

I (can't) See You: Politics of In/visibility in the Writings of Ishtiyaq Shukri

Iqra Raza | University of Delhi

<http://ellids.com/archives/2021/02/4.2-Raza.pdf>

Abstract | This paper seeks to study the shift in representation of the Muslim body (within the context of War on Terror) from figuration of an embodied autonomous subjectivity to a disembodied one haunting through the remnants of its presence, via a close textual analysis of Ishtiyaq Shukri's novels *The Silent Minaret* (2005) and *I See You* (2014). The paper seeks to explore the notions of power and resistance that inform Shukri's concerns wherein *spectrality* operates both as a mode of resistance against surveillance mechanisms and as the culmination of the neo-colonial Empire's necropolitics. It will particularly explore the implications of *spectrality* for bodies located within the neo-colonial epistemological project that reduces the status of the 'othered subject' to that of an object. Conceptualizing *spectrality* as the dominant mode of the post 9/11 novels, the paper engages with Derrida's work on mourning in relation to specters which call attention to the anomaly that plagues the present and, in doing so, offers a new paradigm for an understanding of the post 9/11 Muslim experience.

Keywords | Spectrality, Historiography, Mourning, Ishtiyaq Shukri, South African Anglophone writing, Muslim Experience, War on Terror, Derrida

The corporeal experience of the Muslim body situated within the framework of War on Terror (WOT) in general and the bodies incarcerated within Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib¹ in particular is often conceptualized as being the locus of violence. However, a turn to the violated space of the individual body without an acknowledgement of the markers of race and alterity scripted on it fail to bridge the negotiation between bodies as they are located within the politics of neo-colonial Empire² and their representation within a text. While much of the literature responding to War on Terror focuses on visibility as a counter discourse to the (mis)representations of the Muslim experience,³ Ishtiyaq Shukri⁴ offers an alternative possibility in writing protagonists that are specters, haunting the texts through their absent presence. The question that then arises is how far does Shukri venture in his novels—*The Silent Minaret* and *I See You*—when he layers the experience of the incarcerated body anchored to a specific history, on to an absent presence, as a stylistic challenge in his works? In choosing to erase the presence of the material body from the space of the textual world, Shukri hints at a radical subversion made possible by taking the ‘Spectral turn’ within a context wherein the subject is construed as an object of knowledge.

While this subversion might also be doomed by the possibility of labeling the unknowable as ‘dangerous’ rendering such an attempt counter-productive, Shukri treads with caution. He takes care to build in the everydayness of the protagonists’ lives (before their disappearance) with minute details, making them relatable and unrelatable at once. The Muslim experience is mediated through a presence which exists (in its absence) outside the epistemic registers and the textual world. The spectral nature of the protagonists’ presence becomes potent, especially in juxtaposition to the embodied violence that characterizes the corporeal experience of the Muslim body, in the wake of War on Terror as evidenced by the photographs that emerged from Guantanamo and Abu

¹The two infamous extra-territorial prison complexes commanded and controlled by the United States which mainly held detainees of the Global War on Terror. These places were notorious for the torture techniques administered on the detainees.

²The term used here and subsequently in the paper refers to the neo-colonial politics of the United States, especially those concerning the operations of the global War on Terror. Various theorized by Anne McClintock, Engseng Ho, and others, it includes in its ambit the obvious territorial invasion and also the more subtle and insidious practices such as the creation and proliferation of discourses.

³A vast number of Anglophone writers have turned to employing 9/11 as a central plot device while introducing nuance into their representation of the Muslim and his/her experience in the aftermath of it. Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009), Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2004), and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) are a few of the popular examples. Other writers like Monica Ali and Tahmima Anam have also employed the trope to different ends in their works.

⁴Shukri is an award-winning Journalist-turned writer from South Africa whose works deal with global geopolitical concerns and their impact on individual lives.

Ghraib (with a deliberate erasure of faces) leaving for the viewers mere bodies in sight, anchored to the history of colonization. The body, through its link with visual economy lends itself readily to taxonomy, and encodes differences in its rootedness to ontology, thus, becoming a potent site for both scripting power hierarchies as well as subverting them. The paper argues that Shukri's texts, in their suggestion of the radical possibility of non-presence, subvert the power hierarchy reminiscent of colonization. *Spectrality* in its theoretical ramifications has been often summoned in studies done on 9/11 but has largely remained unexplored within the context of the War on Terror and the United States' neo-colonial practices. Shukri's works demonstrate the implications of politics of in/visibility for racialized Muslim bodies trying to negotiate with a civilization that has regressed to racial taxonomy in order to demarcate its 'other.'

