

## The Transgenerational Trauma of Displacement: Rewriting Diasporic Subjectivities in the Shadow of the Phantom of the (*M*)otherland

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### Abstract

This research is based on the premise that assiduous attention to the transgenerational traumatic aspect of diasporic displacements not only gives voice to the often covert narratives of loss and pain encrypted in the diasporic literature, but it also sheds light on the process of the negotiation of subjectivities by both the first- and the second-generation diasporic subjects. As a critical inquiry into the literary representations of diasporic subjectivities via a predominantly psychoanalytically-inspired approach, the present paper's reading of diasporic short fiction, thus, sits restlessly on the nexus of both diaspora studies and the psychoanalytic studies of trauma. Through a close textual analysis of two samples of short fiction (authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Tania James), the present study, thus, seeks to put forward its intergenerational conception of diasporic subjectivities in the light of the theory of transgenerational haunting. To this end, it explores the ways in which different generations of diasporic subjects are haunted by the phantom of a (*M*)otherland whose uncanny shadow is woven into the confounding reality of diasporic life. This phantom constantly exposes the diasporic self to a psychic space of empathy whose emergence is facilitated by the presence of an external other (most commonly, someone belonging to another generation) who through cathartic interactions with the diasporic self endows her/him with a fair chance to (re-)negotiate her/his subjectivities and to be placed on the threshold of a belated mourning for a hitherto-repressed oft-internalized sense of otherness, if not an oft-occluded shame of unbelongingness.

### Keywords

Diaspora; Trauma of Displacement; Transgenerational Trauma; Transgenerational Phantom; Diasporic Subjectivity.

### 1. Introduction

In a world highly dominated by global warfare and various-yet-insidious large-scale inequities and atrocities as well as a century marked by globalization, transnationalism, and increasing formations of diasporic communities, transnational migrations have turned into a fact of everyday life. Every day, numerous groups of people, either voluntarily or by force, traverse national borders to reach what

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they consider to be, at least initially, their promised land. Soon after arrival, though, many such migratory subjects – who, despite differences in social status and education, share having left behind a homeland – consciously or unconsciously opt in to form (or join) communities which have come to be known as diasporas. It is often through and because of a sense of belonging to such communities that they can then hold onto their roots, preserve their native customs and cultures, or recreate the familiar sort of surroundings much associated with their idea of the land of their origins.

Diasporas, however, often extend and expand to include not only the original migratory subjects, known as the first-generation, but also their progeny, known as the second and even the third-generation. It is highly possible that through the inevitable process of assimilation later generations of some diasporas melt into the mainstream culture and their particularities as a distinct community gradually disappear. Such a process, however, is a long-lasting slow-moving process, a site of constant conflict, and a source of a traumatic scar to the national, cultural, religious, and gender identities of not only those involved in the initial act of displacement (i. e. the first-generation) but also their decedents (i. e. the second and the third-generation). It is this transgenerational trauma which, as addressed in the paper, has subtly found its way into the literary representations of the diasporic experience in the works of not only the first-generation diasporic writers like the Indian-American Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, but also in the works of the second-generation diasporic writers like the American Tania James of Indian origins.

Not surprisingly, then, any conception of diasporic subjectivities (in either their first or later-generation forms) needs to be made in relation to this transgenerational traumatic scar –hence opening up whole new vistas within the realm of diaspora-cum-trauma theory. Proposing to interweave trauma and diaspora through the strand of subjectivity, the present paper sets to challenge the ideal notion, if not illusion, of an easily accessed space of hybridity, a notion often hastily brought on the scene in many studies of diasporic subjectivities in the light of the literary representations of the presence and transmission of such a traumatic scar. Examining two samples of short fiction by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Tania James along with Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory of transgenerational phantom, it poses the following questions. It is only after such questions are attempted that the present study fulfills its final objective, which is 'rethinking, if not rewriting, diasporic subjectivities (of both generations) in the shadow of the phantom of the *(Mo)therland*':

- a. How is the uncanny return of the phantom (in Abraham and Torok's sense of the term) captured by the present selection of diasporic stories?

- b. What shapes does the phantom take?
- c. What roles does it play?
- d. What function, if any, do such phantasmal encounters with the phantom play in opening up, for the diasporic subject, the possibility of a belated mourning for a dead-yet-living (*M*)otherland?

## 2. Literature Review

Notwithstanding the prominence of both trauma theory and diaspora theory as well as a few attempts to relate the two realms, the psychic pain and suffering of the diasporic subject (especially those of the second-generation) is yet to be seriously part of the literary diaspora theory in general. It cannot be denied that not until very recently, little space had been given to the theorization of such psychic affects, but, nonetheless, notions including pain, shame, loss, mourning, and melancholia have already entered the diasporic literary discourse and are currently areas of concerns and matters of growing interest for literary critics. There exists, for instance, a few pioneering works, all published in the past decade, which theoretically deal with the poetics and politics of such psychic affects within a postcolonial/diasporic context. These include, to name a few, Nouri Gana's *Signifying Loss* (2011), Madelaine Hron's *Translating Pain* (2009), and J Brooks Bouson's *Embodying Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings* (2009). Nonetheless, there still exists a lack of theoretical terms to explore the set of feelings and the range of emotions directly associated with what David Cowart calls the "travail of the displaced" (4). What is specially undertheorized, one should note, is what Salman Akhtar brilliantly designates the "trauma of geographical dislocation" (222) – also referred to, in more recent studies like Fatim Boutros's 2015 study of self-representation in diasporic fiction and Madelaine Hron's brilliant chapter in *Trauma and Literature* (2018), as "diasporic trauma" or the "trauma of displacement" respectively.

