Towards a Domestic Gothic Tradition: Shimla through Post-Colonial Lens

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Abstract

Originating in the Pre-Romantic era, the Gothic as a literary genre expanded significantly with colonial expansion. Finding themselves amongst the presumably exotic natives and their supernatural beliefs, the European writers found fertile grounds to extend the genre of the Gothic. For its comprehensiveness and entirety, the Gothic relies on the landscape against which the story is set. It is, then, an array of landscapes, ranging from architectural to the natural, holding the uncanny themes and meanings secure. One such place that evoked strong reminiscences of the "uncanniness" of the traditional Gothic, particularly in the context of the landscape, was Shimla, the summer capital of British India.

Till date, the hills of Shimla are studded with Gothic architectural buildings and the haunts of British ghosts. The paper, under a literary lens, explores the British Gothic as it unravelled itself in Shimla. An attempt shall be made to trace the development of the Gothic, in Shimla, from its initiation by the British writer Rudyard Kipling in his short stories "The Phantom Rickshaw", "By Word of Mouth" and "The House of Suddhoo", to the adaptation of a predominantly English Gothic aesthetics by an Indian, Minakshi Chaudhry, in select short stories taken from The Ghost Stories of Shimla Hills and finally the emergence of the Indian Gothic in Anita Krishan's Ghosts of the Silent Hills. The paper shall analyse the adopting, adapting and abrogating of the Western elements of the Gothic genre, thereby reflecting the cultural beliefs and traditions of the Hillfolk consequently creating a new subset of the genre.

Keywords: Colonialism, Gothic, Landscape, Shimla, Uncanny

The Context

Gothic, initially an architectural concept denoting a specific style of man-made structures, evolved over time to encompass a "landscape"; a geographic ensemble blending the natural and the man-made. Eventually, it came to signify a medium that invokes the primal instinct of fear. Conventionally, in the domains of literature too, these standard elements of the Gothic were exploited to draw from the innate fear of the unknown, existing immanently since the dawn of mankind, in every society and its people.

The Gothic marked its inception as a recognized literary genre comparatively later, in the 18th century; and owing to its connect with fear, in its raw form, was considered by Eliot and even Coleridge as appealing to the sensibilities of "low" culture. Since then, however, as the corpus of

literature widened, the literary Gothic emerged as a conglomeration of the setting and the human perception, which, in turn, started affecting and influencing the aesthetic sensibilities and corpus defining landscape and its construct.

Relying on this aesthetics of landscape, the Gothic has evolved to stand testimony to and representative of cultures across the globe. From the architectural to visual, music, performance and literary as well as media and cultural arts, the Gothic "… has inflected form and meaning across a huge range of cultural discourses, from medieval architecture to contemporary gaming; from graveyard poetry to modern dance; from the eighteenth-century novel to internet fiction" (Punter, 2019, p. 1).

In its new sensibilities, the literary Gothic draws its elements from the primitive fears of humans but paints a picture beyond that, reflecting and at times critiquing the prevailing societal beliefs and institutions. Landscape, while depicting the existent ideology, also provides a means of resistance against conformity to the hegemonic dominance of the mainstream, especially in the postcolonial paradigm, as Punter (2000) says, a "…feasible site of resistance would then be an attention confined to local detail" (p. 42). The combination of the landscape and the human perception, even if subconscious, makes possible the exploration and implications of the "natural" and "devised" landscapes when dealing with the Gothic as a representative of culture.

The impact of the Gothic resonated and influenced the aesthetic sensibilities, not only of the Western world: Britain, France and Germany in particular; but found its way across the globe along with these imperial powers. One manifestation of the spread of this genre, in literature and architecture, can be found in the Indian subcontinent. Once a British colony, India till date bears the architectonics and literary constructions of the erstwhile colonial presence.

Established during the Raj, the summer capital of India, the town of Shimla, or Simla as it was then called, is one such microcosm of India that lives and breathes in the remains of its colonial past. What makes Shimla an epitome for the study of landscape is the combined "Gothicity" of architecture and literature. It was in 1822, when Captain Charles Pratt Kennedy was appointed Superintendent of the Hill States, he began "…the construction of the first European-style house…" (Rudd, 2019, p. 7), the Kennedy House located at Mahasu (now Mashobra). In this alien land, amongst the natives, where the Western elite were unable to understand the religion(s), customs and beliefs, it was an attempt to locate a piece of the familiar by recreating the village and establishing a town as per English tastes.