Ishtiyag Shukri in his narrative posits the idea of transnational, cosmopolitan exchange of ideas as well as goods, such as that between the protagonist and his landlady,⁵ as a means of knowability of the neo-colonial Empire's 'other.' At the heart of this political narrative of power and its 'other,' lies the potentiality for a blurring of the boundaries between 'us' and 'them,' by transcending one's fixed subject positions and allowing for a meaningful exchange. For Shukri, it is the immediate experience of encounter(s) with the 'other' that allow us to truly understand and open ourselves to them. However, this idea of 'knowability' is suggested as a mere possibility rather than an actualized activity, because of the limitations and danger of (mis)appropriation such a knowledge claim entails. Shukri writes with an awareness that the many forms of colonial subjugation, predicated precisely upon a claim to complete knowledge of the 'other,' were often (mis)used to justify 'otherness' (Bhattacharya 2018). He is wary of making such claims so much so that even by the time his novels end, the readers cannot decipher the identity and whereabouts of the central protagonists with certainty. Instead of emphasizing on the protagonists themselves, the texts focus on their absent-presence, utilizing the framework of *spectrality* to mark a discursive shift from ontology to 'hauntology' (Derrida, *Specters* 10), implicative of the number of bodies picked up and disappeared from within the US Empire. While they are not manifested in material forms, their ghosts continue to haunt the characters and later the readers as well. The characters do not just 'characterize' themselves and the times they occur in, but represent the sum total of the history/ies of oppression across the globe. Derridean 'hauntology' utilizes the ghost as a metaphor to talk about a 'return,' making hauntology a disruption—occurring along both temporal as well as ontological axes—of the presence where it is replaced by its 'non-origin.' *Spectrality*, within the scope of the texts, thus becomes a functional metaphor. It marks a shift from visibility to invisibility, and in doing so lays bare the obliterations—of people, races, states, histories, cultures and spaces. Spectrality allows the protagonists of Shukri's texts to operate beyond their immediate coordinates as they bring the past, the future, the absences, and the presences on a single plane offering a

⁵Shukri saturates the text with examples of exchanges that play a vital role in shaping a counter-discourse to the widely circulating one of civilizational superiority that locates two races/nations/religions as binary opposites with no point of convergence. Within the context of WOT, as images and discourses identified the Muslim as the 'other,' Shukri's Catholic character, Frances, finds and celebrates the overlaps between Islam and Christianity because of the exchange of ideas she has had with the protagonist, Issa, and the gift of Tasbeeh she receives from him. As the Tasbeeh and the rosary intertwine in her little pouch, she uses a neologism to bridge the gap between the two, calling it a "Trosebery" (*Silent Minaret* 6).

holistic view of issues geographically and temporally varied, within a synchronic time frame. Thus, the War on Terror can be linked to colonial violence at the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century. Spectrality for Shukri is less an ontological concern, veering more towards social and political implications of the same instead.

The Silent Minaret unfolds the story of a seemingly futile search for the protagonist undertaken by his kin as they try to locate him through the many cues he has left behind. After watching horrifying images from Guantanamo being projected onto the screen at Baghdad Café, and subsequently realizing the extent of tyranny being unleashed by the neo-colonial regimes of the West which were saturated by signifiers that echoed a sense of historical similitude, Issa Shamsuddin “slip(s) through the door into a dawn that is beginning to illuminate the devastation wrought by the violent night” (*Silent Minaret* 48). Issa never speaks to the readers in the text, except through indirect means, such as through his inscriptions and annotations on margins of certain books. He is present in the text only through his absence, which is alluded to more than once in the novel. The text draws attention to Issa’s non-presence within it by way of italicizing his past dialogues. The stylistic function of italicization serves to underscore the fact of the protagonist’s existence outside the text and consequently the epistemic register of the world he inhabits/ed which has both positive and negative connotations to it. While *choosing* to remain outside the epistemic registers hints at possible subversion, being *made* to stay outside it is constitutive of marginalization. A presence turned into a political specter, shifted out of the frame of the neo-colonial regime’s body politic, Issa subverts his marginalized position by choosing to turn into a specter that haunts through the remnants of his presence. The cues that he leaves in his wake work to accentuate the vacuum created by his absence, drawing attention to the political ramifications of marginalization and spectrality, which in certain contexts can be used interchangeably; in that, to be marginalized is to be a political specter and vice versa. Marginalization however does not occur totally outside the episteme; it is rather made legible through its becoming a supplement to the dominant political discourse—the aesthetic, social, and political consequences of which Shukri skillfully explores.

Shukri’s second novel appears ten years after the first, tracing a temporal continuity. The political shift from President Bush to President Obama’s administration and a dramatic upheaval against the Republicans that led to changes in policies and politics of the United States is well reflected in *I See You*. *I See You* is a story of its protagonist’s disappearance. Tariq Hasan, an award-winning photojournalist, has been abducted, incarcerated, and tortured by ZAR Corps, a mercenary organization, for his vocal criticism of their practices, especially their involvement in foreign territories. While the forces of political power in the two novels are different, the tyranny unleashed by them is similar in that both take the individual body as a site for enacting violence. Thus, both Issa and Tariq, the individual-protagonists of the two novels are there, but not there, leaving spectral images of suffering to fill the textual space.