Studies that focus on the significance of this particular trauma in illuminating diasporic subjectivities, yet, are relatively rare. It is no exaggeration to claim that in the joint realm of the literature of the diaspora-cum-trauma theory, there exist only two major critical outputs which have ventured to investigate, in a rather sustained and explicit form, the role of the trauma of displacement in the formation of either the first or the second-generation Indian diasporic subjects: Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) and Delphine Munos's *After Melancholia: A Reappraisal of Second-Generation Subjectivity in the Work of Jhumpa Lahiri* (2013). Since the former, as a pioneering work opening up a new critical path for a re-consideration of the influential role the unconscious plays in diasporic life and

its literary representations, provides both Munos's and the present study with a fertile ground for their more in-depth analysis of the literary representations of the diasporic subjectivities, it is deemed necessary to shed some light on the significance of Mishra's work in introducing Freud's early theories of mourning and melancholia into a diasporic context.

Focusing his sustained critical analysis on the Indian diaspora, Vijay Mishra invokes trauma theory, among other things, to re-define the concept of a Lacanian imaginary within a diasporic context. When applied to a diasporic context, Lacan's theorization of the Imaginary Order is then re-written by Mishra in relation to the role played by the *motherland* as a metaphorical mirror (mother) whose absence activates idealization and identification—two processes which also play active roles in fostering subjectivities. Aiming to expound such processes and “to explore the idea of ‘writing diaspora’ in an analogy with writing trauma or writing mourning” (117), Mishra then heavily draws on Freud's early theories of mourning and melancholia as developed in the latter's 1917 paper. Applying such Freudian insights into a diasporic context gives Mishra a chance to formulate the trauma occasioned by the Indian diasporic displacement (although he never uses the term trauma in such a way).

He, thus, claims that the diasporic imaginary, which he finds relevant to “any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement,” could be understood as “a condition [...] of impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia” (14; 9). The Freudian lost object is the memory of a lost *motherland* (in this case Mother India) – a loss which could be metaphorically compared to “an open wound” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” 253) that never heals but will, instead, be passed down to later generations of diasporic subjects in form of a melancholic fixation on the India-within as an “ever-lost symbol of origin” or “an absence elevated to the status of an unparallel ideal” (Munos, xxi; xxii). This suggests that, in Mishra's formulation, the absence of the *motherland* generates such an overwhelming sense of loss that mourning becomes impossible, and all that remains is never-ending melancholia. The diasporic subject, hence, turns into a melancholic being who unconsciously identifies with the India-made-ghostly-within and, thus, feeds on what could be defined as a structural absence or an emptiness that defies representation – “an ambivalence-ridden short-hand for loss, departure, deprivation, and separation” (Munos xxv). Mishra's recapitulation highlights the impossibility of any prospects of replenishing this sense of loss and the void that has opened up at the core of being:

There is no immediate cure for the condition [of impossible mourning] because the loss remains abstract; it is not compensated for by happiness in the new nation-state and is therefore internalized as the emptiness of the ego itself. (10)

Under the regime of melancholia, when all hopes of redeeming the lost object are dashed, the diasporic subject feeds on the “other-made-ghostly” (Cheng 8) to survive. However, there is no panacea for the original loss. The diasporic subject, unbeknownst to him/herself, forever desires to go back to the traumatic moment of departure (to the original sin) in order to start over – a desire which is incessantly deferred as she/he is stuck at the point of no return. This all suggests that the loss of the homeland, either when it is tangibly experienced first-hand through the first-generation diasporic displacements or when it is experienced, more abstractly, as “the imagining and refiguring of the first-generation experience by the second generation” – what Delphine Munos calls a “phantom loss” (17) – could be conceptualized as an unrepresentable gap or an un-symbolizable absence.

Mishra’s work, as witnessed, has definitely been the guiding soul of the present study, especially in its belief that the most crucial aspect of diasporic subjectivities, hitherto ignored in many of their analytic discussions, is that they are formed in the spectral presence of an absence: the haunting “absent presence”<sup>1</sup> of the *motherland*. Despite taking its lead from Mishra’s theorizing and placing itself in a somehow related line of thought (like the one, for instance, picked up by Delphine Munos in her study of Lahiri’s works), the present study starts with yet quickly departs from Mishra’s reformulation of the diasporic subjectivities by invoking, like Munos, a more Neo-Freudian frame of thought as expounded by the Hungarian-born psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok. Exploring the ways in which the literary representations of the diasporic subjectivities in a representative sample of diasporic short fiction is structured by the theory of transgenerational haunting; the present paper moves well beyond Mishra’s reading of the diasporic subject as a melancholically doomed figure and takes, instead, a more dynamic stand on the workings of the diasporic trauma and its aftereffects on the process of the negotiation of diasporic subjectivities. Before delving into such readings, though, it is worth elaborating on the chief theoretical underpinning of the present study: its Neo-Freudian conception (à la Abraham and Torok) of the “phantom.”