Shimla's natural landscape was alluring to the Outsider. The cool weather, lush greenery and fresh air evoked nostalgia and attracted the attention of the Raj encouraging the British to establish here, a "health centre". This, they managed to do by overcoming the dangerously rocky and steep hills to seek shelter amongst the tall deodar, pine and oak trees. The natural landscape did not make settlement easy, for many of an "…unpaved track up the mountain was a zigzag of hair-pin bends that skirted sickeningly along precipitous edges; it was subject to dangerous landslides and floodings during the rains, and was too narrow for even a four-wheeled cart" (Barr & Desmond, 1982, p. 10). It ignited within the hearts of travellers a sense of adventure, of ruin and dangers of the new world, a Gothic natural world, away from home, and a landscape to be overcome, much like the native.

This natural landscape of the town was decorated with British architectonics: buildings, roads and markets. Eventually with the construction of buildings, prominently influenced by the Gothic or Neo-Gothic architectural style, the town came into shape. The Mall Road was established as the centre, a hub for activities, social and recreational. A need for the familiar further expressed in organized balls, fairs, fetes, luncheons, moonlight parties and other social gatherings:

> Simla was a familiar name to the British…called Mount Olympus, the Viceroy's Shooting Box, the Indian Capua, the Abode of the Little Tin Gods. It was a dream of coolness in a very hot land; a hope of healthy rest from the burdens of imperial office; a haven of familiarity pinnacle above the alien dust of the plains; a solace for the wounded and the desolate, the ill and the bored: a promise of fun and flirtation; above all, a bitter-sweet memory of home – cuckoos and the thrushes, pines in the mist, honeysuckle and roses in the rain. (Barr & Desmond, 1982, p. 7)

The natural Gothic, mysterious and unfamiliar was enhanced by this "devised," assembled Gothic landscape. It provided the perfect setting for the Gothic literary genre to bud and grow. In addition, by the English landscaping of the town, the British initiated a dual aesthetic ground for the literary Gothic: first, the geographical or natural setting, with the towering deodar, pine and oak trees laced along the dangerous steep hills covered with a blanket of mist which has since times immemorial been an essence of these hills; and secondly, the constructed town with its Elizabethan and Neo-Gothic architecture, the remnants of life during the Raj.

Common to this duality was the constant, inherent fear of the supernatural and the alien. The Gothic architecture was an attempt by the Britishers to familiarize the landscape, which, even with its similarities to home, was still peculiar due to the presence of the natives. Their fear emerged from the unfamiliarity of this alien setting, the native hill tribes and their 'pagan' customs and 'superstitious' beliefs. The town fashioned along the English lines, then, did not offer all the comforts of home. It was unfamiliar and especially during the winters, desolate. For the native, similarly the fascination that accompanied the arrival of the British, the new buildings and a new way of life, was laced with fear emerging from these changes to their little village. The eerie, for them came when the familiar was made unfamiliar with the settlement of the British.

The presence of the "unfamiliar," for the British as well as for the natives, in its wake brought a situation where a conglomerated literary Gothic became a significant facet towards domestication and familiarization. The British writers recorded their fascination and experiences with the supernatural in the hills. Such was the extent that E.J. Buck in his non-fictional record "Simla past and present" (1989), while describing an area with a natural outlet of water known infamously as the Churail Baori, describes the "Oriental" belief and British experiences with the "Churail".