However, before launching into a textual analysis of the novels, it is crucial to contextualize the theorization of the dis/appearance of the body within history. A stress on ghosts and haunting dominated and grounded the human psyche’s cognition of what it meant to be a non-presence in the late nineteenth century, manifested most cogently in

articulations of the Gothic. While the ghost existed as a powerful metaphor to signify a return of the past, much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century theorization rejected the ghostly and occultism, most significantly brought about in Sigmund Freud's reluctance to assign any supernatural association to his conceptualization of the *uncanny* and in Theodor Adorno's *Theses against Occultism*. Criticizing Western occultism and classifying it as something regressive, Adorno's text largely operated within the context of enlightenment that still held empirical epistemology as the only possibility. The potency of a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation was first manifested in the late twentieth century as ghosts gave way to Specters that could "do" theory. While the ghost figure had the potential for theoretical foundation, it was left unexplored till the twentieth century when it was no longer a supernatural figure, but offered ethical alternatives instead. Thus, besides its aesthetic function, the ghost "perform[ed] theoretical work" (Lord 92), fulfilling an analytical role as well. Jacques Derrida's Heideggerian revisitation in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question from 1987* further supported it. However, by the time it appeared, *Specters of Marx* had already camouflaged the ghostly into the idea of a specter. The ghost thus ceased to be an actual manifestation of the spooky return from dead and carried instead socio-political ramifications. The terminology of 'specter' shifted theoretical gears with its etymological link to vision, becoming something which is both looking and looked at (spectacle). This turn underscored previously unexplored features of the specter such as its liminal position between numerous dichotomies viz. materiality and immateriality, life and death, looking and being looked at, presence and non-presence. This liminal position of the specter posed a series of social, political, and ethical questions. In its relation to "the deconstructive thinking of the trace, of iterability, of prosthetic synthesis, of supplementarity and so forth," (Derrida, *Specters* 75) the ghost figure got imbued with political, ethical potential, a figure of clarification rather than obscurity.

Writing about the late twentieth century turn of the theoretical underpinnings of the specter, Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren write:

To believe or not believe in ghosts no longer involves a determination about the empirical (im)possibility of the supernatural, but indicates contrasting validated attitudes—a welcoming seen as ethical and enabling, and a rejection considered unethical and dispossessing—towards the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with alterity and difference. (Blanco and Peeren 9)

Ceasing to be a question of the supernatural and belief, the ghost instead represents everything occurring outside the normative, and an acceptance or rejection of it, thus, no longer implies reason or the lack of it but ethical standards instead. The movement away from centrality of the rationale to that of ethics provides a fertile ground for the shift of the metaphor of specter as well. Insofar as it represents possibilities, diagnostics, and alternatives the specter prompts us to question where our ethics lie, instead of in/validating our rational ability. For Derrida as well, a ghost is not so much a return of the dead than it is a metaphorical signifier which exists to raise questions pertaining to justice in the radical possibility of its non-being. Talking about the difference of the specter from the ghost, Derrida says,

The specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood. It resists the intuition to which it presents itself, it is not tangible [...] What happens with spectrality, is that something becomes almost visible which is visible only insofar as it is not visible in flesh and blood. (“Spectrographies” 38)

Insofar as the specter exists defined by its very nature of being non-present, it escapes epistemological and empirical possibilities. Derrida writes that, “One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge” (*Specters* 5). While the specter exists outside the epistemic registers, it is often the figure that shines light on alternative episteme, on what is placed outside the box of epistemology, and in doing so also questions the nature and mechanisms of its production. The specter—in fiction that engages with the implications of ‘War on Terror,’ for bodies tied to a history of unequal power relations between the colonizer and the colonized—offers the radical possibility of subversion. Moreover, as Derrida argues, the specter disrupts chronology drawing attention to the limits of historicization or to the anomaly that exists in the present which can take the form of injustice, disempowerment, etc. It holds suspect the historical grand narrative, offering instead fragmented versions of history that have remained inaccessible thus far. In Wendy Brown’s words, the Derridean specter presents a “rejection of historical totalization in favor of fragmented and fragmentary historiography” (Brown 167).

Contemporary theorizations of “spectropolitics”⁶ have focused on how subjects can be prone to variegated forms of erasure—social, political, and cultural. The functionality of the absent protagonist in Shukri’s texts extends precisely to these conceptualizations insofar as they engage with both the past and the present, critiquing the politics that has rendered them in/visible while also offering new possibilities. Unearthing the lost strands of history is one of the chief concerns of both Shukri as well as his protagonist Issa, a student of history. In Issa’s absence, it is his thesis that fulfills the function of illuminating the alternative course of history traced by him, one that proposes a subaltern account of the historical events and their significance.

Specters, as Derrida theorizes, call to attention the anomaly of the present and in doing so, offer a diagnostic for it. The present always tries to ‘come to terms’ with the past by engaging in a dialogue with it, via specters who act as catalysts for such a process. The specter engages with the past and presents it as an injunction of sorts for the present. What eventually allows the past to ‘haunt’ the present is the attempt at conjuration or a retrieval of the past—done here by tracing an alternate historiography. Rewriting history is not a process of destruction of one in favor of another but rather locating the aporia in the existing narrative and offering radical possibilities. And Shukri’s works lend themselves to precisely such a reading. In *The Silent Minaret*, Shukri fashions Issa as the

⁶In contemporary theorization, ‘Spectropolitics’ refers to a politics of spectrality, which not just contends with the spectral nature of politics itself but also focuses on how and why subjects turn into specters in their susceptibility to various forms of erasure. Critics like Appadurai, Mbembe, and Gordon use the framework of spectrality for such an analysis rather than utilizing the discourses of nationality, postmodernism, postcolonialism, globalization, etc.