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<sup>1</sup> The term “absent presence,” here, is borrowed from Delphine Munos’s study of the work of Jhumpa Lahiri (6). Associated with Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist attempt to dismantle the (presence/absence) binary, the term is exploited by the present study to refer not only to instances of concrete haunting (like the felt presence of the phantom of the dead grandmother in “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives”), but also to the disembodied yet more abstract presence of the phantom of a collective kind (like the phantom of the racial otherness in “Light and Luminous”).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

As Colin Davis contends in his illuminating study on the haunted subject, “hauntology” – which entails a suspension of the separation or an erasure of the distinction between spectral presences and living beings – “has two distinct, related, and to some extent incompatible sources”: firstly, Derrida’s influential work of the latter part of his career *Spectres of Marx*; and secondly, the lesser-known psychoanalytic research conducted by Abraham and Torok and written in collaboration in their brilliant work *The Shell and the Kernel*. Both sources mark a paradigmatic shift regarding the significance, the function, and the proper response to the so-called ghosts. They both dismantle the long-held belief that the territory of the living and the dead can be kept decently separate, that the presence of the ghost is only a temporary invasion in the fabric of the Symbolic Order, and that the function of this ghostly apparition is the revelation of the truth or the restoration of order. Despite close affinities between their shared projects, however, there exists a marked but oft-unacknowledged difference between what Derrida calls a “spectre” and what Abraham and Torok term a “phantom.”

The major difference between Derrida’s specter and Abraham and Torok’s phantom is, in fact, the extent to which the opacity of the message of each is heralded. Whereas for Derrida it is the indeterminate content of the specter’s secret, its resistance to formulation, and the threats and disturbances that it might pose to what we think we already know that is of great importance; for Abraham and Torok speaking to the phantom should be undertaken for the sole reason that the phantom’s secret is recovered and decoded. No matter how unspeakable phantoms’ secrets are due to their being a source of trauma, shame, or pain; they are meant to be visible and verbalized since it is only then that phantoms can be put to rest and their adverse effect on the living can be countered and soon dispelled. Derrida may be simply satisfied with the deconstructive presence of the specter’s secret, the induced structural enigma, the experience of secrecy, the productive opening-up of meaning to contingencies, and the follow-up sense of dislocation in the self-presence of the subject, but Abraham and Torok’s project can be only summed up in their attempt to restore the phantom’s message “to the order of knowledge” and to bring the meaning-making process to an end by uncovering the occluded secret (Davis 73). Curiously, though, this interpretive process of restoration and uncovering does not take place in any straightforward sense. The phantom, Abraham and Torok claim, is deceitful and the process of deciphering its secret is a rather long and laborious task on the part of the living self – a haunted self whose major mission, like that of an analyst, a critic, a

translator, or even an artist, is confronting, if not exorcising, the omnipotent presence of the phantom via a “restless labour of deciphering” (Davis 13).

What distinguishes Abraham and Torok’s theorizing of the phantom from its Derridean counterpart, then, is the eventual possibility of retrieving the secret of the former. The phantom’s secret is not meant to remain a mystery forever; but rather, despite the entire ruse against its revelation, it could and should be transgenerationally revealed. It is upon later generations to “reveal the secret buried in the unconscious and to produce it *in its initial exteriority*,” hence “reducing the guilt attached to an other’s secret” by “speak[ing] it in sayable words” (Abraham and Torok 450). It is necessary that the “spectral memories of past phantoms ... [are] detoxicated through verbalization and aesthetic representations, even when there is no clear answer or response to every aspect related to pain” (Bayer 96) since it is only then that the phantoms can be dispelled and put to rest – dispelling which, when achieved, is considered to be “a small victory of Love over Death,” that is, Eros over Thanatos (Abraham and Torok 452).

In Abraham and Torok’s account, ghosts of the past are metaphoric signifiers of the unspoken secrets of and the unacknowledged traumas of the past generations. What they call phantoms are not simply the ghosts of the dead ancestors coming back to haunt the living descendants, but rather the “lacunae left inside [the self] ... by the secrets of others” (Abraham and Torok 427). As they argue, “the presence of the phantom indicates the effects, on the descendants, of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents” but was then transmitted to the descendants as “a gap . . . with the result of barring him or her from the specific introjections he or she would seek at present” (174). It is this gap that inscribes the presence of desire and calls upon the subject to rework this desire by facing the void. It opens up the possibility of verbalizing the unspoken secret, which is configuring the repressed trauma of the other.

It is this gap at the core of the (second-generation) diasporic subjectivity that is, to a great extent, encrypted in the sample of stories to be analyzed in the present paper. It is only through disclosure of this gap and decryption of the libidinal circulation and the exchange of desire that it gives rise to that, Abraham and Torok’s theory of transgenerational phantom could be best substantiated and the unspeakable traumatic secret that they expound is eventually exposed. As it is observed in Divakaruni’s “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives,” the first story to be addressed in the following more analytic sections of the study, such a phantom is best embodied in Ruchira’s art of painting whose source of momentum seems to be her transgenerational haunted-ness by the memory of

her dead grandmother. The phantom that is embodied in Tania James's "Light and Luminous," the second story to be discussed, though, is of a very different kind: that is, a rather more abstract and more collective kind. In James's story, then, one is encountered not by the phantom of the dead, but the phantom of the racial otherness accompanied by an embodied ever-present sense of shame with which both Minal Auntine and Aarti, the diasporic subjects of two very different generations, are racked.

