



WISDOM OF THE ZENANA: MATRILINEAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE SUBVERSION OF RATIONALIST EPISTEMOLOGY IN *A FIREFLY IN THE DARK*

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Abstract

In Shazaf Fatima Haider's *A Firefly in the Dark* (2018) the domestic sphere is often dismissed as a repository of mere superstition, yet it functions as the novel's primary site of intellectual survival. This paper explores "wisdom of zenana" as specialized form of matrilineal knowledge that operates through folklore, ancestral memory, and the supernatural to challenge the dominance of modern rationalist thought. While existing scholarship on Pakistani gothic literature frequently examines the "uncanny" or the sociological trauma of the characters, there remains a significant research gap regarding the epistemic authority of the "zenana" (women's quarters) as a legitimate system of knowledge. This study addresses this gap by arguing that the stories passed from Nani to Sharmeen are not merely "tales," but a subversive methodology of protection that succeeds where science and logic fail. The theoretical model for this analysis draws upon Postcolonial Feminism and the concept of "subaltern epistemologies." By viewing the "zenana" through this lens, the study demonstrates how Nani's "watcher" lineage preserves a worldview that the Westernized, rationalist world, represented by Sharmeen's mother Aliya, has systematically marginalized. The analysis traces Sharmeen's initiation into this matrilineal archive, highlighting how her father's coma serves as a symbol of the limitations of medical rationalism. Ultimately, it concludes that the novel reclaims domestic space not as a place of confinement but as a fortress of ancient wisdom, suggesting that in times of crisis this "irrational" matrilineal narrative provides the only framework capable of restoring agency to the female protagonist.

Keywords: *Ancestral Memory, Domestic Space as Resistance, Epistemic Authority, Oral Tradition, Subaltern Epistemologies*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Borderland of the Seen and Unseen

The opening of Shazaf Fatima Haider's *A Firefly in the Dark* (2018) establishes a border between two incompatible ways of being. On one side stands Aliya, the modern, rationalist mother who dismisses the spectral as "mumbo-jumbo." In contrast stands Nani, the matriarch and "watcher," whose snowy white hair serves as a badge of office in a lineage of women who see what the world has chosen to forget. This article examines "wisdom of zenana" not as a collection of quaint superstitions, but as a robust, matrilineal system of knowledge. Also, by analyzing the tension between Nani's ancient protocols and Aliya's failed modernism, it argues that Haider positions the domestic, female-led space as the only site of intellectual and spiritual survival in a disenchanted world. The central conflict is not merely a ghost story; it is an epistemological battle. As Sharmeen's father, Amir, lies in a coma, a state that modern medicine can monitor but not cure, the house becomes a microcosm of a postcolonial crisis. The "outside" world of hospitals and scientific data has reached its limit, leaving a vacuum that can only be filled by the "inside" world of the "zenana." The analysis seeks to map the historical and theoretical contours of that space, arguing that Nani's stories function as rational tools of survival in a reality where "jinn" are a tangible threat.

1.2. "Zenana" as Counter-Archive: Reclaiming Historical Sovereignty

Historically, the "zenana" (from the Persian *zan*, meaning woman) referred to the inner apartments of a South Asian household reserved for women. While colonial narratives often depicted the "zenana" as a site of stagnant oppression or "oriental" mystery, it was, in reality, a vibrant cultural laboratory. As scholar Ruby Lal (2005) in *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* observes that the domestic sphere was never purely private; it was a space where political and social influence was brokered through oral traditions, family networks, and the management of "unseen" influences. During the British Raj, the "mardana" (male-dominated outer space) became the primary site of colonization. It was here that English law, Western bureaucracy, and Enlightenment logic were enforced to manage the subjects of the Empire. However, the "zenana" remained a sovereign space where women maintained indigenous folklore, folk medicine, and a specific linguistic culture. In *A Firefly in the Dark*, Nani is the guardian of this "Counter-Archive." Her knowledge of the "jinn", the "banyan tree", and the "silver tasbeeh" is a continuation of this historical resistance. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* argues that the voices of those marginalized by colonial structures often reside in spaces the colonizer cannot fully penetrate. The "zenana", in

Haider's novel, is precisely such a space: a repository of knowledge that the rationalist mind, conditioned by colonial education, can no longer access.