spectral presence who creates a rupture in hegemonic discourses, beginning with the totalizing tendency of European historical discourse. Issa, a research scholar of history, undertakes the task of addressing the fissures created by a quite literal “whitewashing” of history by giving an alternative historiographical account of the colonization of the Cape wherein Islam as a religion played an indispensable role in the anti-colonial uprising. Issa is acutely aware that historical discourse concerns itself with constructing versions of the past in the present that can best serve the power structures in future. It is made intelligible by structuring events (which entails editing and omissions as well) into a coherent narrative, subject to power structures that are in place at a given time. Historiography, contrary to its claim of objectivity, is a very subjective discourse riddled with fissures (Foucault 373–86). Problematizing the ‘givenness’ that historical narratives often assume, Issa attempts to rescue a history manufactured by the colonialists from the amnesia that plagues it by wedging in the missing pieces. Inevitably, this problematization of history also serves to question the political, social, and cultural valuations that arise from a noncritical acceptance of the truth value that these narratives claim. At one moment, when Issa (presented here as Kagiso’s memory) confronts his history teacher at school with another version of the history of Anglo-Boer war, the latter retorts: “History cannot be re-written [...] History *is*, and at St Stephen’s we accept only the thorough, rigorous and sanctioned historical versions outlined in the syllabus” (*Silent Minaret* 16; italics original). For Shukri, and his protagonist Issa, “history however, cannot be told in a straight line” (16). It is neither linear nor singular, but characterized by a multiplicity of narratives.

Linda Hutcheon, writing about what she calls “historiographical metafiction,” says that the merit of such texts lies in the fact that they do not claim to be the Truth but one version of it, since “there is no Truth, but truths in the plural” (18). Shukri proposes the idea that there are indeed many different versions of truth, historical or otherwise, depending on who is writing it. The power structures play a central role in determining the sway of history. In *The Silent Minaret*, Kagiso interrupts the officially sanctioned historical narrative when he refers to the ‘native’ history of the Anglo-Boer war that regards Baden Powell not as a hero but a “lying thief,” he muses:

History was not intended to capture this part of the story; Baden-Powell went to great lengths to omit it from his reports and from his diaries [...] But while the Colonel was able to contrive his written submissions of the siege to London, he had less control over the version of events that passed from the mouths of my forefathers into the ears of their descendants. (15)

This paragraph captures Shukri’s central questions that propel the narrative—what are the grounds of historical knowledge and how are historical narratives constructed? Unlike the post-modern literary discourse that asserts the impossibility of the existence of ‘falseness’ per se, Shukri does not let his narrative to slip into contestations for truth, retaining some objectivity and holding it in place by inserting at this point, the role of memory. Demonstrating that historical narratives do not necessarily remain faithful to historical processes, Shukri underscores the idea of a discrepancy between recorded history and memory. Thus, the motif of remembering and forgetting recurs throughout

the novel with torture and forgetfulness having real implications on physical bodies that then turn spectral which will be explored via Shukri's second novel.

In probing the grounds as well as the processes of production of historical knowledge, Shukri also turns to questions of textuality, reference, language, and the nature of the relationship they negotiate with the 'real' processes. Given the fact that history as it is available to us is accessible only as a text, historical discourses, it can be argued, do not exist outside of the text and outside language, making it imperative to interrogate the very nature of text and the nature of language. Textual historiographical reference gets reduced merely to being a 'trace' in the form of a text, making it essential for us to question what is it that accounts for the 'real'? The past is constituted by signs whose meanings can change over time, making history a hunt for the closest approximate sign. The question of what is the 'real,' therefore, further opens up the scope for questioning the various subcategories of genre and eventually to whether historical narrative should be considered any different from a fictional narrative. Hutcheon in talking of historiographical metafiction draws parallels between history and fiction in that both base themselves on verisimilitude rather than empirical truth and are linguistic constructs that not only depend on a very subjective process of semanticization but also on that of apprehension. She further adds the point of intertextuality that is indispensable to both, something Shukri heavily employs in his texts, especially *The Silent Minaret*.

In interspersing his fiction with actual historical references while also imitating the style and structure of a historical narrative, Shukri effectively blurs the distinction between history and fiction. In doing so, he questions the idea of inscrutability of historical discourse and the sacrosanct status it assumes for itself. In narrating the story of Issa's absence, he brings to the fore many other absences, presenting them to us as obliterated presences, spectral and unforgiving. The history of Dutch settlement at Cape Colonial, the cosmopolitan cultures of South African past and the socio-cultural and intellectual history of Islamic expansions are just some of the absences that are rendered visible through the alternate historiography (traced via Issa's thesis) made available to the reader. This interweaving of history and fiction not just serves to question the sacrosanct status of history but also makes an attempt to accord to the novel a function similar to what Issa's thesis fulfils—that of a 'subaltern' historical discourse. To this extent, he not only imitates the style of historical narrative but also makes sure to add copious references and notes at the end of each chapter. Shukri quotes extensively from various history books, novels, philosophical discourses, treatises, newspapers, classical texts, religious scriptures, and Issa's thesis as well. Shukri's subversive intertextuality in referring not just to 'real' texts but to fictional ones as well pays homage to them while underscoring the fuzziness that characterizes the borders of history and fiction. Fusing form and content serves to effectively blur the distinction between the historical and fictional, real and imagined, theme and structure, past and present, etc. The text is fluid flowing like a post-structuralist historical discourse—nonlinear, fragmentary, and subversive—challenging the racist, Eurocentric discourses that are saturated by losses. This rewriting of the discourse is made possible through the process of mourning, as Derrida envisages it, a point this paper later returns to. It is the work of mourning that opens up the past to the present. Issa's and Tariq's texts are presented as reminders that the present is less than perfect. And it is in the process of mourning that the said texts are

alluded to, with Tariq's writings and photographs being circulated over mass media to keep his memory alive and Issa's thesis and notes helping his friends to discover him in his absence.