In what follows, not only are the literary representations of Abraham and Torok's notion of the phantom explored, but the function that is served by the uncanny absent present of this literal/metaphoric phantom within the diasporic context of both stories is also further clarified. Aiming to reframe and relocate the theory of transgenerational phantom within a diasporic context whilst illuminating it by its literary representations in diasporic short fiction, the present paper offers a reading methodology that defines itself within a dynamic relation of spontaneous complementarity. Rather than being a formal application of theory to fiction, the following two sections of the paper read Divakaruni's and James's short stories parallel to (or along with) Abraham and Torok's theory of the phantom. That is to say, going against the grain, the discussion sections of this paper does not cast its chunks of theory against the literary texts, but rather offers a retelling, if not rewriting, of both stories in the light of Abraham and Torok's theory of the phantom. Both stories are retold, if not rewritten, by the researcher/critic who, disguised as an omniscient narrator, not only re-presents the events of the stories in the shadow of the phantom of the (*M*)otherland, but also struggles to reveal the purport and purpose of this trope in unraveling the covert narratives of loss and pain embedded in each tale.

#### **4. Stories that Haunt:**

##### **Art as a Cathartic Agent in Divakaruni's "The Unknown Errors of Our Lives"**

That the phantom of an ambivalent and enigmatic bond to the (*M*)otherland can become a source of momentum and excess desire in the diasporic subject's life is best reflected in Divakaruni's title story of her second collection of short stories *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). Read alongside the theoretical framework delineated above, Divakaruni's title story – the story of Ruchira, a young woman who upon the death of her grandmother takes a liking to painting frantically – turns out to be the tale of how a second-generation diasporic subject's unresolved mourning and ambivalent feelings for the (grand)motherland hauntingly return in the form of a phantom who communicates in the symbolic codes of art. It is within the psychic space brought about by the absent presence of this phantom that the diasporic subject's unrestrained excess desire for the motherland is then mobilized into art –



mobilization that turns her into a desiring subject and lets her approach a metaphoric representation of her otherwise repressed transgenerational trauma of displacement. It also leads her to accept and finally to let go not only of “the unknown errors of” her life, but also those of her grandmother’s, and her fiancé’s past lives, “the ones they can never put down in a book and are therefore doomed to repeat” (Divakaruni 258).

Introducing Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory” (a term she has employed to conceptualize the second-generation subjects’ memory of the Holocaust) into the diasporic context of Divakaruni’s account of the memory and the aftereffects of such unknown errors in Ruchira’s life and art brings to light the workings of Ruchira’s postmemory as a form of memory whose connection to the actual traumatic event is highly mediated by her imaginings. Her major source is thus the preceding images and narratives related and imposed by the previous generation, namely her late grandmother. More significantly, it reveals how redirecting the transgenerational “postmemory” into art not only sublimates the force of bottled-up pain and hurt inhabited by the second-generation diasporic subject, but also acts “as a countermeasure to traumatic moments of crisis, offering at the same time a potential approach to the past that addresses traumata without risk of causing secondary pain” (Bayer 99). The third-person narration of Divakaruni’s “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” portrays Ruchira’s strained psyche at a turning point in her life. No sooner has she packed everything, getting ready to move out of her apartment and to start a new life with her fiancé Biren than she has to face an unacknowledged error of his past, which is Arlene’s being pregnant with his child. How Ruchira finally decides to deal with this disturbing piece of news in the light of the significant events and key moments of her life in the past two years – the account of which, including how she met Biren, how she started to like him, how passion first erupted, and how she planned to surprise him with her special painting of the kalpa taru tree as a wedding-gift, is dispersed in form of flashbacks in the narrative – is less consequential than what takes centre stage in the story from its very first lines: the spectral absent presence of the dead grandmother and the enabling role her phantom plays in both Ruchira’s life and art.

Despite the fact that Ruchira had not seen her living grandmother more than “a dozen of times in her life, once every two or three years during summer vacation, when her parents visited India,” she had always felt so close to her that she sometimes thought she loved her grandmother even more than her parents (Divakaruni 251). In fact, her grandmother was the sole reason she “struggled through the Bengali alphabet, submitting to years of classes at that horrible weekend school run by bulge-eyed Mrs. Duttagupta, so that she would be able

to read her grandmother's letters and reply to them without asking her parents to intervene" (Divakaruni 252). Had she come up against a problem in life, she would have tried to come up with a solution by imagining what her grandmother ("Thakhuma") would have done in the same situation. The dead Thakuma, however, is not a matter of the past since her metonymic phantom-like absent presence still haunts Ruchira's life. For instance, the "book of errors" Ruchira finds "in a dusty alcove of her apartment" early in the story has sheets "tinged with blue and smell[s] faintly of sweet betel nut *from her grandmother, who is now dead*" (Divakaruni 242, emphasis added). Painting, a favorite pastime which she has kept a secret from everyone except Biren, is an activity she has practiced for the last two years since the death of her grandmother:

Her technique was crude—*she hadn't taken classes and didn't intend to. [...] She worked late into the night, light-headed with the effort to remember. [...] She ruined canvas after canvas, slashed them in frustration and threw them into the Dumpster behind the building. She wept till she saw a blurry brightness, like sunspots, wherever she looked. Then, miraculously, she got better. Sometimes now, at 2.00 A. M. or 3:00 her back muscles tight and burning, a stillness would rise around her, warm and vaporous. Held within it, she would hear, word for word, the stories her grandmother used to tell.* (Divakaruni 251, emphasis added)

