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DEVIANT LANGUAGE: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF *RANI* IN *WHAT REMAINS AFTER A FIRE* (2025) BY KANZA JAVED

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Abstract
This study explores the use of deviant language in Kanza Javed's short story Rani *from the collection* What Remains After a Fire *(2025). The story reconstructs memory, trauma, and domestic life through fragmented syntax, unconventional narrative shifts, and lexical deviations. By applying stylistic analysis, the study examines how deviations in grammar, lexis, and narrative structure create psychological depth and reflect social, cultural, and familial dynamics. The analysis shows that Javed's deviant language foregrounds characters' subjectivities, particularly Daddi's fragmented consciousness and Annie's perspective, while encoding themes of memory, grief, and intergenerational relationships.*

Keywords: deviant language, stylistics, short story, Kanza Javed, narrative fragmentation, memory, grief

Background of the Study
Kanza Javed's *Rani* has received critical attention for its intricate portrayal of familial relationships, memory, and social norms in contemporary Pakistani society. Scholars such as Simpson (2004) and Leech & Short (2007) emphasize that deviant language unconventional grammar, lexical innovation, or syntactic irregularity can be used to foreground character psychology and thematic concerns in fiction. In Pakistani literature, few studies have applied systematic stylistic frameworks to contemporary short stories, especially those highlighting deviance as a literary strategy. This study situates Javed's *Rani* within this gap, analyzing how linguistic deviations convey emotion, identity, and social commentary.

Statement of the Problem
While *Rani* is widely appreciated for its narrative and thematic richness, there is limited scholarly work examining the stylistic mechanisms through which Javed constructs psychological depth and cultural meaning. Specifically, the ways in which deviant language fragmented sentences, unusual syntactic structures, and lexical shifts functions to portray memory, grief, and social hierarchies have not been systematically analyzed. This study addresses this lacuna by applying stylistic theory to uncover the linguistic strategies underpinning the story's narrative effect.

Methodology
This research employs a **qualitative stylistic approach**. Primary data comprises the text of *Rani* in *What Remains After a Fire* (2025). The study identifies linguistic deviations (syntactic, morphological, lexical) in the story and then categorizes deviations as either foregrounding (drawing attention to meaning) or backgrounding (normalizing discourse).. It also analyzes their effects on characterization, narrative perspective, and thematic construction. Contextual interpretation of deviance in relation to memory, grief, and familial dynamics is also done.

Theoretical Framework
The study draws on stylistic theory with a focus on deviant language, following Leech & Short (2007) and Simpson (2004). Deviant language refers to deviations from standard linguistic norms in grammar, lexis, and narrative style, which serve to foreground meaning and evoke cognitive or emotional responses in the reader. In this framework:
Grammatical deviance includes sentence fragments, non-standard syntax, and disrupted punctuation.
Lexical deviance includes neologisms, archaisms, or contextually marked word choices.
Narrative deviance includes shifts in perspective, temporal disruption, or fragmented sequences.

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Stylistic Analysis of Deviant Language

In stylistics, deviant language refers to instances where a text deliberately departs from standard linguistic norms grammatical, lexical or narrative to foreground meaning and evoke interpretive effects (Leech & Short, 2007). In this extract from *Rani*, Kanza Javed (2025) employs multiple forms of deviance to represent psychological fragmentation, social tension, and emotional intensity.

1. Grammatical Deviance

Grammatical deviance includes sentence fragments, non-standard syntax, and disrupted punctuation that break from conventional English structures, drawing attention to emotional or cognitive states (Simpson, 2004).

Sentence fragments and elliptical structures –

"She sat there for a moment, hollowed out."

This fragment lacks a fully realized clause but foregrounds Daddi's psychological emptiness by isolating the phrase as a statement of internal state rather than external action (Leech & Short, 2007,).

Disrupted punctuation and capitalization –

"I DREW THE HEAVY CURTAINS…"

Unusual capitalization creates an abrupt dramatic emphasis, disrupting normal orthography to signal emotional intensity and the narrator's psychological focus (Simpson, 2004).

