

The Haunting Gaze: An analysis of Mahim Bora's 'Toop' (The Bait)

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Mahim Bora's short story 'Toop' (The Bait) explores the fragility of rural childhood by bringing in the theme of play through a haunting gaze of the lifeless eyes of a half-buried infant corpse, recalled by Haribol Koka. This haunting gaze echoes later in the story, in the unblinking eyes of a captured Sol fish by the boys, transforming this childhood moment of triumph and joy into an encounter with the dread. This paper attempts to situate 'Toop' (The Bait), within Assamese literature's engagement with childhood, silence, and trauma, and show how Mahim Bora subtly re-imagines childhood not as a space of idyll and innocence but also as one of interruption, trauma, horror, where memory and mortality intrude into everyday play. Drawing on Freud's theorization of the uncanny, Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma, and Avery Gordon's concept of haunting, this paper seeks to explore the theme of 'haunting gaze' as a symbolic device that discloses the spectral undercurrents of Mahim Bora's powerful storytelling as well as of childhood, memory and trauma.

keywords - trauma, memory, childhood, mortality.

Introduction

The rural village has long been the central imaginative space of Assamese literature. From Lakshminath Bezbarua's sketches of the socio-cultural traditions and the intimate tune of folk culture in the villages of Assam, to the socio-economic issues and its impact on rural Assam in the works of Homen Borgohain, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Assamese writers have repeatedly turned to the rhythms, struggles, and textures of rural life to articulate deeper social truths. The Assamese village often comes to symbolize the pulse and emotions of Assamese people, their essence. It is a repository of memory, their identity, and continuity. Yet, as critics have noted, the literary village is rarely idyllic in any simplistic sense. Beneath its rustic beauty, simplicity and laughter lies hidden stories of silences, traumas, and unspoken histories.

Mahim Bora's short story *Toop* (*The Bait*) describes this complexity. Widely regarded as one of the finest short story writers of Assam, Mahim Bora captures the cadence of oral storytelling and the textures of everyday life, but his narratives often slips from humour and anecdotes into a vein of uneasiness and horror. *Toop* begins as an innocent tale of two boys - Benu and Cheni, two young boys, who are in a quest to catch a prized *Sol fish* in the village pond. Their adventure is loaded with excitement, novelty, imagination and the energy of childhood. Yet this apparently simple narrative gets interrupted by a dark memory of Haribol Koka, an eccentric elder, who recounts how he once discovered the corpse of a newborn infant while fishing. This memory intrudes into the boys' world subtly yet powerfully, transforming their quest, their triumph into horror; when the cold, glassy eyes of their prized catch, the *Sol fish*, mirrors the lifeless gaze of the dead infant.

This paper attempts to explore how Mahim Bora structures his story *Toop*, around the motif of the 'haunting gaze', which merges innocence and trauma, the visible and the invisible, the everyday and the uncanny. By focusing on the frozen stare of the eyes, between the dead fish and the corpse, the story dramatizes how memory intrudes upon play, unsettling the assumed idyll of childhood. The theoretical framework of Freud's theory of the uncanny, Pierre Janet and Cathy Caruth's theories of trauma, and Avery Gordon's concept of haunting, will be used to show how Mahim Bora's story stages the spectral dimension of childhood and rural life, describing how an innocent childish quest gets shadowed by memory, death and horror, returning through uncanny encounters.

Childhood, Play, and the Threshold of Mortality

At its surface, *Toop*, appears to belong to the genre of a childhood tale. The narrative opens with the two boys' exuberant plan to catch the elusive *Sol fish* in Singi Pukhuri. Mahim Bora beautifully captures the energy and excitement of Benu and Cheni, who like any other children, transforms this mundane activity of catching a *Sol fish* into a grand adventure. The *Sol*, gleaming like silver, darting in the water like a ghost which they could almost see, but not quite, touch, becomes for them, more than a fish; it embodies their quest, mastery, and the fulfillment of their playful imagination.

Mahim Bora through his highly evocative language and depiction of minute details describes how their innocence lies in the seriousness with which they pursue this task- anxiously worrying about fishing lines, discussing and debating how to plait the muga thread, and scheming to persuade the much feared and the eccentric Haribol Koka with tea and tobacco. Mahim Bora accurately details their gestures, Cheni sketching the form of the Sol in the air, Benu imagining hooks biting into fish that do not yet exist; immersing the readers into their imaginative world. Childhood here is not mere fun but also becomes a realm where resourcefulness, secrecy, and the joy of anticipation shapes life.