This scene of frenetic activity and act of secrecy regarding it gives Ruchira's art of painting a magical mysterious aura in the story and underlines the fact that, for her, painting is the product of an unpremeditated instant of frenzy which entails remembering and translating, if not enacting, the trauma of the loss of both her grandmother and her *motherland*. Despite her having refused to attend her grandmother's funeral, the concocted image of her cremation which has long appeared in her recurrent nightmares ("the hard orange thrust of the flames of the cremation pyre, the hair going first, in a short manic burst of light, the skin warping like wood, the eyeballs melting, her grandmother's face blackening and collapsing in on itself with terrible finality") now infuses her paintings with some "fanciful, garish" colors (Divakaruni 252-3).

What Ruchira translates into art, though, is not necessarily her personal trauma of the loss of her grandmother since her art is also the territory of the transgenerational phantom, "the dead buried within the other" (Abraham and Torok 175). Her art is a *mélange* of some repressed traumatic memories of either her past (loss of her grandmother), her grandmother's past (loss of her husband as a freedom fighter), and, on a larger scale, her *motherland's* past (loss of independence in the colonial India). Metonymic traces of all such traumas, which "persist in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time" now combine to "swoop down on her like a taloned angel" and

to call for metaphoric acknowledgement and representation (Luckhurst, *Trauma Question* 81; Divakaruni 253). Ruchira's series of paintings offer an encrypted narrative of the "mythic images from Indian legends" drawn from "stories her grandmother used to tell" combined with her post-memories, transmitted by looking at "sepia photographs," or by what Mishra calls "witnessing of the fractures in language and by being haunted or possessed by what it hides" (116). Accordingly, paintings – which, due to their association with both the trope of the dead grandmother and that of haunting, act as metonymic signifiers of the burden of legacy and the absent presence of a lost-yet-not-dead (*M*)otherland – are aesthetic practices in the highly empowering realm of the metaphoric. It is this metaphoricity, which presents the diasporic subject with a chance to "transpose her [transgenerational] traumatic pain into creative production" and to "translate [long-repressed] insecurities into productivity" (Herrero 106).

Divakaruni's story ought not to be read solely as a means of highlighting the liberating role artistic works plays in the metaphoric acknowledgment and representation of the transgenerational trauma of displacement. Ruchira's paintings, as "a constant interplay or percolation of one through the other of the old and the new," are marked by what Luckhurst calls "the contemporal; a mixing of times together" ("Polytemporality" 129). Pulling the thread of her present and future through the loop of the mesh of her ancestor's past within the symbolic codes of art, her paintings not only voice the past traumatic reality she has not experienced first-hand but also provide a creative means of dealing with her present traumatic reality. Ruchira's paintings simultaneously satisfy her desperate need to connect her to her roots, to heal her present, and to make possible her future with Biren.

Contemporality of Ruchira's art is best showcased in the soothing role this art plays in deepening her relationship with Biren – a bond which blossoms into love mostly due to Biren's appreciation of her paintings (metonymically, stories of their *motherland*): "That, and the way he looked at her paintings. Because otherwise she doesn't think she could have agreed to marry him" (Divakaruni 243). It is Biren's keen interest in her paintings that helps her to overcome her "reluctance to give of herself" (Divakaruni 264) and finally to break the spell cast over her relationships with boys – a spell for which Ruchira blames her throwback gene: "What throwback gene was it that stopped her, a girl born in America? *What cautionary spore released by her grandmother over her cradle when Ruchira's parents took her to India?*" (Divakaruni 246, emphasis added)

It is right after Brian's discovery of Ruchira's paintings that they grow most close to one another and have their first kiss and unprotected sex. The sudden longing that Ruchira feels for Biren is of the intense kind that is also associated

with her art of painting and its metonymic evocations of the trope of the dead grandmother along with the trope of a dead-yet-living absent present (*M)otherland*. Biren here also acts as a cathartic agent through whose presence Ruchira becomes a desiring diasporic artist whose contemporality in art (her mixing of different times and cultures) helps her not only to exorcise the transgenerational phantom but also to filter her traumatic present through an impersonal past, hence opening routes towards a contingent future.

The best instance of this latter case comes towards the end of the story when Ruchira makes use of the metaphor of paint to digest the unwelcome piece of news that Arlene (Biren's ex-girlfriend) has brought to her. Upon hearing the news, she draws an analogy between the unknown errors committed in the course of one's life and the sudden blobs of paint accidentally dropped on canvas: "Ruchira holds this new, trembling knowledge like a too-heavy blob of paint at the end of a brush, threatening to ruin the entire painting unless she finds the right spot to apply it" (Divakaruni 260). Also later, musing on the events of the day, she ponders how her and Biren's lives "are already mixed, like past and future, promise and disappointment, linseed oil and turpentine. Like the small exhalation of birds on a wish-fulfilling tree" (Divakaruni 266).