1.3. Failure of the Rationalist Project: Modernist Epistemic Blindness

A central pillar of this article is the critique of Enlightenment rationalism as it operates within the postcolonial South Asian psyche. The character of Aliya embodies the Westernized ideal: she believes only in what can be measured, medicated, or proven in a laboratory. She views her mother's stories as a threat to Sharmeen's mental health, failing to realize that these stories are actually a form of armor. The father's coma serves as the ultimate symbol of the limitations of this logic. The hospital is the manifestation of modern rationalism, sterile, white, and data-driven yet it is fundamentally powerless. It can describe Amir's biological state, but not the spiritual "knot" that keeps him bound. Haider portrays Aliya's skepticism as a form of "modernist blindness." This aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" in *The Location of Culture* (1994) where the colonized subject adopts the rationalist mask of the colonizer but finds it insufficient to address the deep-rooted "unhomely" realities of their own heritage. Aliya's tragedy is that she has been "educated" out of her own survival instincts.

1.4. Subaltern Epistemologies and the Postcolonial Gothic

The analysis is grounded in the theoretical framework of Subaltern Epistemology, the study of knowledge systems marginalized by dominant Western power. By framing Nani's wisdom as an "epistemology," we move away from the idea that her beliefs are "irrational." Instead, we see them as a different kind of science, one that accounts for the "ghaib" (the unseen). Furthermore, the novel reclaims the Gothic genre. In traditional Western Gothic, the haunted house is a place of terror from which the protagonist must escape. However, in the Postcolonial Gothic, the haunting often represents the return of suppressed histories that must be integrated, not exorcised. In Haider's work, the "jinn" are not merely monsters; they are the objective reality of a world that refused to be simplified by British "reason." To survive this Gothic landscape, one requires "wisdom of zenana", a toolkit for navigating a world where the floorboards might literally swallow you whole.

1.5. The "Watcher" and the Inheritance of "Sight"

The relationship between Nani and Sharmeen represents a Matrilineal Succession. In a patriarchal society, inheritance is typically measured in property or surnames. In this novel, the inheritance is Sight. Nani identifies Sharmeen's vivid imagination not as a childhood whim, but as a sensory organ. This reframes the feminine trait of imagination

as a technical skill for survival. Sara Ahmed (2004), in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* explores that the way we perceive and feel our environment is a form of knowledge that shapes our reality. In the “zenana”, storytelling is the technology that Nani passes down, a way to map the dangers of the parasitic “banyan tree” and the intentions of spirits like Jugnu. Sharmeen’s journey is not about growing up in the Western sense of becoming more rational; it is about awakening to her matrilineal duties as a “watcher”.

1.6. The Ethics of the Firefly

Ultimately, this research argues that *A Firefly in the Dark* is a manifesto for the reclamation of indigenous, female-led wisdom. The novel concludes not with a triumph of modern medicine, but with the vindication of the “unseen.” The “Firefly” in the title serves as a perfect metaphor: it does not illuminate the entire forest with the harsh light of a hospital bulb, but it provides just enough flickering light to see the next step. The research gap addressed here is the common dismissal of the domestic sphere as intellectually void. By centering the “zenana”, Haider provides a framework where the irrational becomes the only rational way to survive a haunted postcolonial world. As Sharmeen moves forward, she does so not as a victim of her fears but as a practitioner of a profound and protective reality, proving that the wisdom passed down in the quiet corners of the home is the only light capable of surviving the storms of modernity.

1.7. The Architecture of Fear: The Domestic Gothic

While the introduction established the “zenana” as a site of power, we must look more closely at the Gothic nature of the house itself. In *A Firefly in the Dark*, the house is not a passive setting; it is a sentient participant in the family’s trauma. Haider utilizes the “Uncanny” a concept famously explored by Sigmund Freud as “das Unheimliche” to show how the familiar domestic space becomes strange. The most potent symbol of this is the “banyan tree”. In rationalist botany, it is merely a plant; in wisdom of the “zenana”, it is a “parasite.” Haider writes of it as a “cancer” that thrives on the “carcass” of the “gulmohar.” This is a masterstroke of Gothic imagery that serves a dual purpose: it represents the supernatural encroachment of the “jinn”, but it also symbolizes the way suppressed ancestral histories (the roots) eventually break through the surface of modern “paved” lives. When the ceiling of the house collapses, killing Nani, it is the ultimate literalization of the “heaviness” of the unseen world. Rationalism, which Aliya uses to “stucco over” the cracks in her family’s history, cannot hold up the weight of a neglected spiritual reality.

1.8. The Linguistic Divide: “Begumati Zaban” vs. Colonial English

A significant, often overlooked aspect of "wisdom of zenana" is its linguistic character. In the novel, Nani's speech is saturated with a specific flavor of Urdu/Persianate folklore that stands in stark contrast to the sterile, efficient English of the medical professionals and Aliya's modern social circle. The use of Divine Names like "Ya-Khaliq" (The Creator) during the recitation of the "silver tasbeeh" acts as a linguistic shield. This is what scholars call "performative utterance" the idea that words do not just describe reality, but actively shape it. By naming the "jinn" and invoking the names of God, Nani is utilizing a "Sacred Technology." Aliya, conversely, is linguistically impoverished; her vocabulary is limited to the symptoms of a coma or the side effects of antidepressants. This study suggests that the subversion of rationalist thought begins with a return to the indigenous tongue, the language of the "zenana", which possesses the nouns and verbs necessary to fight a battle that English-medium rationalism cannot even name.

