

ESSAY

Cages of flesh and bone: Deconstructing social hierarchies with ‘THE ZAMINDAR’S GHOST’ AND ‘SHAKCHUNNI’

Ultimately, the supernatural in both novels serves as a desperate language, a means for characters and communities to articulate a trauma too vast and too brutal to be named. The political is not a subplot; it is the very air these characters breathe, thick with the poison of oppression.

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In the mist-covered hills of Ooty and the famine-ravaged villages of Bengal, they speak of ghosts. They whisper of a Zamindar's phantom haunting a grand manor and a shape-shifting shakchunni preying on a crumbling estate. But to listen only to these whispers is to be deceived. For the true horror in Khayaal Patel's *The Zamindar's Ghost* (HarperCollins India, 2023) and Arnab Ray's *Shakchunni* (Hachette India, 2024), it does not lurk in the shadows of the supernatural; instead, it thrives in the broad daylight of social hierarchies. These are not mere ghost stories. They are chilling portraits of the real, breathing monsters we create—the gilded cages of class, the suffocating weight of patriarchy, and the brutal machinery of colonial power. The phantoms are a smokescreen, a folkloric language for a far more terrifying truth: that the most malevolent hauntings are the legacies of injustice etched into the very foundations of society.

In Ooty, the legend of the Zamindar's ghost is a convenient fiction, a collective lie the town tells itself. It is easier to blame a restless spirit for the death of the Zamindar's loyal servant, Rai Bahadur. He is a tragic ghost, a man who sacrificed his family on the altar of loyalty to the Rana family. His life is a lesson in the cost of servitude within a rigid hierarchy, a lesson his son, Tej, the head constable, has learned through a lifetime of neglect. Tej's hollowed-out existence is a living tomb to the human price of maintaining an unjust order. This order, however, is not self-sustaining. It is a tool, crafted by the British Raj. The Zamindars, such as Digvijay Rana and his son Arjun, are not just powerful landlords; they are local elites empowered by the Crown to exploit their own people and maintain control over them. The system's most profound cruelty is forcing the oppressed to participate in their own subjugation. Arjun Rana's torment over leading British troops against his own people is the ultimate colonial trauma—a haunting that no exorcism



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

can dismiss, a ghost that walks in the uniform of the oppressor.

A similar decay oozes in the heart of Shyamapur, the setting of Arnab Ray's *Shakchunni*. Here, the feudal hierarchy is not just a social ladder but a death trap. As the Great Bengal Famine—a man-made catastrophe driven by colonial policy and local greed fueled by materialism—the zamindars of the Banerjee family hoarded grain in their granaries. Their lavishness is a stark, grotesque contrast to the villagers, who scavenge in drains for survival. This oppression is not merely external; it replicates itself within the manor walls. The patriarch rules through a pathetic tyranny, while his sons, Narayanpratap and Rudrapratap, are pitted against each other by their parents, a chilling demonstration of how a system maintains its power by setting the oppressed against one another. The novel poses a distressing question: Who is the true monster? The folkloric

'Shakchunni' spirit that demands occasional offerings, according to the famished villagers or the aristocrats who systematically consume the lives, dignity, and future of an entire population? The supernatural entity is merely a symptom; the disease is the hierarchy itself.

Within these oppressive structures, the lives of women become a brutal battleground where the agency of women is a forbidden fruit and identity is a ghostly, borrowed thing. In Ooty, the patriarchal order is metaphorically enforced by the ever-present rumour of the Zamindar's ghost. Archana Rana is its tragic prisoner. Married into the Rana family in an alliance that swallowed her father's fortune, she is trapped in a gilded cage. In stark defiance stands Sharvani Mehra. She navigates the same patriarchal world not as a victim, but as a rebel, weaponising male desire to carve out a sliver of freedom and influence. Yet,

her defiance comes at a cost—a life of societal judgment and isolation, a price exacted by the very hierarchy she subverts.

Shakchunni takes this theme of female identity and makes it the core of its horror. The very myth of the shakchunni—a female spirit who possesses a bride to steal her life and her home—is a perfect metaphor for a system that erases a woman's identity, making her a mere vessel for male legacy. The young bride, Saudamini, is not a person but a transaction, married to a heartbroken man and valued only for her potential to produce an heir. Her mother-in-law, Bouthakurun, is perhaps the most terrifying character of all—a woman who the patriarchy has so thoroughly consumed that she becomes its most vicious enforcer, ensuring the next generation of women endures the same subjugation. The absolute horror here is not a ghost, but the grotesque, predatory lust of

Raibahadur for his own daughter-in-law.

Ultimately, the supernatural in both novels serves as a desperate language, a means for characters and communities to articulate a trauma too vast and too brutal to be named. The political is not a subplot; it is the very air these characters breathe, thick with the poison of oppression. In *The Zamindar's Ghost*, Tej's absurd obsession with a "Revolutionaries' spy" is a classic case of misdirection, closing his eyes to the corruption brewing within the system he is sworn to protect. Digvijay Rana's ghost can be viewed as the lingering spirit of colonialism itself, a violent, decaying presence that continues to demand sacrifice. In *Shakchunni*, the haunting is directly fueled by the Great Bengal Famine. The crumbling estates, the rising communist ideals among the desperate, and the heavy hand of the British Raj create a pressure cooker of societal collapse. The 'shakchunni' is the folkloric embodiment of this collapse, a scream of anguish given form, a story told to make sense of a world devouring itself.