As stated above, the text raises questions with reference to language as well. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida arguing about the relationship between history and the act of writing says that the former always operates under conditions of *différance*, i.e., the impossibility of finding exactitude and fixity as far as meaning is concerned. Therefore, past as a linguistic articulation can never be presented objectively as 'truth,' rendering all attempts at articulation 'spectral' in that language (re)produces mere traces of the 'original' with meanings always getting deferred. Thus, only a semblance of the event remains captured. Shukri questions the nature of language by going back to definitions and etymologies, in a hunt for the "ghost" of the origin. In *The Silent Minaret*, while dictionary definitions do nothing to help, Kagiso arrives at a possible meaning of the word 'disappearance,' one that can help him reconcile with it in the context of an "Issaless London," he nevertheless understands its implications. Even though the noun "**disappear** v.intr: 1 cease to be visible; pass from sight. 2 cease to exist or be in circulation or use (*trams had all but disappeared*)" (*Silent Minaret* 28) is defined for Kagiso, its meaning still escapes him. It sounds to him "clinical. Improbable" (28). The entire narrative for Kagiso becomes a struggle to negotiate with various meanings of 'disappeared' when put together with the noun, Issa. And it is precisely this struggle that allows him to access various meanings and etymologies from the many and variegated layers of signification that have been accumulated over signs. The obliteration of the intermingled and cross-pollinated histories lets civilizations manufacture narratives of incommensurate differences between 'us' and 'them,' and Shukri writes with precisely this awareness, undercutting such a discourse by enforcing overlaps. *The Silent Minaret's* specter-protagonist ruptures the surface veneers bringing to the fore the narratives that have always lurked beneath it, not so much directly and by volition as he does indirectly by leaving cues to be unraveled, filling the margins with his non-presence quite literally. The functionality of specter in visibilising the invisible marks it as a potent figure in subaltern discourses which hinge themselves on contestations for meaning making. Thus, Issa disappears himself in order to play a more potent role in interrupting the linear flow of history.

While studying the role of the spectral protagonist of *The Silent Minaret*, it is crucial to note the moment of his disappearance. Issa sits in Baghdad Café with the manuscript of his thesis now finished, behind the *mashrabiya* screen, his eyes transfixed on the television screen flooding images from Guantanamo, "Blurred pictures on the giant screen of heavily shackled men in orange overalls behind high security fences, their arms chained behind their backs to their feet" (43). A photograph is also an embodiment of spectrality, superimposing past and present. And it is precisely in this context that Issa apprehends the photographic images. As emblems of the suffering that is an instance of the past, to Issa, they stand in for both the remote past (as a reminder of the colonial history) as well as the immediate present (in his sudden awareness of how violence permeates the everyday experience of the Muslim subject). He watched "as history rose up from the open manuscript on his table and came to hover between him and the images on screen" (43). Thus, deeply affected and haunted indeed by the images of suffering on

the screen, Issa suddenly stands up and walks away; in the process he “brushes past the waiter” (45). However, the waiter, also too absorbed by the spectacle of his ruined hometown, does not notice the movement. Issa in this moment has already become a spectral presence, a non-presence, an absence, for the waiter. Much like Islamic mythology of the djinns (supernatural beings) who leave a scent in their wake, at the moment of Issa’s disappearance, the waiter “inhales, trying to decipher the sudden, delicate fragrance - jasmine, violet, rose” (45). It is at this moment that he looks towards the corner seat for the source of the fragrance, only to find that its occupant is no longer visible. But his disappearance has left an alternative historiography for others to see in the form of his thesis, marking already a rupture in historical discourse. Issa’s disappearance does not just stem from his recognition of the precariousness of his life but also from his acute knowledge of the way neo-colonial biopolitical regimes rely on individual bodies for their *modus operandi*. As a diasporic subject, Issa’s passport conditions his mobility or the lack thereof within a geopolitical world, tracing movements across borders while at the same time subjecting his body to surveillance under a biopolitical regime. The passport, a document meant to facilitate movements, if branded with the mark of undesirability and otherness, serves to limit mobility.

