importantly, translation helped us to see death in a new light, as part of the epistemological universe of life, an impetus to further inquiry rather than a cessation of learning.

[73] See Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author."

The translation of these bhoots of Bengal will open them up to a broader domain of academic inquiry, transcending the linguistic and cultural geographies to which they belong. Such a task is necessary, in order to understand the different multiplicities that constitute the umbrella terms: “society” and “culture.” Ghosts tell us more about the tradition, culture, and psychology of a community of people than they do about their religion (O. Davies 2). In translation, the field of inquiry is not restricted to the Bengali sociocultural environment alone, especially in understanding the ontological questions concerning life and death. These bhoots have the potential to shed light on the basic constitutional frameworks of human society. This teeming live culture of ghosts may help us better understand the nodes of connection between social, religious, and historical factors, in the development of a distinctive cultural response to life and death. Thus, one may look at the afterlife as a self-portrait of life, a means to understand the artist through his creation, made in his own reflection.

Herein, I hope that I have made the case for a project involving further translations, a far more comprehensive body of work, with detailed annotations, and supplemented with ethnographic investigation. It is a task that could not be accomplished due to the constraints of the scope of this present volume of work, apart from the limitations of time and space. To briefly state some of the multiple avenues of further study: one could embark on a comparative analysis between the bhoots of Bengal and their similarities or differences with their cross-cultural variants; or make them the subjects of a sociological inquiry; or continue with the cultural analysis taken up in this volume of work and delve deeper into them as texts; or simply take up reading about their exploits once again, in translation and perhaps in the original as well. Hence, at this juncture, I stand as an explorer, looking with eagle eyes upon the freshly discovered realm of the Bengali afterlife. Like Keats on first looking into Chapman’s Homer-perhaps one of the most glorious odes to the epiphany of translation-it is time to look beyond “western islands” and explore other demesnes, even or especially one’s own. As the promise of discovery is the task of scholarship, and the task of the translator is the discovery of that promise.

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