Broken and repetitive speech patterns

"Shhh... Shhh...", "Accha, accha"

The repetition and ellipsis mimic disordered speech, deviating from grammatical norms; this foregrounds Daddi's cognitive disruption due to Alzheimer's and grief (Leech & Short, 2007)

These grammatical deviations do not merely break rules; they **encode emotional texture and internal states**. The fragmented syntax and disrupted punctuation create a readerly experience of disorientation and empathy, mirroring the psychological fragmentation of characters.

2. Lexical Deviance

Lexical deviation occurs when unusual or contextually striking words are used—neologisms, archaisms, or socially marked terms—to create symbolic or emotional effect (Leech & Short, 2007)

Contextually marked vocabulary

"Behaya aurat. She's a shameless woman."

The use of culturally specific, morally loaded terms deviates from neutral English description. Here, lexical deviance foregrounds social judgment and cultural norms about female behavior (Leech & Short, 2007)

Metaphorical expressions deviating from literal language

"interwoven in the fabric, burning in the fire, braided into the silver of her hair."

These metaphors are lexical departures from normal narrative description. They blur sensory modes and create a surreal, symbolic representation of grief and memory, intensifying emotional resonance (Simpson, 2004, pp. 20-22).

Emotionally loaded lexical choices

"frail body finally surrendering…", *"cloak of invincibility."*

These phrases diverge from straightforward diction. Their deviancy foregrounds the contrast between resilience and vulnerability, enhancing thematic depth (Leech & Short, 2007)

Lexical deviance intensifies the narrative's emotional weight. The author's choices are not random; they foreground moral tension, cultural judgment, and the erosion of identity making the ordinary extraordinary.

3. Narrative Deviance

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Narrative deviance involves disruptions of linear chronology, shifts in perspective, or fragmented sequences that diverge from conventional storytelling techniques (Simpson, 2004).

Temporal disruption and flashback

The narrative oscillates between the present event (funeral) and childhood memories (*"I WAS NINE. May had just begun…"*). This non-linear sequencing deviates from standard chronology, representing how memory intrudes upon the present and disrupts narrative coherence (Leech & Short, 2007)

Shifts in perspective

The narration alternates between external description and interior states of characters (the narrator, Daddi, community). These shifts deviate from a single consistent point of view, reflecting psychological complexity and multiple subjective realities (Simpson, 2004).

Fragmented narrative sequences

Episodes such as bathing Daddi, confrontations with Nargis, and Daddi's hallucinations are presented with minimal transitional cues. This fragmented presentation foregrounds emotional immediacy over narrative cohesion (Leech & Short, 2007).

Narrative deviance in the text conveys the **messiness of memory and experience**. Rather than presenting a coherent, ordered story, the extract reflects how trauma, grief, and memory operate non-linear, intrusive, and emotionally charged.

Discussion

Applying the stylistic theory of deviant language to this passage reveals that Javed's linguistic strategies are deliberate tools for meaning making, not casual departures from conventional English. Grammatical deviance creates rhythm and foregrounds emotion; lexical deviance infuses narrative with moral and cultural salience; and narrative deviance structures the story around memory and subjectivity rather than chronological order. Together, these deviations:

Represent the psycho-emotional states of characters (especially Daddi and the narrator), making internal experience perceptible to the reader.

Encode cultural and social values, such as judgments about divorce, widowhood, and gender roles.

Break narrative expectations to reflect the disruptive power of grief and memory.

Thus, instead of seeing deviation as error, stylistic theory shows that these linguistic deviations *foreground* meaning making language itself a site of emotional and ideological engagement (Leech & Short, 2007; Simpson, 2004).

Findings

Deviant language in *Rani* mirrors characters' psychological states and cognitive fragmentation. Syntactic and lexical deviations foreground themes of grief, social expectation, and intergenerational tension. Narrative deviance enhances the reader's immersion into characters' subjectivity, reinforcing cultural and emotional realism. The stylistic strategies establish a literary aesthetic that blends realism with symbolic and psychological depth.