Issa, like Shukri himself, is stopped and checked by security staff at the airport for his visual attestation to a certain religious (Muslim) and racial belongingness (Arab-African). It is Issa’s corporeality and his name that tie him to his Arab and South African heritage, “inscribing his racialized body in terms of an undifferentiated hostile Muslim otherness, effacing all other markers such as class or education” (Aumeerally 15). Issa’s resistance to state surveillance and racial and religious profiling is manifested in the form of his disappearance. Corporeal recognition predicates itself on embodied differences; Issa chooses to erase his physical presence from the public record, resisting surveillance and knowability—the epistemic registers of which are saturated by meticulous descriptions of alterity which correspond to Issa’s corporeality. Invisibility thus becomes a way to subvert the omnipotence of surveillance mechanisms of imperial institutions that rely on corporeality, as well as to escape being branded as the Empire’s ‘other.’ Calling despised foreign bodies like his own “Europe’s Untouchables” (*Silent Minaret* 81), Issa is acutely aware of the ways in which biopolitical control is determined by the politics of taxonomy supplemented by its surveillance technologies. But he wills to resist knowability “even as the tentacles of the war on terror proliferate, delineating a new ‘version of recognition [which] would be based less on knowledge than on apprehension of its limits’” (Aumeerally 17). Issa is in the text but a ghostly evocation that can only find his voice through others who engage with the ‘traces’ of his absent-presence in order to fully comprehend the implications of his spectrality.

Unlike *The Silent Minaret* where Shukri hints at the fact of Issa’s disappearance being an act of his own doing (as a subversive measure), *I See You* makes it clear that Tariq has been abducted and incarcerated. So, while Issa’s disappearance is a subversion, that of Tariq is a brutally violent manifestation of the neo-colonial regime’s necropolitics.⁷ Seen in conjunction with the bodies that were picked up and incarcerated

⁷Mbembe, in his book, *Necropolitics* works on Foucault’s idea of ‘Biopolitics’ in greater detail. Recognizing that the strict demarcations between “resistance and suicide,” “martyrdom and freedom” (92)

in Guantanamo, wherein their status as a legal subject was suspended rendering them non-presences legally, Tariq's incarceration draws significant parallels. Questions of the body become especially pertinent to *I See You* because of the specifics of Tariq's abduction and subsequent torture. Rather than *becoming* a spectacle, his abduction is spectral in nature, shaped by censorship. Studying Shukri's two novels simultaneously becomes an exercise in coming to terms with visibility and invisibility of violence respectively. While the first one makes a direct reference to Guantanamo images which were paraded as signifiers of the Empire's moral victory over everything seemingly opposed to it, the second offers insight into unseen excesses of violence through Tariq's account of torture as well as his prize-winning photograph. While *The Silent Minaret* makes violence apparent enough for the protagonist to disappear because of it, *I See You* covers it up, quite literally as well, often using euphemisms to describe torture. The readers never get to see the violence, but only infer it from the various accounts.

Tariq's torture reeks of the human rights violation that haunts Guantanamo. The discourse of the "right to have rights" (Arendt 296) implies that there exist subjects who are less than subjects, since not everyone has the right to have human rights (123–267). This is especially pertinent in the case of Guantanamo where the inmates are represented as less than humans, their alterity further highlighted by their claim to belonging to a certain religion. Islam has since a long time been rendered as the 'other' to everything that the West stands for—civility, democracy, liberty. The philosophical discourse of rights, owing its origins to Immanuel Kant, primarily construes the subject of human rights as being an autonomous, adult, rational, white male (Douzinas 2–3). Human rights are, therefore, for all their universalism, exclusionary in practice. And if a subject cannot avail human rights, it is implicative of their being less than human or non-human, in other words they become non-presences, at least in the legal-political epistemology. It is this kind of spectrality to which Tariq's character lays claim to.

As noted earlier, Derrida attests to the specter's position as both "visible and invisible [...] phenomenal and non-phenomenal" ("Spectrographies" 39). Tariq's character is a specter within the space of the textual world. He haunts the readers by his presence made manifest through his disjointed stream-of-consciousness account of events inside the prison, yet we do not know where he is, if at all he lives. Shukri titles all of Tariq's accounts as "Somewhere" but we're party to Tariq's thoughts everywhere. Tariq's position as the Empire's other is brought about in the very first account we get from him with his emphasis on the colour of his skin "brown," immediately implicating his racial belongingness and corporeality in his *otherness*. He begins to envisage violence on his own brown skin, suddenly "stop[ping] this macabre imagination from unfolding further" (*I See You* 19), thankful that he has "ten healthy intact toes" (19), alerting us to the danger of brutal violence that he is subjected to. Tariq's indeterminable coordinates also draw attention to the possibility of his body being inaccessible even in death.

Dealing at length with torture, Shukri subtly introduces ethics into the scope of the text by implicating the readers in the reading process, forcing them to open

no longer exist in a necropolitical regime, he introduces the idea of social and political deaths to biopolitical operations.