The first British official to record the uncanny after residing in the often mist or snow-covered mountains was Rudyard Kipling. While staying in the Tendrils Cottage, the writer was inspired to write the first ghost story set here, which would then lead to several others being recorded. As Ruskin Bond states in the "Foreword" to Ghost Stories of Shimla Hills (2012), "Kipling started it all with his phantom rickshaw and its ghostly occupant, and since then there have been any number of phantoms, of one kind or another, haunting Shimla's old schools, hotels, cemeteries and places of entertainment." (p. xi) Through his texts, namely Plain Tales from the Hills (2017)

and "The Phantom Rickshaw" (2010), Kipling drew attention to the Gothic landscape of Simla. Depicting the natural landscape, in "By Word of Mouth,"(2010) Kipling describes travelling along winding paths across these hills,

> You pass through big, still deodar-forests, and under big, still cliffs, and over big, still grass-downs swelling like a woman's breasts; and the wind across the grass, and the rain among the deodars says:— 'Hush — hush — hush.'…It runs through dark wet forest, and ends suddenly in bleak, nipped hill-side and black rocks. (Plain Tales, 2017, p. 185)

However, much like Coleridge, this beauty of nature is fraught with dangers looming ahead. He creates a sense of mystery, danger and wild wanderings in search for solace and comfort but eventually unravelling horror in these unknown terrains.

Continuity and Departure

This familiarization initiated by the Britishers became an immanent part of life in Shimla and in contemporaneity, writers like Minakshi Chaudhry and Anita Krishan, both born and raised in the Shimla hills, draw from the natural and constructed "haunting" landscapes and use it as a setting for their stories. In "The Premonition", Chaudhry encapsulates the Gothic essence of terror in an unknown, unpredictable setting:

> The tall trees loomed darkly overhead, not even a whiff of air disturbing the stillness. A fog had suddenly descended, reducing visibility to near zero. The environs had an evanescent quality that seemed a natural and integral part of the strangeness of the place. A little later, the gaps in the atmosphere filled up as the thick clouds of fog gently swirled around becoming softer, cotton-like. The catalyst for this transformation was this whispering wind. It had silently come and taken everything in its fold in just a few seconds. Nothing could be seen…. (Ghost Stories of Shimla Hills, 2005, p. 29)

The natural landscape and setting are furthered by Krishan as she describes the town during winters in "An Uncanny Attachment:"

> Dark clouds had descended like a gigantic rolling ocean in the sky. It had been snowing non-stop for the past two days. Two feet of frozen vapour covered the landscape, hiding all colours under its white cape. The bitter cold had restrained folks inside their homes…. The deserted expanse was even more desolate now—and overwhelmingly silent. (Ghosts of the Silent Hills, 2020, p. 23)

The gothic in Kipling's work emphasizes the eerie and mysterious aspects of Shimla, often framed through its dense forests, mist-covered hills, and crumbling colonial mansions. "The Phantom Rickshaw" makes use of the landscape to evoke a sense of psychological discomfort and a spectral presence which aligns with Gothic tropes of haunted spaces and repressed anxieties. This is deeply tied to the colonial experience, highlighting a detachment or estrangement from the land, which enhances the Gothic mood. In Chaudhry and Krishan's work, a localized perspective emphasizes Shimla's present, history and cultural richness rather than isolation. Due to their intimate, anecdotal tone which blends local folklore, myths, and natural beauty, the Gothic is present, but

subdued. Their narratives are more inclusive, capturing Shimla as a lived space rather than an alien land. This contrasts with Kipling's colonial outsider gaze, which often exoticized and mystified the locale. Yet, it is his contributions that led to an expansion of the genre and cleared a path from which emerged hybrid tales, a curious blend of the Eastern 'exotic' and the Western 'logic', a blend of the natural with the constructed; and of the urban and rural landscape which defines this genre of the Indian Gothic.