Conclusion

Kanza Javed's *Rani* demonstrates how deviant language can operate as a powerful stylistic tool to convey memory, grief, and social commentary. Through fragmented syntax, lexical innovation, and narrative shifts, the story foregrounds character psychology while encoding cultural and familial values. The study contributes to Pakistani literary linguistics by highlighting how stylistic deviance functions not merely as a narrative device but as a mechanism for constructing layered meaning and emotional engagement.

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RANI

MY GRANDMOTHER KEPT CALLING HER DEAD HUSBAND to bed. On the night of the funeral, Daddi looked for my grandfather in the folds of her velvet blanket, the hollows of her cheeks, and the flickering flames in the gas heater. She sang ballads as if Dadda was lost somewhere: forgotten in a forest, interwoven in the fabric, burning in the fire, braided into the silver of her hair. The family had just buried him that morning, and Daddi did not remember anything about the ordeal. No one in the village of Bismillahpur expected my grandfather to live for as long as he did. He had survived the 1947 partition, the 1965 war, a bankruptcy, and two heart attacks. He was eighty-nine when he died, his frail body finally surrendering to heart attack number three. After the second, my parents and I had begun to believe that he had achieved some kind of immortality. He had cheated God. He was enshrouded in a cloak of invincibility. Dadda was to remain forever. The news of the death rattled everyone but Daddi. She slept next to his dead body for two nights, until a maid returning from her weekend off discovered them. She called my parents in Lahore. It was a three-hour drive to the village. I drove while my parents sobbed. I had just moved back into the family house after my divorce. My decision to end my five-year marriage had hit my parents hard, fracturing something deep inside them. They believed that marriages, no matter how bad, no matter how cursed, should not die an early, unnatural death. They should be endured. Pushed through. Dealt with. When Dadda died, they sniveled and sniffled in their seats. Some things in life are inevitable, like the death of an old man who had already outlived all his siblings and cousins. It was a natural thing to have happened. The time had come. But to leave a husband who was still living and walk out of my in-laws' house, childless and penniless, was an unnatural thing. I had committed a terrible crime. The weight of the hasty funeral fell on my shoulders. My father removed himself from the task, as he was mourning something else—both his sons, my older brothers, had remained in Michigan and offered condolences over the telephone. They could not make travel arrangements on such short notice. So the village of Bismillahpur watched a thirty-fouryear-old divorced woman orchestrate her dead grandfather's funeral: order clean white linen to wrap the body in and arrange for the funeral prayers. Summon men to bathe the body and dig the grave. Remind mourners that the widow had Alzheimer's and could not utter anything with certainty except the words "Accha, accha." Yes, yes. I DREW THE HEAVY CURTAINS in the bedroom so the light could meet my grandmother's aging, gray eyes. She sat up from her charpoy and looked at the sunlight filtering through the barred window. The light illuminated only her neck and baby blue sweater—the rest of her body remained immersed in shadows. She sat there for a moment, hollowed out. Two weeks had passed since the burial. My parents returned to Lahore so that my father could resume his work as an assistant professor of economics at Government College. I was told to stay back for another two weeks in Bismillahpur and pack Daddi's belongings, clean and lock the house, pay the servants their fair dues, and oversee the work being done by the farmers who worked on my grandparents' farmlands. Wheat, peas, and cabbage had to be sown. Rice had already been harvested. I did not volunteer for this. My mother believed that since my divorce, I had too much idle time on my hands. I did not have a husband to cook for or a baby to nurse or a job to go to. I did nothing but sit in the winter sunshine of our Lahore home and read books. I refused to meet new men or atone for the sin of losing a husband by grieving and praying before God. When relatives came to inquire about what had happened in my marriage, I retreated to my room and stayed