themselves to Tariq's presence. As we read through his account, we are subjected to his subjectivity, thus playing a host as well as hostage to his spectral presence. Derrida in *Of Hospitality* writes "it is the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage – and who really always has been" (125). In this, the host forsakes power, becoming susceptible to the guest's abuse. Therefore, insofar as we empathize with Tariq, we open ourselves to hosting his spectral presence within us. Our powerlessness in the face of his ill-fate also becomes a condition of our opening up of the self to him. So long as the reader admits her inability to do anything about Tariq's sealed fate ending in torture, she allows him into her consciousness, aided by the stylistic technique employed here. Tariq's stream of consciousness journaling of violence inflicted upon his body strikes us with the immediacy and intimacy of his voice. The readers' empathy begins to extend beyond it, becoming eventually, a condition of hosting his absent presence. However, at certain points in his account, we are posed with questions which implicate us in the process of his abuse, of being mute witnesses to the violation of his body. Tariq's account begins to read like a harrowing reminder of slave narratives as he admits his ignorance about circumstances surrounding his captivity. He writes as a clueless victim of violence, shackled and transported from one place to another. Naked and hooded, Tariq narrates of the shame that haunts him by his sudden awareness of being watched. His account of shame at being stripped and the sexual violence that follows it is a haunting reminder of the slave violence of the nineteenth century, recalling the master-slave dynamic between the white colonizer and his coloured subject. In the scene that Shukri constructs for us via Tariq's interiority, it is further imbued with a sense of historical similitude, owing to the latter's acknowledgement of the colour of his skin as well as the specifics of his incarceration and torture. Incarcerated within four white walls without any spatial-temporal coordinates within which to place himself, Tariq writes that it is his male body that further curbs and disallows his awareness of temporality, "Deprived of references, I look to my body as a measure of time... But how reliable a measure of time is the male body? A woman would know a month" (*I See You* 136). Tariq becomes a specter, being haunted by his past and haunting the present. At this juncture, it is important to note the juxtaposition that arises out of Tariq's narrativization of shame and his position within the text. While shame, as Sartre and others after him theorize it,⁸ is largely a product of an acknowledgement of visibility or a perception of it, Tariq's character is not a signifier of embodied subjectivity but that of a spectral presence insofar as the space of the textual world remains haunted by him. It is not the same or even similar as claiming that Tariq does not possess a body—he does and brings our attention to his corporeality, and somatic experience time and again—it is rather that Tariq is a specter of the novel, and perhaps so for the characters therein who do not get to know anything about him.

Tariq's transition from a presence to non-presence follows a trajectory similar to that of Issa. Everything happens before anyone can notice. He disappears from the midst of a

⁸Shame, in Sartre's phenomenological accounts in *Being and Nothingness*, is defined as a mode of consciousness that follows from an acknowledgement of certain aspects of one's being in the presence of an 'other.' By definition, the body becomes the locus for such an experience, obliterating the possibility of a 'spectral' shame. However, the paper argues that while Tariq Hasan possesses a body, his spectralization fulfills a functional role, i.e., he plays the role of a specter while retaining semblance of corporeality, making it possible for him to feel 'shame.'

crowd “within a matter of minutes” (25). There are no witnesses, no proof, nothing recorded on CCTV. Tariq’s abduction in its operation is closer to a vanishing than a disappearance, much like Issa’s. Like *The Silent Minaret*, *I See You* is preoccupied with the theme of uncovering which is a function of the specter, as mentioned above. For one, Leila Mashal’s intention while contesting elections, is to make visible what is “invisible cabal of deep power [that] has no truck with constitutions or manifestos or binding documents enshrining civil rights and liberties” (*I See You* 27). Moreover, she contends that the post-apartheid South Africa has shown no substantial change in its mechanism of political operation, in that the collusion of capital and power remains as interlocked as it was before. Seen through this lens, contemporary South African society is portrayed as a superficial entity that needs to be questioned and uncovered, and it is the specter protagonist of the text viz. Tariq, who makes such an interrogation possible through his being present in his absence.

Important to note at this juncture is the susceptibility of coloured male bodies to the Empire’s violence, which follows as a corollary from the War on Terror experience which affected black and brown men most directly. The Muslim experience in Shukri’s novels is narrativised as one which is reminiscent of the colonial experience of the past, in that both are shown to trace a temporal continuity. Shukri responds to this legacy of colonial violence by not just making connections to the past but also by showing how it differs from the past by introducing possibilities of subversion as well as the extremities of techno-violence. It would not be a generalization to say that Shukri’s texts rely on the in/visibility of violence in order to articulate the Muslim experience which finds expression, most manifestly in absences within families and an unending period of trauma for the next of kin. As Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*, the process of mourning for a subject whose place of burial is unlocatable does not cease, making the trauma of the ones left behind outlast the suffering. For Derrida, mourning is indispensable to meaning making and representation. Reformulating Sigmund Freud’s theorization of mourning—to which he attributes a subject’s way of negotiating with the social order while coming to terms with the loss of an attachment to objects and/or individuals and subsequent attachment to new objects/individuals, a transference made possible via mourning—Derrida argues that all semanticization is involved in mourning. Thus, all attempts at articulation must necessarily find themselves involved in the work of mourning, since language relies on substitutions to make itself comprehensible, and in doing so attempt to fill in the gaps and find what has been lost. Both Shukri’s novels as well as Issa’s thesis, as already argued, are involved in precisely such a process of meaning making.

As Derrida argues, the mourning that does not cease further opens up possibilities for the ‘other’ to come into being in their ‘otherness,’ thus, carrying within itself the very potent seeds of subversion (*Specters* 142). A ceaseless mourning process for an individual is also implicative of their being kept alive in memory while acknowledging their material absence, allowing them to ‘haunt’ forever, constantly challenging the normative lives being lived. And it is precisely in this context that Leila Mashal, Tariq’s wife, publicly mourns his loss while standing for a political office. Tariq’s spectral presence is what pushes her to introspect on her own actions to constructive ends, calling her to perform the work of mourning. Leila lets her scars scab into scripts of political

power, much like the post 9/11 Muslim experience of trauma holds the potentiality for ushering in change. It is the encounter with the specter (not always literal) which propels us towards the process of collective mourning, allowing room for subversion. Shukri constructs for his readers such an encounter in order to call to attention the 'unfinished business' of the trauma of War on Terror that we continue to nurture inside us. The post 9/11 Muslim experience, it would suffice to say, is constituted by scars that can never heal, and in being so, retains the possibility of becoming constructive through its continued remembering, making memory the key trope in both the possibilities of mourning as well as consequent subversion.