1.9. Sociopolitical Critique: The Fragility of the Pakistani Bourgeoisie

The novel serves as a scathing critique of the contemporary Pakistani middle class. Amir and Aliya represent a generation that has "arrived" at modernity. They live in a world of cam scanners, hospitals, and social protocols. However, Haider demonstrates that this modernity is incredibly thin. When the patriarch (Amir) falls, the entire structure of their "rational" life collapses. This exposes the research gap in how we view the Pakistani bourgeoisie: they are often portrayed as either purely secular or purely religious, but Haider shows them as "liminal." They are caught in a "no-man's-land" where they have forgotten the old protections (the Zenana wisdom) but haven't found security in the new systems (Western medicine). Aliya's descent into a medication-induced fog is a metaphor for a class that is "numb" to its own cultural heritage. Nani's "watcher" status is therefore a call to wakefulness, a demand that the modern Pakistani subject stop sleeping through the haunting of their own history.

1.10. Jugnu and the Ethics of Coexistence

The character of Jugnu (the Jinn) provides a crucial philosophical breakthrough in the novel. Unlike Western horror where the "demon" must be banished, "wisdom of zenana" advocates for Coexistence. Jugnu is not a "monster" in the traditional sense; he is a being of free will who explains that "good" and "evil" are choices. This subverts the binary logic of rationalism, which seeks to categorize things as "real" or "imaginary," "safe" or "dangerous." Jugnu's presence as a firefly, a small, flickering light reinforces the idea that truth is not a blinding, totalizing sun, but a series of small, intermittent revelations. By befriending Jugnu, Sharmeen is not succumbing to madness; she is entering into a "pact." This echoes the historical Sufi traditions of South Asia, where human and spirit

worlds are seen as overlapping circles rather than separate entities. The “zenana” is the only space where such a pact can be negotiated, as it is the only space that respects the agency of the “Other.”

1.11. The “Silver Tasbeeh” as a Methodology of Resistance

If the “banyan tree” is the symbol of the encroaching dark, the “silver tasbeeh” is the instrument of light. Within the study’s framework of subaltern epistemology, the “tasbeeh” is not a magic wand; it is a mnemonic device. It represents the discipline required to maintain one’s mental and spiritual boundaries. Nani’s insistence that Sharmeen use the beads is an act of pedagogy; she is teaching a child how to focus her “sight.” In a world of digital distractions and pharmaceutical numbing, the rhythmic repetition of the “tasbeeh” represents a return to the slow knowledge of the ancestors. It is a subversion of the fast-paced, disposable logic of modern life. The objects found within the “zenana” (beads, trunks of old clothes, scents) are anchors that prevent the protagonist from being swept away by the rationalist storm which has already claimed her mother’s agency.

2. Literature Review

Shazaf Fatima Haider’s *A Firefly in the Dark* (2023) positions the novel as a critical intersection of the traditional bildungsroman and the postcolonial Gothic. Critical reception highlights the work’s ability to transition from a seemingly lighthearted affair or innocent tale into a dark and terrible exploration of local mythology that resonates with the oral storytelling traditions of South Asia. This narrative shift underscores the domestic sphere’s transition from a site of colonial observation to a primary location of intellectual and spiritual sovereignty. By synthesizing scholarly frameworks including Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s concept of “epistemicide” and Ruby Lal’s historical reclamation of the “zenana” this section explores how Haider’s work validates “wisdom of zenana” as a legitimate, protective methodology that succeeds where modern rationalist logic fails. In a review of *A Firefly in the Dark*, Aiman Javed (2018) characterizes the work as an engaging and imaginative bildungsroman that skillfully weaves reality with local mythology. The narrative follows twelve-year-old Sharmeen, who moves in with her maternal grandmother (Nani) following her father’s car accident and her mother Aliya’s descent into severe depression. He highlights the strength of the narrative voices, particularly Sharmeen’s embodiment of vulnerability and resilience, alongside the “witty and profound” guardian jinn, Jugnu. While the novel explores deep thematic connections between local and foreign mythologies and challenges the binary categories of good and evil, Javed also notes complex character dynamics, such as Nani’s condescending