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there. No woman in the family had ever gotten a divorce before. Since there was no redemption in my new, disgraceful, unrepentant way of living, I was tasked with packing up Daddi's life so she could move into our house in Lahore. I did not mind my punishment. I did not mind being shameless. I did not mourn for anything. Not my punishment. Not my failed marriage. And not my dead grandfather. As I was turning off the heater in the bedroom, Daddi flung out her foot from the blanket and dangled it in the air. She sat there for a while, her eyes vacant. I gently took her arm and walked her out of the bedroom to the bathroom. I sat on a small plastic stool and waited for her to finish. As she was sitting on the white commode, she mumbled something about Sakina, the maid. I told her she was making us breakfast. Daddi said she wanted dinner. I said Sakina was making us dinner, then. I washed her with a Muslim shower and lifted her from the commode, only to realize that the excrement had trickled down her leg, staining her off-white shalwar. I filled two buckets with hot water, warmed the freezing bathroom with an electric heater, and removed Daddi's dirty clothes. IN THE WEEKS FOLLOWING THE FUNERAL, we developed a simple, everyday routine. It fell into predictable patterns. After breakfast, Daddi, Sakina, and I sat in the sunny courtyard. Sakina chopped vegetables and cleaned rice and lentils for lunch. I read the Urdu newspaper and stories from women's magazines out loud to the ladies. I do not know if Daddi understood what I read, but she nodded as I exaggerated the dialogue. "Accha, accha," she said. I told myself that she was following along. On days when Daddi remembered knitting, she knitted. On days when she remembered that I was Quratulain, Annie, her granddaughter, she massaged my scalp with almond or mustard oil. Our excitement arrived in the form of guests who stopped by for a cup of chai and gossip. It was usually a prying neighbor or a farmer offering condolences. Since Daddi was not the same, such visits were rare. Shabana, the next-door neighbor, remained a faithful guest. Once, she brought her six-year-old daughter Fatimah with her. As Fatimah dunked a Gala biscuit in her mother's chai, Daddi called her for a massage: "Come here, Annie. Come here, little Annie." Fatimah looked at me, confused, and I gently reminded Daddi that I was Annie, not the six-year-old. Daddi looked confused but tried to hide it. The only thing that really varied in our routine was Sakina's selection of lentils and vegetables, my choice of story, or Daddi's mind. After Daddi retired for her afternoon nap, I took on the important things. With Sakina's help, I slowly packed my grandparent's clothes in suitcases and trunks. I took down the curtains from the drawing and dining rooms; discarded unwanted items; called my friend in Lahore and spoke of small, inconsequential things that wove through our days. Her new hair color. Her complacent father-in-law. Her forgetful mother-in-law. An orange stray cat who stole a leg piece from the kitchen counter. I took long baths and rubbed the sticky mustard oil out of my hair, watching as it washed down the drain. ONE NIGHT AS SAKINA WAS PREPARING to head back home after serving dinner, Daddi sprang out of her bed and began dressing in front of the mirror. She said she was getting ready for her wedding to Ghulam Awais—Dadda. For a while, Sakina and I did not interfere, but instead let Daddi play, let her entertain the delusion. We watched her apply black kohl under her eyes and braid a green and gold parranda into her hair. Her fingers, weathered and skilled, deftly twisted the golden threads. We had gotten used to her vague ramblings, the paranoia, the hallucinations and memory jumps. It was a sad disease, but it was a disease. It had to be dealt with kindly. Daddi existed in fragments, in vapors. I was unable to fully capture her in those weeks as I could when I was a child: crawling into her lap, fitting my little body in her arms, running my fingers through her wet hair after she bathed. The old Daddi carried the smell of red Lifebuoy soap, sharp and antiseptic, and almond hair oil, sweet and nutty. Her fingernails were always stained yellow from henna. I knew that when she was smiling and looking down at me, she was looking down only at me. She could see nothing and no one else in the world. She was only mine. The new Daddi spoke tirelessly to her dead mother on the telephone. She sang to the swirling flames in