Haribol Koka, the elderly figure whose knowledge they seek, embodies the shift between play and mortality. His eccentric habits, brewing tea with “*a bay-leaf and a pint of salt*,” puffing his smoke before it even reached his nostrils, plaiting muga thread with ritual precision, stretches both the boys’ anticipation as well as the readers. Every detail about him becomes a performance, heightening the sense of suspense. Yet beneath his eccentricity lies a suppressed history, when the old man suddenly in the midst of his conversation with the boys, confesses:

“*From that day onwards I haven’t ever touched a fishing-rod.*”

What follows after this, is his account of discovering a half-buried newborn, unearthed by jackals and swarming with ants, its “*eye balls stuck out of the sockets with a glare of flinty stiffness.*”

This sudden revelation shifts the axis of the entire story. The boys, wide-eyed in fascination, are suddenly initiated and confronted with death, not as an abstraction but in the form of an image. The corpse intrudes into their play, planting a memory, an experience which they cannot yet fully comprehend. Their fishing quest, initially framed as joyous anticipation, unknowingly becomes shadowed by this spectral presence and even the readers experience this change. Thus, childhood in *Toop* is marked by the shadow of mortality, where the border between innocence and trauma dissolves.

The Haunting Gaze:

The symbolic power of *Toop-The Bait* centers on the ‘eyes’, the gaze that bridges the living and the dead. Freud’s *The Uncanny* provides a useful lens here. According to Freud, the uncanny is not simply what is frightening but , “*that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar*” (1919/2017, p. 593). It emerges when something homely becomes estranged, familiar becomes distant, and when repressed memories return in a distorted form.

In Mahim Bora’s story, the pond represents the quintessential homely space of Assamese rural life: it is a site of play, sustenance, and imagination. Fishing is an ingrained practice and a part of Assam’s cultural fabric which is transmitted across generations. Yet when Benu finally captures the *Sol fish* in the end, its cold, glassy eyes suddenly unsettles him as it resembled the lifeless gaze of the infant corpse stored in his mind. What should have been a moment of triumph suddenly shifts and collapses into something strange and scary. The pond becomes uncanny; and it no longer remains a familiar space of play but gets transformed into a haunted site, where they are confronted with death.

The doubling of ‘gaze’ produces this uncanny effect. The frozen gaze and the lifeless eyes, becomes terrifying through resemblance to what is repressed: the infant’s gaze. Freud notes that the uncanny often arises through repetition and doubling, “*the constant recurrence of the same thing*” (2017, p. 601). In *Toop*, the fish’s gaze repeats the infant’s gaze, collapsing their childhood play into trauma. And for the boys, the uncanny lies precisely in this slippage, the familiar object of childhood joy and innocence is transformed into an index of death.

What is interesting is that, Mahim Bora grounds this uncanny within Assamese cultural life. The ponds, the act of fishing, the oral narration of Haribol Koka, all are deeply familiar rural motifs. This is because he does not want to simply import the uncanny but to emerge it slowly and gradually from the familiar textures, objects and sights of everyday Assamese life. By locating Freud’s concept in the specificities of Assamese village life, Mahim Bora dramatizes how the uncanny is culturally situated: the spectral emerges not through Gothic settings or ghosts but in ponds and fishing rods, where the everyday itself becomes estranged and unfamiliar.

Trauma and its Transmission

The uncanny in *Toop* operates through doubling, and its psychic dimension is trauma. Pierre Janet defined trauma as “*the splitting of consciousness*,” where unbearable experiences are severed from ordinary memory (1955, p. 9). Haribol Koka exemplifies this. The discovery of the infant impacts him so profoundly that he abandons fishing and eventually leaves the village. Even years later, that memory remains frozen, vivid, and unassimilated. He still could not forget the image of the half-buried corpse of that infant; as if its lifeless eyes seemed to stare straight into his own.

Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, similarly noted that trauma results from a “*breach in the protective shield*” when sudden fright overwhelms psychic defenses (1920, p. 33). For Haribol Koka, the infant’s gaze constitutes this breach. His eccentric behaviour and blunt humour masks an unhealed wound. His narration to the boys is not a catharsis or a therapeutic release but a repetition, of the trauma that remains raw, and alive. For Benu and Cheni, however this trauma takes another form: one that gets

stored but is delayed. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is “*a break in the mind’s experience of time*” that resurfaces belatedly as haunting repetition (1996, p. 61). The boys do not experience the infant directly; rather they inherit it through Haribol Koka’s story. Yet when they catch the Sol, the memory erupts belatedly: the fish’s eyes remind and repeat the corpse’s gaze, and the boys are overcome with fear. Their silence at the end of the story, embodies what Van der Kolk and Van der Hart calls “*speechless terror*,” where events cannot be organized linguistically (1996, p. 172) -

“They tried to speak but the words just vibrated near their hearts and evaporated”.

Toop dramatizes two dimensions of trauma - Haribol Koka’s frozen dissociation and the boys’ uncanny repetition. In both, trauma transmits across generations, refusing closure. Mahim Bora’s story reveals how memory circulates not only within individuals but also across generations haunting them across time.