Accompanying the natural is the devised facet of the Gothic landscape established as and within the urban town are buildings in the Elizabethan, Neo-Gothic and Indo-Saracenic architectural styles. Some still standing as reminders of the British Raj alongside which, they house numerous horror stories. The Western literary Gothic which refers to the architecture of the Middle Ages as a characteristic setting, differs in its colonial implementation as its setting in India is primarily within the colonial architectonics. The Mall Road runs through the center of the town and remains a place of social hustle and bustle. Set here, Kipling's "The Phantom Rickshaw" elaborately describes the haunting of Theobald Jack Pansay. Chaudhry too establishes it as a place of ghostly activity, from ghostly apparitions that haunt the Ridge, Scandal Point, Middle Bazar and the road that connects Sanjauli to the Ridge, "The more you ignore the rumours that the Ridge is haunted, the more you encounter people with [supernatural] experiences…" (Chaudhry, Ghost Stories, 2005, p. 9). From the fabled pit of fire in the Gaiety Theatre to the poltergeists of the Viceregal Lodge and the Railway track, there is an abundance of ghosts scattered throughout the town. Krishan similarly has her stories set in Mashobra, the Faridkot Estate and Wildflower Hall, "Enclosed by a lush thick pine and deodar forest, wrapped by tranquil silence barring sporadic sounds of nature—it was a divine place to live" (Ghosts of the Silent Hills, 2020, p. 45). Her work draws from the British tradition but in essence re-establishes the genre by inclining it more toward native beliefs.

Apart from the setting, another aspect of the Gothic can be highlighted by means of characters and perspectives. Kipling's characters are Britishers trying to adjust in the hill town trying to locate here, the familiarity and warmth of home back in England. They are torn between the "Cultural Sensibilities" of the Western world and their "Experiences" in the 'pagan' East and this rift between two worlds, the Eastern and the Western; is studded with the juxtapositioning, yet simultaneous placing of the Living and the Dead. In his "The Phantom Rickshaw" he offers a glimpse of the British experience in Simla, "…while all Simla that is to say as much of it as had then come from the Plains, was grouped round the reading-room and Peliti's veranda…" (2010, p. 7). His Simla, then, evidently comprises only of the English, where the native is insignificant, only useful for menial tasks and without a voice. His ghosts too are English, "One may see ghosts of men and women, but surely never of coolies and carriages. The whole thing is absurd. Fancy the ghost of a hillman!'" (Kipling, 2010, p. 10). Thus, from the perspective of the Self, the native other is reduced to a mere object, not significant enough to be given space in the world of the Living or the Dead. Ruskin Bond in "The Man Who Was Kipling", deduces this when his Kipling claims, "...but my only aim was to show off the Empire to my audience—and I believed the Empire was a fine and noble thing" (2017, p. 6). He allocates space for this portrayal of the "noble", in the process discarding the rest.

Encountering the literary colonial with reference to the natives' beliefs and customs and their connectivity to their natural surroundings through a postcolonial lens allows us to explore the gaps

and question the space, or the lack of it. This has been done by Indian "native" authors who through their texts explore the same. Unlike Kipling, "Fancy the ghost of a hillman!" (2017, p. 10), the ghosts of the natives are 'allowed' to exist, and the beliefs of the natives are made central in the "Indian Gothic aesthetics". Then, the eerie and uncanny dark dungeons, labyrinths, crumbling buildings, or mist covered mountains and forests are not merely Gothic backdrops; rather they "…are actually central… a means by which political, psychological, social, and cultural ideals are laid bare, transmitted, and often critiqued" (Yang and Healey, 2016, p. 1). The elements introduced during the Raj are rearranged, domesticated and the "native" space reclaimed.

Chaudhry and Krishan, re-allocate the space that was previously assigned to the British and place at the centre the native, thereby culminating the "strike back" of the native resisting the colonial dominance. In "Torture Cell of Gaiety Theatre" Amrit; a poor boy from a local village serves as an instrument resistance against the British norms, when his uncle claims that the "Mall Road is only for gora sahibs and the rich, royal Hindustanis" (More Ghost Stories, 2017, p. 14), he is unable to accept this, for "This was their village, their Sheyamlah, they had a right to go anywhere and he was not a thief or beggar" (2017, p. 16).

In contemporaneity, however, in the hands of Indian authors, whilst the native is a certain appearance, the British too find space. Incorporated in Minakshi Chaudhry's "Haunted Bauris and Benches" are colonial spectres, a woman wearing a white wedding gown, often sighted at the Scandal Point, a group of Britishers, all in Victorian outfits, around the U.S. Club, the Englishman who haunts the road to Himachal Pradesh University and the Ridge which at night is rumoured to be a haunt of the British ghosts, a lively re-enactment of the bygone era. The British while not having been denied space are lingering presences, remnants of a long-lost era, much akin to the architectural presences.