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the fire. She scolded the news anchor on television, told me I was poisoning her tea. And she referred to Sakina as "Rani." Rani. I hated hearing that name. It upset me. I ignored Daddi whenever she said it. The three of us were sitting together in Daddi's room. Sakina chuckled as Daddi draped a shawl around her head and became a bride. Suddenly, her chuckling pained me. "Get out of the room! Go back home!" I cried, prompting the young maid to leap out of her chair and run out the door. That night as I removed the shawl from Daddi's head and prepared her for bed, she beckoned me closer and whispered, "Annie, Annie, where is the baby?" Silence fell as I looked down at her dismayed face. There were black kohl specks on her wrinkled cheek. I dipped the corner of my shawl in a glass of water on her end table and gently erased the stains. If Daddi had uttered the name "Rani" in front of my parents or Shabana or Sakina, they would have laughed it off, marked it as one of her many hallucinations. But I knew who she was remembering. I turned off the lights in the bedroom and lulled my grandmother to sleep with a "Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." Daddi did not lull, though. All through the night, she kept asking for the baby. THE NEXT AFTERNOON, our routine continued as normal, for the most part. Shabana was visiting again, sipping chai and stitching a loose button on one of my sweaters. Sakina sat on a stool near us and kneaded dough for the rotis. But Daddi asked again for Rani, would not stop asking, her haunting chant reverberating in my thoughts. "Who is this Rani?" asked Shabana, looking at me. "I don't know," I lied, and waved off the question. "Was it a maid? Is it a cousin?" "I don't know," I echoed, and urged Sakina to quickly make a roti for the yellow lentils she had prepared. I watched Shabana's long fingers, chipped with red nail polish, move up and down with the thread and the needle, and as I did, an old memory began to unspool in my mind. Daddi was not always like this. Haggard. Strewn and scattered, like a tree in a storm. Like a fire dying in the hearth. She had been a magnificent woman. Grand. Vital to the family. Sakina stopped kneading and stood up. She straightened the back of her long kameez and then stooped to lift the steel dish with the dough. "You know, Quratulain baji," she said, "Daddi told me months ago that she saw a woman coming down the stairs from the barsati." I looked at the stairs that led to the barsati, the room on the roof. "She said the woman had blood on her shalwar," Sakina laughed. "Bakwas," I said. "That's rubbish." Sakina shrugged. Shabana brought the thread to her mouth and snapped it with her teeth. The loose button was fixed. "When my grandfather began to lose his memory," she said, "he started seeing strange things, too. He said the trees in the village were walking. His house spoke to him all night. My mother used to say that a witch put a curse on him when he was a boy for torturing all the cats and dogs in the village. It was a punishment for his crime." "That's rubbish," I repeated. "I don't know, Annie Baji, but this is what my mother told me." Shabana stood up and handed me the sweater. "She said we lose our minds because of the bad things we do. They never leave us." Every bone, every pulsing vein in my body wanted to reject Shabana's words about a curse. But I was unable to, because I remembered. I could remember everything from my childhood clearly, could remember that time when I lived with my grandparents. All my adult years, the memories came to me in waves. I had tried to push them away, to make sure they stayed distant, like the cold water of the ocean that bubbles and foams on the shore but never touches your toes. You fear the tides from a distance, careful not to let them sweep you away. But you cannot stop them. I WAS NINE. May had just begun. My father had received a scholarship to complete a PhD at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. My mother went along to help him settle down in an apartment. It was a big move for my parents. Before this, they had never left the country, never lived without a kitchen maid, never lived in a small one-bedroom apartment. My brothers were sent to stay with an uncle in Karachi who had two boys their age, and I was sent to my grandparents in the village. I slowly grew used to my grandparents and their behaviors. Daddi would roam around the big house with a bunch of keys she kept stored in her bra. She asked after all the servants: if the watchman had done his duties