Shukri, through his novels attempts to make in/visible the lives that are precarious and unworthy of recognition. The texts operate within a biopolitical framework insofar as they suggest the easy dispensation of certain lives. Indeed, both Issa's thesis as well as Tariq's portfolio are driven by their awareness and acknowledgement of this fact and, therefore, the need to make apparent the suffering and to show 'bare lives'⁹ of the ones who have been conveniently marginalized, shifted out of the frame. In this context, it is crucial to analyse Tariq's prize-winning image that while on the surface looks like a romanticised photo of bucolic life, when looked at carefully, reveals the brutality of violence that its subjects have been subjected to. Tariq as a war photographer is chiefly concerned with making visible the violence that has hitherto remained invisible and succeeds in making an impact in the society, much like Shukri himself, who through his works makes visible all that had previously remained out of the sight of discourse, historical or otherwise. Shukri succeeds in bringing to the fore the precariousness that haunts coloured Muslim lives insofar as he uses the stylistic device of spectrality with respect to his protagonists, to two different ends in his two novels. While in one, the emphasis is on spectrality as subversion and interruption of the Empire's epistemological project, in the second, it is the violent manifestation of the 'thanatopolitics'¹⁰ of the state. His novels end without a closure, furthering the point of spectrality that was raised, in that the texts open themselves to the possibility of being haunted by the protagonists forever. Thus both his novels end with the lingering absent-presence of the protagonists. As Derrida says in *Specters of Marx* that in the absence of a thing, there remains a spectral element perhaps *more real* than its corporeal form; the reality that is made manifest in and by the protagonists' absence draws attention to the otherwise purposeless fecundity of logos in articulating their political presence. The textual ghosts—Issa's thesis and Tariq's portfolio—cannot be killed and, therefore, take on dimensions that look more alive than their living, embodied counterparts. In making his protagonists haunt the novels and the readers, Shukri radically redefines what it means to 'be' for the Muslim

⁹Agamben in *Homo Sacer* conceives of a body valued for its productive life force, but not as a political subject capable of contributing to the body politic, making it possible for the Homo Sacer to be killed but not sacrificed, Agamben's work has been contextualized within studies on WOT for their potentiality in analyzing the images that were circulated by the US with an intention to shape discourses surrounding the event.

¹⁰A concept fleshed out by Giorgio Agamben, it modifies the Foucauldian Biopolitics which is defined as the state's control over its populations' lives. Thanatopolitics refers to the politics of death instead of life. Agamben asserts that life had always been under state control, what shifted with the advent of modernity was the extension of that control to death. Foucault in *Society Must be Defended*, however had already noted that in the business of "mak[ing] life," "the balance" between life and death for the state is "always tipped in favor of death." (239)

subject in a world that resists their presence and renders it non-presence. Insofar as spectrality is seen as a diegetic function of the novels with respect to protagonists, we can perhaps concur that Shukri is aiming to reformulate the post 9/11 Muslim writing that responds to the War on Terror. In portraying absent protagonists of his novels, Shukri turns to an exploration of what the event (War on Terror) has taken away from everydayness of the Muslim world. The Muslim experience is characterized by gaping absences that make sense only when read in reference to the imperialist project of modern Empire. The paper, therefore, through an exploration of Shukri's texts attempts to open new avenues in studies done on War on Terror and the Muslim experience therein.



Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life*. Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, 1973.
- Aumeerally, Naseem L. "Rethinking recognition in Muslim diasporic writing. From an "ethics of responsibility" in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to an "ethics of dispersion" in *The Silent Minaret*." *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, pp. 73–83. doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2017.1386396.
- Bhattacharya, Baidik. "Somapolitics: A Biohermeneutic Paradigm in the Era of Empire." *Boundary 2*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2018, pp. 127–159. doi.org/10.1215/01903659-7142753.
- Brown, Wendy. "Futures: Specters and Angels: Benjamin and Derrida." *Politics out of History*, Princeton UP, 2001, pp. 138–174.
- del Pilar Blanco, María, and Esther Peeren, editors. *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford UP, 2000.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Steigler. "Spectrographies." *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, edited by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeran, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 37–51.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- . *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. 1993. Routledge, 1994.
- Douzinis, Costas. *The End of Human Rights: Critical Thought at the Turn of the Century*. Hart Publishing, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Tavistock Publications, 1970.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 2003.
- Lord, Catherine M. "Set Adrift in Style: The Scholar as Fiction and Film-Maker in Jacob's Room." *In(ter)discipline: New Languages for Criticism*, edited by Gillian Beer, Malcolm Bowie, and Beate Perry, Legenda, 2007, pp. 94–106.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Citadel Press, 2001.

Shukri, Ishtiyak. *I See You*. Jacana Media, 2014.

---. *The Silent Minaret*. Jacana Media, 2004.