The once popular "haunts" of the British remain as such, the only difference, that they exist in-between the realm of the living and the dead. The lady on Kipling's "Phantom Rickshaw" and Chaudhry's "Lady on the Rickshaw," depict two sides of the same coin. Through Chaudhry's narrative, the dichotomy between the living and dead in terms of fear and horror is realigned. Kipling's lady, true to the nature of a malignant spirit, haunts her estranged lover to death; while Chaudhry's, attached to the town of Shimla, is herself a victim of the horrors of change, unable to let go, she is condemned to witness her beloved town 'decay'. Krishan also introduces her readers to the ghosts of the colonial past, in "The Unfinished Party" a recurring tea party hosted and attended by the ghosts of Britishers becomes a source of terror for the living. The presence and continuation of the British Gothic, apart from the architectonics, in the form of ghosts probably can be seen as the project of familiarization coming full circle. Such is the domestication that the ghosts have placed themselves as adopted 'citizens' of India in general and Shimla in particular. This can also be understood as a metaphor or an extension of the British influences and their everlasting presence on the urban space. The presence of the British in contemporaneity is then felt especially at places of the colonial origin where they remain as a part of the landscape of the new Indian Gothic.

The urban space is occupied by British sensibilities, whereas the rural offers space for the natives. What was once discarded and deemed superstitious and pagan by the British is reclaimed as a part

of the ordinary lives of the Hillfolk. In Chaudhry's "The Nakalchi Bhoot Who Died" the previously labelled "Tin Gods" of the native folk are understood not as lifeless symbols, but their relationship is established through lived experiences; she claims "Bhoot, rakshash and chudail are part of life here. They are as important in the social milieu as gods, devtas and devis…. Like devis and devtas, the ghosts and witches have their area of jurisdiction over which they have full control" (More Ghost Stories, 2012, p. 34). Thus, incorporating the cultural sensibilities, she elaborates customs, practices and beliefs associated with the native gods. Krishan too identifies and provides a space to the local/native beliefs and customs of the Hillfolk. In her second collection of ghost stories, the urban setting remains incomplete without an understanding the element of horror and fear as drawn from the native beliefs of the people. The notion of "black magic" which has been ridiculed, dissected and discarded in Kipling's "The House of Suddhoo", is reclaimed and reassessed when Krishan talks of the intricacies of magic amongst the natives. In the story "Shadow in the Dark," she describes exorcism rituals performed by tantriks. These rituals reflect indigenous beliefs in Himachal Pradesh, where supernatural occurrences are often addressed through spiritual intervention.

> The only rational solution suggested was to find an expert exorcist…. After months of search, Prakash heard about a miracle man through one of his juniors, who recommended a sage living in a forest in Theog, about seventeen miles beyond Shimla. He claimed that the holy man could communicate with the spirits of the dead. (Ghosts in the Dark Silence, 2022, p. 181)

Drawn not from her imagination, but traced via lived experiences of people around her, Krishan introduces cultural beliefs highlighting a way of life intertwined with supernatural presences. The difference in terms of rural and urban landscape is evident across these narratives. The urban is embellished with British architecture and British ghosts, whereas the rural setting allows for a deviation from the traditional Western Gothic and provides space to the folk traditions and folklore of Shimla hills. Thus, the rural landscape, left comparatively untouched by Western sensibilities emerges as space for the Indian Gothic.

Moreover, the space is not merely exclusive, but shared as well. In "The Angrez Chudail", Chaudhry offers space to a hybrid. The churail, a supernatural entity recognized across South Asian cultures is hybridized. An "Angrez", as the British officials were addressed, Chaudhry's creation exists between the two worlds, the Eastern and the Western. The story, creates spacial hybridity is set in-between the natural and the devised, along a lonely path through a thick "…conifer and oak forest" (Ghost Stories, 2005, p. 4). The native belief is modernized, where the churail, who according to traditional belief is supposed to haunt natural water bodies meets Sadhu near three water tanks. She has the characteristic features of the churail, the feet turned inward, the wailing calls accompanied by haunting laughter and screams, all but her face, "It was beautiful, and she was an angrez!" (Ghost Stories, 2005, p. 6)