Interestingly, it is Ruchira's painting of this same tree ("kalpa taru, the wish-fulfilling tree") that inspires her with a more practical approach towards the state of chaos that has just hit her married life. This fourth and "final painting in her Mythic Images series" – inspired after their first sexual encounter and meant to be "her surprise wedding-gift to Biren" to be hung "opposite their bed, so they can look at it after love making" – is the painting of a multi-colored tree on whose branches singing "Shaliks" or "birds of memory" (as her grandmother would have put it) are given faces of the people most dear to her (Divakaruni 257). Exploiting her incomplete art to reveal Biren's yet unknown error and to fix her otherwise ruined relationship with him, Ruchira then decides to use this same painting to reveal the unspeakable secret "one day in February" when she would probably "take down the painting she hung in the foyer and go into the studio and add in a bird with a boy-face and spiky gold hair, with Biren's square chin and an unsuspected dimple. And if Biren asks about him . . . ? This is what Ruchira wants from the kalpa taru: that when Biren asks, she'll know how to ask him back" (Divakaruni 267).

Drawing subtly on the trope of the transgenerational phantom and highlighting the restorative role of art in healing transgenerational trauma, Divakaruni's "The Unknown Errors of Our Lives" posits that the diasporic subject's "spontaneous engagement in artistic expression" not only facilitates the catharsis of the repressed libidinal excess (associated with the absent presence of

the phantom of the (*M*)otherland) but also “provide[s] mechanisms of resilience” for dealing with and manipulating the present traumatic reality (Ganteau and Onega 18; 17). It is perhaps why, as Dori Laub and Daniel Podell claim, “survivors of trauma or children of survivors [who] often become involved in an ongoing dialogue with trauma [...] engage consciously or unconsciously, in artistic expression” (1993). In a diasporic context too, art becomes a coded way of both signaling and signifying the trauma of displacement. However, as a metaphoric means of expression, it also opens up the possibility of such a creative engagement with both past and present that an effective insertion of the past in the present and vice versa becomes probable—a balanced insertion which is, above all, restorative and healing.

### **5. Color that Haunts:**

#### **An Embedded Narrative of Shame in Tania James’s “Light and Luminous”**

Unlike Divakaruni’s story, what haunts the Indian diasporic subject in Tania James’s moving story “Light and Luminous” is not the by-now-familiar dead grandmother’s phantom, but rather a more abstract phantom of racial (and class) oppression and the psychological torture that accompanies it. What chiefly distinguishes “Light and Luminous” from that other story, then, is the special attention it gives to the hitherto ignored axis of race in association with the transgenerational trauma of displacement and the fundamental role this particular axis plays in mediating diasporic subjectivities. It is the story’s recognition of skin color as a marker of race and race as a signifier of otherness in the (Indian) diasporic experience as well as the haunting absent presence of the rather repressed pain of the phantom of the racial otherness embodied as an ever-pervasive sense of ingrained-but-invisible shame that allows us to read the story in the light of the previously-discussed theory of transgenerational haunting.

The story’s poignant analysis of the pain and shame suffered by not only the first-generation Indian diasporic subjects but also their American-born descendants illustrates the long-term debilitating effect of being the racial other within a diasporic context. This, without doubt, suggests that the trauma of racism and the sense of shame and unbelongingness that it induces do not resolve over a generation. Rather, they are faced, in full measure and anew, by each coming generation. More importantly, “Light and Luminous” highlights how intergenerational interactions can open up old infected wounds whose infestation loom large. Such an opening up of the traumas of the past, of course, should by no means be evaded but rather welcomed since covering over wounds and insecurities can only spread the infection. After all, it is only via painful

(re)encounters with past phantoms that the phantoms' pernicious effect might be diminished.

James's "Light and Luminous" is a third-person narration screened through the consciousness of Minal Raman, a 48-year-old first-generation diasporic subject living in the American Midwest. Due to economic deprivation, Minal is now leading a double life: the secret life of a bored and dissatisfied cashier at Foodfest in Downers Grove (a place "half hour away from her home, a safe distance from friends and acquaintances who would never guess what she has become" [James 174]) and the once-successful life of a talented, competitive, but old-fashioned dance instructor/director at her non-progressive "Illinois Academy of Indian Classical Dance" (a place whose membership has been dwindling in the last two years). Despite being a gifted dancer, however, Minal has very low self-esteem which is aggravated by a sense of shame towards both her secret second job and, more importantly, her dark skin color. She might have long repressed this implanted sense of racial inferiority or the position of anxiety regarding her dark color, but the trauma of racial otherness is so fresh a wound that, no matter how long she has lived in the USA, it is always on the brink of bleeding. Notably, in "Light and Luminous" this reopening of Minal Auntie's old wound is a direct outcome of her interaction, if not identification, with her grandniece Aarti, a third-generation diasporic subject who is currently going through what Minal Auntie has been through several times: that is, the trauma imposed by racism.

Right from the outset of the story, Aarti, being the worst in her class, is an embodiment of otherness and a sense of un-belongingness. Having "no grace, no confidence, no future on the stage," she is initially described as "a dark, big-boned girl who copes with her size by slouching" and who is out of step with her other dance mates (James 168). Aarti, thus, is that one odd graceless dancer who can be picked out of the group at first glance. Undoubtedly, Minal Auntie is so alert to this gracelessness and awkwardness that, upon mapping out the formations of the next dance for the India Day Festival, she quickly underlines Aarti's outright otherness and plans to redress it. In spite of all this, however, Minal Auntie fully sympathizes, if not empathizes, with Aarti: "[she] knows the feeling: there is no lonelier place in the world than where Aarti is standing now." That loneliest space which is now being taken up by Aarti, of course, is nowhere but the virtual space of otherness, of not being in tune or of not being in step with the rest—a space all too familiar to an auntie whose own dark color has long been cause for concern, if not shame: "Minal Auntie knows, because she is equally dark, the black-brown of tamarind, a hue that surpasses the spectrum of

foundation colors sold at Walmart, even those under the brand called Nubian Queen" (James 168).