Silence, Social Erasure, and the Unnamed Infant

The emotional weight of *Toop* begins with the unnamed infant whose corpse anchors the story’s uncanny gaze. Crucially, the narrative withholds all contexts: the child’s parentage, cause of death, and circumstances of burial, all these remain unspoken. Haribol Koka speculates,

“The village had no information of births publicly at any household. Works of some scoundrel, nasty hypocrite.”

This anonymity and silence reflects the taboos surrounding infant death in rural societies, entangled with poverty, shame, or gendered violence. The corpse then becomes a symbol for the marginalized lives and their silent stories: present yet socially erased. As Avery Gordon observes, haunting occurs when “*what’s been concealed is revealed, when what appears to be invisible or absent makes itself felt*” (1997, p. 8). The infant haunts precisely because it is both visible (the corpse and the gaze) and invisible (its life and its story being erased).

And it is Haribol Koka, who bears the burden of this haunting image, silently carrying a memory which the village collectively silences. By recounting and narrating it to the boys, he transmits not only a factual knowledge but an affective weight, the sense of injustice without articulating it. The boys inherit this silence along with the image. Their eventual muteness and unspoken thoughts in the end of the story reflects both speechless terror as well as the impossibility of narrating what remains socially unspoken. This technique resonates with Assamese literary traditions of silence and indirectness. And Mahim Bora reveals this screaming silence through indirect yet poignant images: the corpse in memory, the gaze in the fish, the unanswered questions. The unnamed infant embodies all - marginalized lives, the voiceless, social taboos, all erased literally, yet forever haunting.

Narrative Technique

Mahim Bora’s masterful narrative technique transforms everyday rural detail into a conduit for unease. As for instance, the plaiting of muga threads in the story which is described with such ritualistic precision: “*Placing the fingers... he pressed the three threads with the nails of the index finger and the thumb... the windings struck the right-hand finger with a twang.*”

Such a narration, however, also transforms and builds up a mundane activity latent with tension, mirroring the tightening of a fishing string before rupture. This accumulation of sensory details stretches the boys’ anticipation while subtly preparing the reader for the disquiet. The climax of the story, the capture of the prized Sol, around which the story supposedly revolved, arrives not as a shock but as the culmination of a narrative woven with unease. When Benu recoils, “*I don’t like it. How stiff and stony those eyes are!*” the moment suddenly got charged by all that came before - Haribol Koka’s memory, the ritualistic delay, and the spectral buildup. Haribol Koka himself embodies this tension. His vulgar humour and brusque authority mark him as an eccentric, an outcast; yet, his melancholy and opaque past reveal deep psychic scars. His eyes, “*glittering white as the Barali*” but “*lacking vision*,” render him spectral, unreadable, and haunting. Benu could not meet his gaze, sensing in it a history which is too vast, scary and unsettling to comprehend.

The ending, marked by the boys’ silence and Cheni’s symbolic act of flinging the fish into the bamboo grove, denies closure. Instead, Mahim Bora foregrounds this unease. The boys are swarmed with a lot of unanswered questions “*as wasps and began to sting*”, *Whose eyes were those? What bond tied them to Grandpa?*

These unanswered questions underscore the story’s ethical resonance: trauma, marginal lives, and social silences which resist neat articulation. Mahim Bora’s refusal of closure is an ethical and a deliberate choice, compelling readers to remain haunted and to reflect on these questions.

Conclusion

At first glance, *Toop (The Bai)* appears to be a simple tale of two boys chasing a fish. Yet Mahim Bora transforms this everyday rural adventure into a profound meditation on childhood, memory, and the unseen layered mysteries and complexities of human consciousness and life. The doubling of gazes', that of the infant's corpse and the dead frozen eyes of the Sol fish, turns triumph into horror, dramatizing how innocence can be shadowed by trauma. By situating his story and the sudden shift within the signifiers of Assamese rural life, the childhood quest, the playful imagination, the pond, fishing, oral storytelling, Mahim Bora shows how the uncanny is embedded in cultural specificity. His story resonates with Assamese literary traditions genre of childhood, but he adds his own dimension, and colour - the spectral presence of the marginalized within the childhood world. Ultimately, *Toop (The Bai)* compels readers to ask -

How do societies carry silenced traumas across generations? Who bears the burden of the voiceless and the forgotten? When the eyes of the dead meet the eyes of the living, what truths surface?

Mahim Bora deliberately leaves the story unresolved, denying catharsis. Childhood play becomes an initiation into mortality, memory, and haunting. The ordinary pond, the act of catching a fish becomes uncanny, a site where invisible histories shimmer beneath the surface. In the end, *Toop (The Bait)*, leaves both its characters and its readers suspended between wonder and unease. It reveals that childhood is not merely an innocent phase but can be a fragile threshold where silenced and suppressed traumas intrude. Mahim Bora's refusal to answer is itself the answer. The 'haunting gaze' that of the fish, the infant's corpse, and the haunting memory, lingers long after the story ends, shimmering like the Sol itself in the dark waters of the readers mind.

Citations

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