treatment of her servant Aziz. Despite critiques regarding the book's short length and the rapid introduction of folklore that may overwhelm readers unfamiliar with South Asian storytelling, he ultimately recommends the novel as an original and necessary local alternative to Western children's classics. In another review, T. Akhtar (2019) describes *A Firefly in the Dark* as a "suitably spooked" experience that subverts the expectations of a typical lighthearted children's book. The novel moves away from Hollywood-style tropes to tap into a deeply localized "horror of your childhood," bringing to life traditional tales of "the woman with turned feet" and spectral window-scratching. The narrative follows nearly thirteen-year-old Sharmeen as she navigates a "battleground" between her mother's skepticism and her grandmother's "dark and twisted" stories, eventually discovering that these myths have a terrifying basis in reality. While he praises the writing for its gifted blend of humor and darkness, he also admits to a personal struggle with the text, noting that the characters and stories were so "close to home" that they challenged the reviewer's personal faith and prejudices. Nudrat Kamal (2018) describes this novel as a "luminous coming-of-age" story that skillfully utilizes local myths and jinn folklore to create a world that is both familiar and fresh for Pakistani readers. She particularly praises the "lush language" that mimics oral storytelling traditions and the deft balance of suspense, horror, and humor, specifically noting the character of Jugnu as the most entertaining highlight of the book. Beyond its fantastical elements, the novel's significant contribution to the sparse landscape of Pakistani young adult (YA) fiction lies in its frank, age-appropriate treatment of menstruation, which demystifies a natural process and links it to the protagonist's emerging sense of agency. Maham Zee (2018) describes the novel as restoring faith in Pakistani literature, praising its originality and cultural resonance. The narrative follows twelve-year-old Sharmeen, who moves into her grandmother's home after her father falls into a coma, only to find that her Nani's terrifying tales of jinn and ancestral pacts are beginning to manifest in reality. As the plot shifts from an innocent tale to a dark struggle for survival against malevolent forces, Sharmeen must rely on her own summoned jinn, Jugnu, to uncover family secrets and protect her declining mother. While the reviewer praises the simple, effortless writing and strong character development, the reviewer remains "in flux" regarding the book's target audience, noting that although it appears suitable for children or young adults, its "dark nature" suggests a deeper and more complex appeal. Anosh and Asghar (2024) provide a linguistic and thematic critique Haider's novel. They examine how her work utilizes specific linguistic choices to construct a magical realistic setting, deeply rooted in Pakistani cultural and socioeconomic narratives. The researchers employ a hybrid analytical framework combining Wendy B. Faris's theory of magical realism with Joseph Campbell's theories on heroism and monomyth to evaluate how the novel bridges mythmaking traditions with contemporary storytelling. The study categorizes Haider's linguistic choices into four primary segments:

Enchanted Dreams, Unreal Illusions, Supernatural Realms, and Mysterious Forces. These segments analyze vocabulary related to mythical creatures like the “Janeeree” (she-jinn) and the “Amluq” (jinn-man hybrid), as well as metaphysical elements like “smokeless fire” and “silver prayer beads”. The study highlights how the novel blurs the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, using “dreamlike” and “hallucinatory” language to reveal previously concealed aspects of the world. It emphasizes that Haider creates a “sentient architecture” where the domestic space, particularly trees like the willow and banyan, symbolizes historical and cultural embedment. The authors argue that Haider’s work is a vital contribution to Pakistani children’s and young adult fiction, offering a localized alternative to Western classics by grounding the narrative in South Asian mythology and Islamic cultural influences. The study concludes that *A Firefly in the Dark* serves as an effective means of subverting historical and social narratives, empowering its protagonist, Sharmeen, to challenge social standards through an intricate web of mythological elements

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The primary methodology of this study draws on Foucauldian archaeology, specifically focusing on what Michel Foucault terms “subjugated knowledges.” In the context of *A Firefly in the Dark*, the “wisdom of the zenana” represents a body of knowledge that has been disqualified as inadequate or insufficiently elaborated, what Foucault describes as naive knowledges located low in the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. By analyzing Nani’s protocols as a legitimate “science of the unseen,” this research moves away from the dismissive labeling of folklore as “mumbo-jumbo”. Instead, the “zenana” is repositioned as a vibrant social and political laboratory where influence is brokered through oral traditions and management of “unseen” influences. This framework allows us to see the domestic sphere not as a place of stagnant oppression, but as a site where indigenous histories are preserved against the totalizing “sun of reason”. The research applies Jacques Derrida’s concept of “hauntology” to analyze the sentient architecture of the house. Unlike traditional horror, where ghosts are intruders, hauntology suggests that the past remains a structural presence that demands recognition. In Haider’s work, the “banyan tree” serves as the primary metabolic symbol of this spectral persistence. Described as a “parasite” and a “cancer” (p. 22), the tree represents suppressed ancestral histories that eventually break through the surface of modern “stuccoed” lives. The methodology involves a close reading of these structural collapses, such as the falling ceiling, interpreting them not as signs of physical decay but as the literalization of the “heaviness” of a neglected spiritual reality that Aliya’s modernism can no longer sustain. This study also utilizes Edward Said’s concept of