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that night; if the stable boys had fed the cows, hens, and donkey; if the maids had cleaned all the bedrooms and bathrooms. She scheduled her weekly meetings with the farmers and the neighbors. Her shrill, commanding voice and booming laughter echoed in the corridors. Daddi marched here and there, in the open courtyard and in the shadows. Dadda, on the other hand, handled the external affairs: the tenants, the rent, the sowing, harvesting, and selling of wheat, rice, and maize. In the evenings, we sat in the cool courtyard and had tea. The servants' shifts changed at that hour. A watchman named Iftikhar arrived for duty, and a maid named Nargis prepared our dinner and beds. My grandparents had just hired Nargis. She was a young woman, divorced twice. She had been married first at fourteen to a cousin, and then, after he left her, to a cleric with two wives and six daughters. He wanted a son, but she gave him nothing. Nargis was labeled as barren, a cursed woman whose husbands did not want her, and whose family would not accept her back. Dadda had found her wandering through the village one afternoon, knocking at the doors of the big brick houses, asking for a job as a maid. So Nargis became a tenant in my grandparents' barsati. They cut the rent of the upstairs room from her salary. In the mornings, when I was doing my summer homework in the courtyard downstairs, I could see her strolling up on the balcony. She watched over the red chiles left to dry in the sun, the blankets and clothes spread out on different charpoys to kill the musty trunk odor. She cleaned the lentils and the rice for lunch. She fed the animals and massaged Daddi's legs with different oils. Nargis was always sweet to me. She called me guriya, a doll. "Guriya, guriya." She pinched my cheeks when she found me scuttling around the house, playing with Daddi's kohl and rouge. In the afternoons, when my grandparents retired for their naps, I snuck up to the barsati with my Barbie to spend time with Nargis. Nargis played songs on her radio and combed the doll's hair, styling it differently each afternoon. Her fingers worked through Barbie's glistening golden locks. She remarked on the texture and the light color of the doll's hair, how she wished she had hair like that, seemingly unaware of her own —beautiful, thick, and black. I had never seen hair like hers. Hair that spoke to the breeze. Hair that had conversations with monsoons. I had a bowl cut, my mother had blonde streaks in her frizzy brown hair, and my grandmother's head was stained mud-red from years of henna. We could only dream of hair like Nargis's. "Do you have a name for your doll?" she asked me. "Barbie Doll," I replied. "Let's call her Rani," she said. "My father called me Rani when I was your age." So Barbie Doll became a princess. A rani. When Nargis did laundry in the courtyard, she squatted near the water pump with a bucket and soap. Her hair poured like water over her shoulders, and her hips jiggled as she rinsed, wrung, and hung the damp clothes on the line to air-dry. People would look at her as we scampered around the village for groceries and errands. Daddi often asked her to cover her head and bosom with a dupatta because there were men working around the house and it was a shameless thing to do, to try and distract them from work. "Behaya aurat. She's a shameless woman," Daddi said to Dadda one day. He nodded along, but I caught him looking at her. I caught him looking at her often. The maids whispered the same foul things about Nargis. They wondered why both her husbands had left her. What must she have done, besides not producing children? Why did her family not accept her back? But even in the midst of all these whispers, I could only see Nargis's beauty, her hair, her. One night, I was having trouble falling asleep with my Barbie Doll, my rani. Daddi and I shared a bed in the primary bedroom while Dadda slept in a separate room. I watched the whirring fan in the dim glow of the night- light and listened to Daddi's snores. After a while, I climbed down the bed and went up the barsati to see Nargis. Surely she would play with me and my Barbie Doll. There was faint music coming from her radio—I knew she was awake. Halfway up the stairs, I heard movement in her room. Movement, accompanied by muffled cries and whispers. I saw a large shadow on the wall. Someone was coming downstairs. I darted back to the bedroom. The door was ajar: I recognized the figure as it stepped downstairs and into the light. FIVE MONTHS