Architecturally, the hues of colonial presences linger in the echoes of the blaring air raid alarm which although installed under the British rule, till date remains an essential part of the daily life of the locals. It lingers still in names such as Comberemere, Boileuganj, Longwood, Annadale, Barog, Harvington, Kelingston, Auckland, Chadwick, Ripon etc. The Shimla Hills are studded with buildings such as the Viceregal Lodge, Christ Church, Gaiety Theatre, Town Hall, Railway

Board Building, Rothney Castle, Kennedy House, Bentinck Castle, Chalet Day, Barnes Court, Cecil and others serving as visual reminders and sources of inspiration to draw from even in contemporaneity when they have been renovated.

The erstwhile genre of the West, then, has also been thoroughly domesticated by the Indians. The entire construct can be traced on three levels in post-colonial terminology. Beginning with an adopting of the tradition as established primarily by Kipling, Indian authors followed the traditional storytelling method. Similar to the ghostly parade that haunted to death Kipling's protagonist is Krishan's ghostly party of British officials along with their native servants loyally serving them even in death, and Chaudhry's account of the many British spectres that haunt the town.

This is followed by a further adaptation of the genre with respect to native and cultural sensibilities. This is achieved in the works of Chaudhry and Krishan, where a space is carved for the native voice. The primarily urban landscape although laced with colonial presences, keeps the natives central to the narrative. Because the writers are native, the devised landscape is mixed and so are the ghosts. The English perspective shifts to a Native perspective and though the setting remains English, the narrative is directed by the Native. Then, this "Englishness" becomes a part of the landscape, serving as a reminder of colonial Simla. In Chaudhry's "The Haunted Mansion," (More Ghost Stories, 2012) Malkiat Singh, an eighty-year-old man becomes this native voice, who narrates the colonial and gothic history of the town, pondering upon and critically analysing the Raj and time since then:

> Some of them loved the place so much that they never left. Their spirits wander here. A headless man roamed the Ridge, another one with a hat haunted the road leading to Annadale. An English woman in a white bridal dress is seen on the Mall and the Ridge. Oh, there used to be so many ghosts! Where are they now, wondered Malkiat.
>
> It seems they did not like the development activities of Shimla. Old buildings have been destroyed in fire making the ghosts homeless, Malkiat thought. They must have migrated to the interiors of the Shimla hills or left for some new place, he mused. (p. 95)

Eventually both Chaudhry and Krishan break away from the established norms of the genre, moving from adopting and adapting, they further domesticate the genre by means of abrogation. Their works reclaim the individuality and become culturally conscious; an example of the same is when both writers begin with recognizing folklore and the cultural beliefs of the Hillfolk and their relationship to their devis and devtas and allocate space for "native" terms in their narratives.

The genre, conceived during the time of the Raj did not terminate with the departure of the British from India. As Bond says, "In 1947, the British left the country but left their ghosts behind" (Ghost Stories, 2005, p. xi). Not only did the genre survive but was adopted and adapted by the native writers seamlessly as if it was injected into the blood and consciousness of the native psyche. As Kipling opines:

> And the last puff of the day wind brought from the unseen villages the scent of damp woodsmoke, hot cakes, dripping undergrowth, and rotting pine cones. That is the true smell

> of the Himalayas, and if once it creeps into the blood of a man, that man will at the last, forgetting all else, return to the hills to die. (qtd. Bond, 2017, p. 7).

The Raj similarly has become an inalienable part of the landscape in contemporary Gothic writings. The hills are not only the haunts of the subjects of "Oriental" imaginations and the British influences but also keep preserved, via narratives, their own unique customs and beliefs.

Conclusion

Indian writers have not allowed themselves to be confined to the Western Gothic tradition but have established a Gothic tradition of their own. Within this new literary tradition, the central focus has shifted from the English to the Native and a greater emphasis on the customs and beliefs of the land. The native "natural" along with the "devised" from the times of the Raj, merge seamlessly into the inimitable Indian aesthetics creating a domestication of the erstwhile Western Gothic and its landscape.

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