This feeling of sympathy and empathy between Minal Auntie and her grandniece further deepens when she is forced to babysit Aarti twice a week. In fact, it is through their exchanges on those same days that the issue of race is openly raised by Aarti who, expressing the pain of being the target of racial taunts and a strong desire to change the color of her skin, unknowingly reawakens Minal Auntie's past oft-failed struggles to fit in and to foster a sense of belonging. It has, perhaps, been this same sense that, having eluded her, has made her feel "drained, distant from the world reeling past her window, [like] a [headless] chicken spinning around a stick" (James 176):

Minal Auntie studies the road for a while. At last, she says, "Your color is your color. There is nothing to do about it." She speaks from a place of impatience and experience, having wasted years on a similar quest for an antidote. She has smeared the skin of boiled milk onto her cheeks; she has stirred pinches of gold dust into her tea. When she was a child, a neighbor boy, Velu, insisted that if she stood outside at night, he could see only her teeth and the whites of her eyes. (James 177-178)

Despite an initial attempt to hide her desperation and to suppress a long-repressed sense of shame towards the color of her skin by feigning indifference and acceptance ("Your color is your color. There is nothing to do about it."), Minal Auntie is led to the verge of a secret acknowledgement to herself of sharing Aarti's plight. In fact, no matter how hard Auntie tries to seem in control, Aarti's worry at racist jibes reopens her never-healing but covered-over wound and refreshes her memory of Velu and what Victoria Burrows, quoting Sara Ahmed, calls "the 'encounter' with the racial body" (6-9). This "distressing racial encounter" which, as Burrows explains, is "a meeting which involves surprise or conflict" consists of a pinning-down of a black body "by the traumatic impact of the white gaze reading [that] body as repulsive" (6) – an incident that both Minal Auntie (the first-generation) and Aarti (the third-generation) have experienced at some point in their diasporic lives.

Aarti is more than a signifier of otherness in "Light and Luminous." She is the materialization of the never-resting phantom of the trauma of racism, which needs paradoxically to hide-and-expose this secret source of a devastating psychic life of shame, diffidence, and un-belongingness in diaspora. Aarti's use of Pond's talcum powder, her interest in and curiosity about a box of Light and Luminous in the toiletries section of the IndoPak Grocery, and her later account of another kid's racist taunt all reopen Minal Auntie's past racial wounds, tap into her ingrained sense of inferiority, and, thus, reactivate her defensive weapons. Her initial response-in-defense, of course, is to take refuge in Indian

classical dance—what is, in the present story, the master metonymic signifier of *Mother* India and a now rather fading sense of glory, power, and confidence whose reminiscences can still warm her dried-up self-esteem. Basking in such reflected glory, however, cannot last long when present mirrors reflect here and now, rather than there and then, and when heart-warming reminiscences prove to be ephemeral and fragile: “But the feeling dissolves when she descends the basement stairs and stands before the paneled mirrors. Here is her reflection: a flat nose, raisin-colored lips, eyebrows that have never seen a tweezer, and of course, her skin. She turns back on the mirrors” (James 186). It is to fight against what she feels to be projected in the mirrors that Minal Auntie immediately attempts to reconstruct and reclaim her lost glory by losing herself in the dance—the cathartic space of art.

No matter how adroit a dancer she is and how cathartic the dance proves to be, however, the memory of Velu, the boy whose hurtful racist comment still haunts her, cannot be blotted out and she is left pondering over the sensations her apparently one-sided love for him has long aroused within her. Minal Auntie’s sequence of responses-in-defense including her sudden strange desire to flaunt her own talent in her students’ competition by taking up all the four roles that her students were supposed to play. They include the following: her decision to quit her second job at Foodfest where “each pitying smile [was] a blow to her heart” (James 182); her follow-up trip, after so many years, to an Indian beauty salon to thread her eyebrows, upper lip, chin, and sideburn and to receive a facial (which is, ironically enough, called “the Fairness Facial”); and her final application of a tube of Light and Luminous at her solo performance on the India Day Festival can all be read as unconscious defensive attempts to veil a now reopened wound, to hide an internalized sense of racial inferiority, and to foster a new sense of self which can be “expanded to fill the frame of the old, fresh and resplendent, immune to pain” (James 195).

As witnessed by the ending of the story, these all turn out to be some temporary-working defensive weapons which will, sooner or later, break down, hence forcing the subject to confront her core issue. Despite her desperate attempts “to reactivate the elation that came of Aarti’s words [of compliment on her dance skills],” Minal Auntie is soon taunted and mocked by her own students both because of her act of robbing them of their “diva moment” of the dance and her excessive application of the whitening powder to her skin (James 193; 200). Sadly, even Aarti with whom she has a bond of affection does not defend her. In fact, reality hits Minal Auntie the hardest in the face when she “is jolted by the sound of her own words in Aarti’s mouth [‘She said your color is your color, and there’s nothing you can do about it’] spoken with such flat resignation” (199).