"imaginative geographies" to map the boundary between the "seen" and "unseen" worlds established in the novel's opening. The "zenana" functions as a sovereign territory where women maintain indigenous folklore and a specific linguistic culture that the "mardana" has surrendered to colonial bureaucracy. The linguistic methodology contrasts Nani's Persianate folklore with the sterile, efficient English of the medical professionals. Nani's use of Divine Names like "Ya-Khaliq" during the recitation of the "silver tasbeeh" acts as a "sacred technology". These are analyzed as "performative utterances," words that do not merely describe reality but actively shape and defend it. Aliya's "modernist blindness" is thus revealed as a form of linguistic impoverishment, where the loss of indigenous nouns and verbs leaves subject defenseless in the face of metaphysical crisis.

Finally, the analysis examines the character of Jugnu through the lens of "ethical coexistence." Unlike Western Gothic traditions that focus on the "uncanny" as a source of terror to be banished, "wisdom of zenana" advocates for a "pact" between human and spirit worlds. This relationship reflects South Asian Sufi traditions where these realms are seen as "overlapping circles" rather than separate entities. By befriending Jugnu, the protagonist enters what postcolonial theory describes as a "third space", a liminal area where the marginalized "wisdom of zenana" emerges as a legitimate, functional science of the unseen. The "Firefly" light becomes the ultimate metaphor for this epistemology: a localized, resilient truth that provides just enough flickering light to see the next step in a world where the totalizing sun of Western rationalism has set.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Architecture of the Unseen: The Metabolic House and the Freudian Uncanny

The domestic setting in Haider's *A Firefly in the Dark* functions as a sentient participant in the family's trauma rather than a passive backdrop. Utilizing Sigmund Freud's concept of the "uncanny" (das Unheimliche), Haider transforms the "home" from a site of safety into a site of metabolic invasion, where familiar objects become terrifyingly alien. This is most evident in the description of the "banyan tree", which Nani characterizes as a predatory force, calling it a "parasite" and a "cancer" that "starve and trap their host within" (p. 22). The postcolonial "monster" is actually a suppressed history returning to reclaim space. The "banyan's roots" are not just wood and fiber; they are "the smallest of roots, selfish and strong" that "creep and curl around, grasping, holding, growing" (p. 22). Sharmeen observes that at night, these roots "look like men trying to push against each other, struggling to enter my bedroom" (p. 22). This imagery evokes Freud's "medusa's head," symbolizing a terrifying, castrating power that threatens the patriarchal order of the

home. When the ceiling collapses and kills Nani, the house effectively "purges" the guardian of the "zenana", leaving the space open for the "vile one." This signifies that the "stucco" of Aliya's rationalism (p. 18) could no longer bear the weight of the unseen reality. We must analyze this collapse through Alison Rudd's lens of the Postcolonial Gothic, where the instability of the landscape reflects the instability of a national identity, caught between secularity and the supernatural. The roots, described in a Freudian sense, represent the "return of the repressed" ancestral guilt and suppressed secrets that possess their own agency and vitality. They are "selfish" because they prioritize their own growth over the structural integrity of the home, suggesting that indigenous histories cannot be permanently stuccoes over by modern rationalism. These roots signify that the past is not a static memory but a growing entity that metabolizes the present.

The use of active verbs underscores the "hallucinatory magical realism," in which mental images of fear transform into tangible physical occurrences that threaten the characters' reality. This imagery evokes the "uncanny" where the private refuge of the child is breached by the monstrous. It symbolizes an intrusive patriarchal power that threatens the sovereign female space of the "zenana", reflecting a terrifying force that modern rationalism is unable to categorize or repel. Aliya's reliance on the physical world is merely a thin layer of plaster, a pseudo-realistic illusion that proves too fragile to withstand the crushing weight of ancient metaphysical forces. It highlights the "epistemicide" occurring when a culture adopts a rationalist mask that is fundamentally insufficient for its own environment. The ceiling does not just fall because of rot; it falls because the modern structure was "hollowed out by a history it refused to acknowledge". This relates to the postcolonial struggle of building a national and personal identity on a foundation of unaddressed trauma and neglected indigenous truths.