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PASSED IN THE VILLAGE. I missed the first two months at my school, and upon my parents' orders from across the world, my grandparents enrolled me in English, math, and science tutoring classes in a nearby city. Nargis became a shadow. She only emerged from the barsati at night to do her errands. I watched her silhouette in the kitchen, kneading dough and stirring pots. She began to drape her body in a big shawl. She kept away from me. She would greet me when I ran into her but did not linger as she had before. She spoke no more of dolls and ranis. "Nargis is a bad influence," Daddi began to say. "Play with the other maids. Play with Abida, Parveen, or Shaheen." But Abida, Parveen, and Shaheen did not know how to apply henna designs on my palms like Nargis. They did not hum Bollywood tunes like Nargis. They did not care about playing hide-and-seek like Nargis. They did not have hair like Nargis. I DISCOVERED NARGIS'S SECRET on a weekend Daddi and I were alone in the house. She was standing on a ladder, trying to remove cobwebs from the dining room ceiling. The servants were away attending a wedding, and Daddi had sent Dadda to Karachi several days before to tend to my brothers. His departure was discreet and unceremonious. One night he was having dinner with us, and the next, Daddi packed his bag and sent him off. Suddenly, Daddi slipped from the ladder and hurt her back. She moaned in pain on the floor, and I struggled to lift her writhing body. "Run upstairs and call Nargis!" she pleaded. I frantically ran up the stairs and found Nargis sitting up on her bed, trimming the ends of her hair by candlelight. She did not have a shawl wrapped around her body, just a thin kameez and shalwar. She sat there before me, fully present, fully visible, and for the first time in several weeks, I saw her clearly. Her belly was large, straining, swollen up like a balloon. As I entered the room, she saw me and quickly jumped to her feet, hastily draping a dupatta around her torso. Confused, I asked her why her stomach looked like that. I asked her if she was unwell. She did not answer. She wanted to know why I was in her room. "Daddi wants you downstairs," I said. "She hurt herself." "Let's go then." That weekend, Nargis ceased to be a shadow. She bustled around the house taking care of Daddi, who could do little to nothing in her condition. I tailed Nargis as she went about her chores, trying to get a peek at her protruding belly, though she tried to hide it whenever she saw me. When Daddi caught a glimpse of Nargis's figure in the daylight, she called her names: a loose woman, a prostitute. Her anger and hostility were so fierce that she did not care if I was present or not. She could not contain herself. She wanted the ground to split open and swallow Nargis alive. She wanted her to drown in a well, to be buried in a desert. Away from her. Away from Dadda. Away from me. Away from the village. And away from memory. "I'll send you away. I want you gone from this house," Daddi yelled at her. "Don't send me away, baji, don't send me away," Nargis begged Daddi. "I've no place to go. My family will kill me." We were sitting in the courtyard on low bamboo stools. I was snipping coriander on a steel tray. Nargis was slicing onions and tomatoes for lunch. "I'm not a whore, baji," said Nargis softly. "Ask him. Ask him what happened." Daddi did not respond. She sat resolutely on her charpoy, an angry look clouding her face. "Why don't you ask him?" Nargis repeated. I did not know then who Nargis was speaking about, but my grandmother did. She understood everything. As if she were not injured at all, she darted up from her seat and slapped Nargis hard across her face. The cutting board and the sliced vegetables fell to the ground. I dropped my scissors and rose in fear. I had never seen my grandmother like that, so savage, so mad, so unrecognizably violent. A deep red spread across Nargis's cheek. She placed a hand on the bruise, bowed her head in shame, and began to weep. Daddi did not stop there—she grabbed my fallen scissors and reached for Nargis's braid. "No, no!" Nargis wailed as she struggled to fight back. In the commotion, her hand accidentally hit Daddi on the forehead. "Accha? So you want to hit me now?" Daddi exclaimed. "Daddi, no!" I protested, shuddering. I wanted to move but found I couldn't. The courtyard, the bamboo stools, the charpoy, the vegetables: everything but Daddi disappeared at that moment. I watched her madness, afraid