Auntie has no choice but to confront the phantom and to bring her infected wound out in the open: “Minal Auntie can bear the stinging cream no longer. She unlocks the stall door, and aside from a few small gasps, the girls go dead quiet. She looks straight ahead as she strides to the counter. Turns on the faucet. Throws handful of water over her face. Gritty white dollops plop onto the porcelain of the sink” (James 200).

Whether or not, in this cathartic moment brought about by “a moment of racial exposure that forces her into a position of abject humiliation” (Burrows 7), Minal Auntie can finally accept the confounding reality her skin color represents remains rather ambivalent. On the one hand, the poignant metaphor of outgrowing and shedding the “old, dead skin” suggesting a refashioning of subjectivity pervades the penultimate paragraph of the story, while on the other, the haunting memory of Auntie’s first racial encounter with Velu’s racist taunt, silently creeps towards the very last lines of the story. This ambivalence, of course, infuses the story with such a wordless tension that the readers, along with Minal Auntie, are left adrift in an alien culture whose implantation of a deep-seated sense of shame in its other-colored citizens is so grave that it takes decades (if not centuries) for the situation to be redeemed.

Unlike the malleable phantom of the dead (grand-)mother(land) in the previous story, the undying phantom of what is termed “the trauma of the embodied racial encounter” by Victoria Burrows (7) is here to stay. Therefore, all, each, and every single diasporic subject like Minal Auntie and Aarti can do, if they ever dream of resistance and change, is to face up to, rather than covering up, the naked truth of the physical and psychic reality of being the racial other. It is only by acknowledging and voicing the pernicious presence of this pervasive racial otherness in the fabric of everyday life in diaspora, rather than blocking and suppressing the growing anger and frustration which it fuels, that diasporic subjects are likely to move towards voicing and possible healing of the trauma of racism as part and parcel of the trauma of displacement. Perhaps, to foster a new subjectivity “immune to pain” (James 195), Minal Auntie also should have first succumbed to that pain by recognizing her position of vulnerability—a position best metaphorized by the image of “headless chickens in a glass coffin [...] spinning torpidly on spits” (James 174). Had Auntie, like the reader, the author, and the narrator of “Light and Luminous,” recognized the painful significance of this metaphor, she might have been able not only to metaphorically inscribe her pain but to exorcise or, at least, to move towards exorcising the phantom of a color that constantly haunts and re-haunts.

## 6. Conclusion

Both Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Unknown Errors of our Lives" and Tania James's "Light and Luminous" hint at the long-lasting (though not always paralyzing) effects of the phantom of the (*M*)otherland which, when dislodged through intergenerational interactions, can reopen old infected wounds by tapping into the diasporic subject's often deep-seated sense of racial/religious/cultural inferiority, shame, and otherness. This by no means suggests that such reopening of wounds and encountering with the resting-yet-restless phantoms of the past are doomed to fail or to end on a doleful note. After all, such moments of confrontation, all of which seem to be critical to the diasporic subjects' psychic functioning and crucial for the ongoing process of their negotiating subjectivities, are not simply some out-of-the-ordinary epiphanic moments of awakening. Rather, they are rehearsed within what can be called, following Nouri Gana, the psychic space of "empiphany" woven into the fabric of the characters' everyday life.

A portmanteau word (combination of "empathy" and "epiphany"), "empiphany" was first used by Nouri Gana in his illuminating study on the poetics of loss, where he coined the term to suggest "a mysteriously tied knot between empathy and epiphany, or recognition and cognition" (56). Regarding it as an ethical moment of self's approximation to the other without an appropriation of its gaze and experience, Gana thus considers "empiphany" as a fleeting moment when the dynamic interaction between the self and the other might become possible. As the analysis of Divakaruni's and James's stories in the light of the theory of transgenerational phantom also reveals, the literal/metaphoric return of the phantom of the (*m*)otherland hauls, at certain privileged moments, each of the diasporic subjects represented by the stories into an abstract psychic space, immune to the spatio-temporal logic, which is marked by what amounts to an "empiphanic" encounter between the self and its internal irreducible otherness externalized in the form of the phantom.

The empiphanic space, where the living-yet-dead diasporic self encounters the dead-yet-living phantom of the (*M*)otherland, is one which facilitates reconstructing desire, embracing the other on its own terms, fulfilling a belated mourning process, and coming to terms with a(n) (often transgenerational) sense of loss, pain, shame, and otherness on the part of the diasporic subject. This does not simply imply that accommodating the restless phantom of the (*M*)otherland is an easy task or that working through the transgenerational trauma of displacement is definite. It rather suggests that the empiphanic space of the return of the phantom might carry the potentiality for healing and catharsis. What is of great importance for the present purposes, however, is that the

emergence of such a space, is facilitated by the cathartic force of an external other (like a living/dead relative of another generation or simply an artistic activity). It is the external other – whose presence coincides with the self's moments of acknowledgement, metaphorization, and acceptance of a sense of rage, hate, fear, shame, and otherness – that endows the diasporic subject with a fair chance to (re)negotiate his/her subjectivity in relation to affects which had long been suppressed, thereby providing him/her with the possibility of accommodating phantoms, mourning a sense of loss, and overcoming the transgenerational trauma of displacement.

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