4.2. Epistemicide and the Language of the Clinic: The Great Linguistic War

A central conflict in the text is the "linguistic war" between Aliya and Nani, which serves as a micro-enactment of the broader post-colonial struggle for identity. Aliya dismisses Nani's warnings as "mumbo-jumbo" (p. 36). This is a primary example of Boaventura de Sousa Santos's "epistemicide," the systematic destruction of indigenous knowledge systems by dominant Western rationalism. By labeling grandmother's knowledge as nonsense, Aliya participates in the destruction of the very "cultural laboratory" that ensures her family's survival. Aliya refers to her mother's specialized knowledge as mere "superstition" (p. 35). By doing so, she adopts the role of an internal colonizer, delegitimizing her own heritage in favor of imported Westernized ideals. This "modernist blindness" leaves the family speechless and paralyzed in the face of the supernatural. Aliya's reliance on the hospital to wake her husband, Amir, is portrayed as

a tragic irony. The hospital can monitor his "vital signs" (p. 35), but it is blind to the spiritual "knot" keeping him in a coma. This illustrates the inadequacy of clinical language, which offers data and monitoring but lacks the vocabulary to provide true healing or to understand metaphysical realities. To the doctors, Amir is a "neurological shutdown" (p. 36). This clinical reductionism fails to see the human as a spiritual being, focusing only on biological failures. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) suggests, the marginalized (or in this case, the spiritual) voice cannot be heard within these rigid, colonizing structures. Aliya believes stories are "only on paper" (p. 9). This reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," where the colonized subject adopts the "blindness" of the colonizer to their own reality. Aliya mimics the Western rationalist so thoroughly that she becomes unable to perceive the "ghaib" (unseen) even when it manifests within her own home. Nani sees Amir as a man "locked in perpetual anticipation" (p. 17). Her diagnosis is emotional and metaphysical, proving that "wisdom of zenana" reaches deeper into the human condition than the medical gaze of modern science. This "slow knowledge" provides a framework for understanding trauma that the clinical world cannot replicate. Nani recites "Ya-Khaliq" (The Creator) using the "silver tasbeeh" (p. 23). This is a "performative utterance", words that actively shape and defend reality rather than just describing it. It is a "sacred technology" deployed from the "zenana" to combat the "epistemicide" of the modern world. The "silver tasbeeh" (p. 23) functions as an instrument of light and spiritual protection. It is an indigenous technology used for psychological warfare, allowing the "watcher" to maintain focus against the "smoke and mirrors" of the supernatural realm. Nani's ancient idioms provide a methodology for action while modern English leaves one speechless. Her Persianate and Urdu-inflected folklore provides Sharmeen with a necessary "vocabulary of defense" to name and fight the malevolent forces. Reclaiming these indigenous terms is a decolonial act that restores agency to the subaltern voice. Aliya's vocabulary is limited to "symptoms of a coma" or "side effects of antidepressants". She represents the loss of "cultural armor" that occurs when a society abandons its linguistic and spiritual roots for the sterile, objective language of clinical rationalism.

4.3. The Pedagogy of the "Watcher": Imagination as a Sensory Organ

Nani's most significant contribution is her redefinition of the imagination, shifting it from a "childhood whim" to a "technical skill" for survival, a "sight" that must be trained. Nani tells Sharmeen that imagination "is what most attracts Jinn to humans" (p. 42). Imagination is framed here as an active, "metabolic" connection to another realm rather than a passive or "fictional" fantasy. It is a state of consciousness where reality is transformed into something alluring and mystical. Sharmeen is trained to be a "watcher" (p. 28). This role is a form of Matrilineal Succession, where power and authority are inherited through "sight" and spiritual knowledge rather than material property. It confirms

that the domestic space is a repository of specialized knowledge essential for family preservation. Nani's instructions are precise: "Do not look at the face of the shadow. Look at the space behind it" (p. 52). This teaches Sharmeen to look at the "voids" and shadows that rationalism chooses to ignore, identifying the "arcane and enigmatic" forces at play. This is a lesson in Subaltern Epistemology, learning to see what the colonizer's logic has made invisible. Sharmeen realizes that "white hair is the mark of the watcher" (p. 46). This links aging and domesticity to intellectual and spiritual authority rather than decline. It empowers the female matriarch as a guardian of an "enduring monument" of memory. Imagination is redefined as a "sight" that must be trained for protection. Sara Ahmed (2004) explores, that the way we perceive our environment is a valid form of knowledge that shapes our survival. The novel validates the subjective experience as a form of Subaltern Epistemology.