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that if I moved, she would smack me across my face or shove me across the courtyard. I was afraid that she would hurt me too. Eventually, Nargis stopped struggling and slumped down, defeated. Maybe my grandmother was stronger in every way, or maybe Nargis did not fight hard enough. Maybe she felt she deserved what was happening. It took a while for the blades to work through her thick hair, though the struggle only made Daddi's cuts more ferocious. There was a tense stillness as she worked, broken only by the sharp, deafening sounds of snipping and tearing that filled the courtyard. And then, it was over. Nargis's braid fell to the ground like a dead snake. When she was done, my grandmother threw down the scissors victoriously and they hit the floor with a clank, right next to Nargis's hair. Her beautiful, dead hair. Nargis sat still. Her hand moved slowly towards her neck. Her fingers felt the jagged, rough edges where the braid had been. Nargis looked at me. Her eyes said nothing. Her lips said nothing. And I said nothing in return. I don't know what she expected from a child, if she even expected anything at all, but I gave her nothing because I understood nothing. Why did Daddi do what she did? I wondered. Why did Nargis say what she had said? I waited for Nargis to shriek. She had to shriek. Had to acknowledge, in some way, the horror of what had just happened. A part of me wanted her to rip Daddi apart, to curse Dadda loudly, but she didn't. She remained silent. Imperfect. Reduced to a shadow again. After a few seconds, Nargis wiped her tears, picked up her hair from the floor and tossed it in the trash. The weekend ended. The help returned. Nargis vanished to the barsati once more. ONE NIGHT, I woke up to the sound of someone crying. Like a stray cat wailing in the hallway. I hopped out of bed and followed the desperate sound. It was coming from upstairs. I went up to check and peeked into the barsati. There, Nargis sat on the floor: her hair chopped, her legs wide apart, her face distorted in an expression of grief and pain. A strange woman sat on her knees by her side, shushing her, calming her, wiping sweat from her forehead with a small towel as she screamed. The woman saw me standing by the door and asked me to leave. I did not. I could not. My feet would not move. I was entranced by the scene before me, by Nargis's grunting, by the chaos. The woman asked me to leave again, her words sharp this time. I returned downstairs, bewildered. As I lay in bed, waiting for nothing, I thought I heard another cry. A low cooing. A baby. I paused to listen, willing my heartbeat to quiet. But I could not hear a cry the second time, just Nargis, whimpering softly. I found it hard to fall back asleep, but when I finally did, I dreamt of a child playing with me in the sunny courtyard of our village home. In the early hours of the morning before the servants arrived, I heard chattering outside the bedroom. I recognized the voices, Daddi and Nargis, and scrambled out of bed to peer through the slightly opened door. Nargis held a duffel bag in one hand and a piled-up blanket in the other. She swayed ever so gently as if trying to rock the quiet, unstirring bundle in her arms. As if she were trying to pacify herself. I never saw what was inside that blanket, but whatever it was, it never moved or made a sound. It remained still. When Daddi saw me standing barefoot by the bedroom door, she told me to say goodbye to Nargis, who would be leaving us. I did not cling to Nargis as I said goodbye, as I might have before. Without her hair, she was a different thing. Frail, and small. I never asked why she left. A tonga cart pulled up in front of the house, and Nargis sat down on the bench. As the horse trotted away, I watched Nargis, her eyes downcast. She was like an old photograph, a water stain, a dust of light under an almond tree. SAKINAAND SHABANA LEFT AFTER DINNER. I warmed the bathroom with the electric heater and filled two plastic buckets of water for Daddi's bath. I removed her sweater and kameez and untied her silver hair. I rubbed red soap all over her body. "Quratulain," said my grandmother. I paused with the soap. Water had brought her back to me, flooding the gray matter between the two hemispheres of forgotten time. She remembered everything about me in that hour. She asked me about my health. She asked me about the health of an old friend with whom I had lost touch. She asked me about my husband. "I'm not married anymore, Daddi." "Accha, accha," she said. "That's a

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shame. Where are your children?" "I don't have any." "Hmm." "I couldn't have any." "That's a pity. It's a long, empty life without a child." She then asked me where her own husband was, and I knew I had lost her once more. I rested my hands, which were gently scrubbing her back and arms. I collected myself, squeezed the bottle of Bio Amla shampoo and massaged it into her silver hair. "You don't have to look for him anymore, Daddi," I said. "You don't have to mourn for him. He was not a good man." Daddi stayed very still as I continued bathing and talking to her. "She had nothing. You were a woman. You were not good to her," I said quietly. "We were not good to her." I poured water on her back and washed the soap off. "I could have done something. I could have said something, years ago. I was small, but I did nothing," I said. "And this is how I am living now—with nothing. And this is how you will live now, too." I do not know if my words reached her, but I told myself that they did. Her silence spoke volumes, her stillness revealed the truth. "Accha, accha," she said, finally. She sat on a low stool, naked. I squatted near her, gently scrubbing her back and shoulders as she kept pouring warm water on herself. A cleansing ritual of a kind. An atonement, of a kind. OceanofPDF.com