This pedagogy serves to counter the "epistemicide" prevalent in postcolonial urban centers. Nani's role as the educator of the "watcher" establishes a curriculum that bypasses the secular education of the Pakistani elite, which often prioritizes Western classics over local mythologies. By teaching Sharmeen to interact with the jinn Jugnu, Nani provides a "linguistic critique" of the rational world. Jugnu, so named because of his firefly form, explains that his light only seeks to "light the next step in the dark" (p. 150). This metaphor implies that indigenous knowledge does not seek total dominance but rather resilient survival within the shadows of a haunted landscape. Sharmeen's final stance refusing to blink in the face of the darkness, "She looked at the darkness and did not blink" (p. 152), confirms that the matrilineal line is the only force capable of maintaining light in a disenchanted world. The "zenana" is not merely a physical location but a "fortress of ancient wisdom" that preserves the "monomyth" of the culture when external structures fail. This final act of agency suggests that reclaiming indigenous vocabularies and matrilineal "sight" enables the subaltern to become the author of their own reality, bridging the temporal gap between the remarkable and the commonplace. This final expansion explores the culmination of Sharmeen's journey, the ethical implications of the "jinn-human" pact, and the novel's role in resisting postcolonial epistemicide, bringing the total discussion toward its definitive academic peak.

The final maturation of Sharmeen as a "watcher" represents a radical shift in the power dynamics of the Pakistani domestic sphere. In a rationalist, post-Enlightenment world, imagination is frequently dismissed as fictional or a symptom of childhood daydreaming. However, Nani instructs Sharmeen that imagination "is what most attracts jinn to humans" (p. 42). This reframes the imaginative faculty not as a retreat from reality, but as a metabolic connection to a deeper, supernatural realm that exists outside the normal range of human experience. By training Sharmeen to look at the "voids" that rationalism

ignores, Nani embodies a curriculum of the spirit that stands in direct opposition to the “modernist blindness” of the secular elite. This inheritance is the primary matrilineal succession of the novel, confirming that the domestic space is a repository of slow knowledge that modern science, with its focus on “neurological shutdowns,” cannot replicate.

The training Sharmeen undergoes in Nani’s ancestral bungalow is essentially a lesson in subaltern epistemology. Nani’s precise instruction “Do not look at the face of the shadow. Look at the space behind it” (p. 52), teaches Sharmeen to perceive the “hallucinatory” and “dreamy” aspects of existence where mental images of fear, transform into actual physical occurrences. This pedagogy suggests that the rational world is in fact the most vulnerable because it lacks the “vocabulary of defense” required to navigate the shadows it refuses to see. Sharmeen’s realization that “white hair is the mark of the watcher” (p. 46) further ties this spiritual authority to the physical demographics of the matriarch, positioning the aging female body as a “fortress of ancient wisdom” rather than a site of decline.

4.4. Coexistence over Exorcism: The Ethics of Jugnu and the Monomyth

The character of Jugnu represents the novel’s most profound philosophical departure from Western Gothic traditions. While Western paradigms often demand that the supernatural be “exorcised” or banished to restore a secular order, Haider’s *Zenana* Gothic advocates for an Ethics of Coexistence. Jugnu explains to Sharmeen that “Good and evil are not characteristics... they are choices” (p. 45), effectively shattering the binary logic of colonial rationalism that seeks to simplify the world into “safe” and “dangerous” categories. Jugnu is portrayed as a being of free will, telling Sharmeen, “Jinn are a part of the invisible realm... we all coexist” (p. 4). This relationship reflects South Asian Sufi traditions where the human and spirit worlds are seen as overlapping circles rather than separate, hostile entities.

By befriending Jugnu, Sharmeen enters into a pact that enables her to navigate the unreal illusions and mysterious forces that have invaded her home. The “Firefly” light (p. 150) serves as a localized, humble truth; it does not seek to illuminate the whole world with the blinding sun of reason but only to “light the next step in the dark” (p. 150). This flickering illumination is a metaphor for indigenous knowledge; it is resilient and practical, providing a method of survival within the shadows of a haunted postcolonial landscape. This ethics is the ultimate subversion of colonial logic, which seeks to cleanse anything it cannot categorize or control.

4.5. Failure of the “Mardana” and the Final Witness

The character of Aziz, the servant, and the comatose state of the father, Amir, illustrate the catastrophic failure of the "mardana" world when it is stripped of spiritual oversight. Aziz thrives in the blind spots of modernity, manipulating Aliya's rationalism because he knows she will dismiss his malevolent presence as feminine "hysteria" or "superstition". Aziz's command to Sharmeen to "stop quoting [Nani] all the time" (p. 80) is an attempt to enforce a "colonial mimicry" that would leave the child as defenseless and blind as her mother. This demonstrates that the secular world, represented by the "stucco" of Aliya's rationalism (p. 18), is fundamentally hollowed out by a history it refused to acknowledge.

The final confrontation with the "vile one" marks Sharmeen's complete acceptance of her matrilineal inheritance. Faced with the darkness, "She looked at the darkness and did not blink" (p. 152). This refusal to blink is the ultimate act of agency, denying the darkness its power to terrify and affirming the watcher's sight. It confirms that the subaltern voice does not need to be "exorcised" from the modern world; rather, it must be integrated as a necessary technology for survival. The novel concludes by proving that identifying with local myths such as the "Janeeree" or "Jugnu" is a vital act of reclaiming an identity that Western children's classics cannot provide. The "zenana", therefore, is not a place of chores but a sovereign archive of memory, ensuring that even in a world of concrete and clinical data, the "unseen" remains a protected and understood reality.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this research marks a pivotal transition in understanding the role of the domestic sphere in contemporary South Asian literature, moving beyond the reductive tropes of confinement to recognize the Zenana as a site of intellectual and spiritual sovereignty. By examining Shazaf Fatima Haider's *A Firefly in the Dark* through the lenses of postcolonial feminism, subaltern epistemology, and the Gothic, Wisdom of Zenana has been uncovered that serves as a sophisticated method for survival in an increasingly disenchanted world. The character of Aliya provides a stark cautionary tale through her Modernist Blindness, illustrating the cognitive costs of mimicking the colonizer's logic so thoroughly that one loses the indigenous vocabulary required to describe their own spiritual reality. In contrast, Nani's pedagogy, which reframes the imagination as a functional Sight, emerges as the novel's most significant inheritance. This Matrilineal Succession proves that the domestic space is a repository of Slow Knowledge: a form of wisdom that modern science, with its clinical focus on "neurological shutdowns" and "vital signs", is fundamentally unable to replicate. The firefly light, or Jugnu, remains an ultimate metaphor for this epistemology: It is a durable, situated form of knowledge

that does not seek to illuminate the whole world but instead guides the next step in darkness when the totalizing sun of Western reason has faded.

5.1. Suggestions for Academic and Cultural Reclamation

To preserve the cognitive sovereignty of indigenous knowledge, several structural shifts can be suggested:

De-marginalizing Domesticity in Literature: Academic curricula in South Asian studies must transition away from viewing domesticity through the lens of "Kitchen Sink Realism". Instead, spaces like the "Zenana" in Haider's work should be treated as "Sovereign Archives" where cultural and metaphysical histories are actively preserved.

Linguistic Preservation as Defense: There is a critical need to document and preserve the specific dialects and folklore associated with "Begumati Zaban." As demonstrated in the text, these linguistic forms provide "performative utterances" that function as essential psychological and spiritual defense mechanisms against cultural erasure.

Integrating "Sight" into Education: Modern education in Pakistan often replicates the "Mimicry", as seen in Aliya. Philosophical training for students should integrate local metaphysics and indigenous narratives to help balance global modernism with a localized "Sight" that acknowledges the "unseen" as a valid part of the lived experience.

Reclaiming Local Mythology: As noted by reviewers, children and teenagers should complement their reading of Western classics such as Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling with local myths. This enables them to recognize themselves in their own cultural narratives, fostering a sense of identity grounded in South Asian storytelling traditions.

5.2. Future Recommendations for Research

This study identifies several unexplored avenues for further scholarly inquiry into the intersections of folklore and modernity:

The Eco-Gothic and the Urban Landscape: Future studies should expand on the Ecological Gothic found in the analysis of the "banyan tree". Researchers can explore how South Asian writers use local flora and fauna to represent the "return of the suppressed," perhaps comparing Haider's metabolic landscapes with those in the works of Uzma Aslam Khan or Arundhati Roy.

Masculinity and the Comatose State: A significant gap exists in analyzing why the Mardana (male/public) world is frequently portrayed as "asleep" or incapacitated in

the face of supernatural threats in Pakistani fiction. Investigating these Crises of Masculinity could reveal deeper insights into the gendered nature of spiritual warfare.

The Ethics of Coexistence in Digital Spaces: Researchers can explore whether traditional Sacred Technologies, such as the “Tasbeeh” as a “mnemonic device”, can be adapted to survive the digital distractions of the contemporary world.

Linguistic Archetypes in Magical Realism: Following the framework of Anosh and Asghar (2024), further research is needed to categorize linguistic segments such as “Enchanted Dreams” and “Unreal Illusions” across a broader range of Pakistani Anglophone fiction.

The study ultimately concludes that darkness remains a constant companion to light. The wisdom of the zenana suggests that being modern does not require the “exorcism” of history; rather, it requires witnessing it. Sharmeen’s final stance, refusing to blink in the face of darkness, is the ultimate act of agency. It shows that reclaiming indigenous vocabularies and matrilineal “sight” enables the subaltern to become the author of their own reality. The zenana endures as a monument to the power of memory, ensuring that even in a world of concrete and clinical data, a firefly’s light continues to flicker.

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