To read *The Zamindar's Ghost* and *Shakchunni* as simple ghost stories is to miss their profound, beating, and broken hearts. They are historical critiques dressed in the chilling costume of folklore. They force us to look past the ghosts in the window and into the darkness of our own histories, to recognise the terrifying reflection staring back. The accurate spirits are not the undead, but the inescapable, man-made structures of social hierarchy—the chains of class, the prisons of gender, and the legacy of colonial power. These are the monsters that outlive their creators, haunting the halls of manors and the hearts of villages long after the bodies have been buried and the ghosts, supposedly, laid to rest.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Blood, desire, and the fight against patriarchy

Review of Kat Dunn's 'Hungerstone' (Manilla Press, 2025)

JONAH KENT RICHARDS

As we approach Halloween this October, I thought a story about the supernatural would be the most appropriate book review choice. *Hungerstone* by queer British fantasy novelist Kat Dunn is a sapphic vampire novel set in 19th century Britain. Inspired by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 vampire novella "Carmilla", Dunn's novel is a story about blood and hunger. While these are typical themes in a vampire novel, Dunn goes beyond their genre association to explore their roles in women's health and the socioeconomic oppression and exploitation of women and working class people. In a genre where women are far too often objectified, Dunn transforms the fall to vampirism into a form of self actualisation and emancipation.

The novel's narrator, Lady Lenore Crowther, is the 30-year-old wife of cutlery industrialist Henry Crowther and the ultimate self-made woman. At 12 years old, she survived a tragic carriage accident that killed her parents and left her under the cloistered tutelage of her sole relative, Aunt Daphne. She uses her ancient family name to arrange a marriage into the wealthy up-and-coming industrialist Crowther family. Henry and Lenore move from London to the Nethershaw estate in Derbyshire where Lenore now finds herself to be the mistress of a great house. It is the culmination of a lifetime of hard work and sacrifice, a position for which many women in her class would kill for. Despite Lenore's undeniable

social success, her marriage to Henry is neither fruitful nor happy. They had failed to produce any children, and Henry had long ago abandoned their marriage bed. He only offers her a chaste kiss or polite compliment as an occasional scant offering of affection. Lenore suffers from loneliness and an unknown physical ailment which she self-medicates with laudanum and pastilles.

The vampire, a woman named Carmilla Kernestein, first appears to Lenore in what may or may not have been an erotic dream in her London home. Lenore encounters Carmilla for the first time in the real world when Lenore and Henry stumble upon her during a carriage ride to their Nethershaw estate. Lenore immediately recognises Carmilla as the woman from her dreams. But despite her reservations, Victorian social etiquette demands she and Henry provide Carmilla hospitality until she recovers.

The relationship between Lenore and Carmilla culminates in a passionate love scene between the two women. While some readers might dismiss it as a gratuitous attempt by the author to titillate her readers, I would argue the scene feels like the natural peak to the characters' relationship arc.

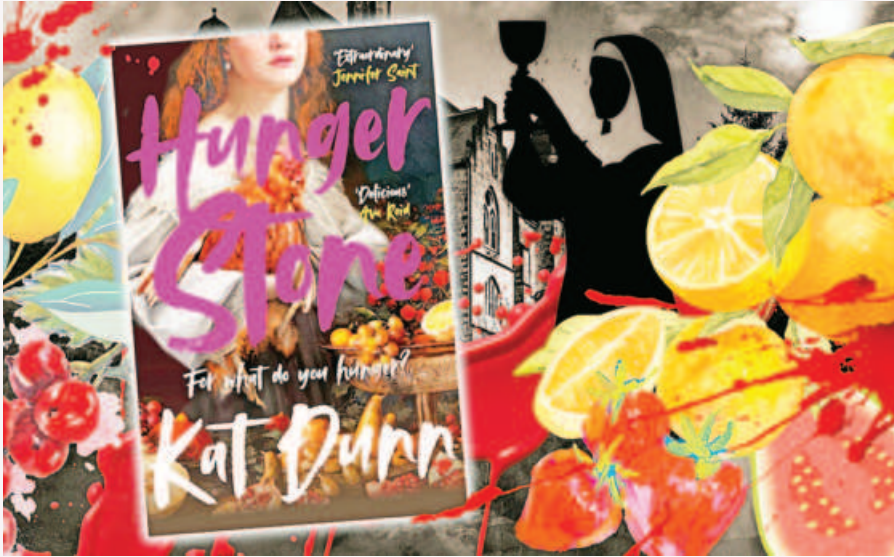


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Carmilla is an Aphrodite-like figure whose presence reignites a long-repressed desire in Lenore. Lenore frequently catches herself staring longingly at Carmilla's body. Beyond sparking her libido, Carmilla provides Lenore with a companionship that she had been sorely lacking. Carmilla's presence allows Lenore to confide those secrets that she dares not share with Henry or even her best friend Cora, and Lenore finally gets to question the way Henry treats her. "What do you want?" is the question that Carmilla repeatedly asks Lenore.

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Carmilla culminates in a passionate love scene between the two women. While some readers might dismiss it as a gratuitous attempt by the author to titillate her readers, I would argue the scene feels like the natural peak to the characters' relationship arc. While the scene is passionate, it is tastefully portrayed in a way that speaks to an organic love between the two women.

Typically, in vampire novels, women are enslaved by vampires into objects of food and desire. Yet Dunn turns Carmilla's vampiric seduction of Lenore from an act of enslavement into an act of emancipation.

She wants. She sees when other people attempt to exploit her, and she is willing to fight back. The Lenore at the end of the novel is self-actualised in a way her previous self couldn't even dream of being.

However, Dunn's scope extends beyond the romance between Lenore and Carmilla; Henry's cutlery making factory has been failing to compensate their workers and their families who were injured or killed on the job. Lenore is horrified to learn that the privileged lifestyle she has come to enjoy as Henry's wife has been financed on the blood of working class people in her husband's factory. She appears to see the workers stuck in the same patriarchal capitalist system that has trapped her in a loveless marriage.

If I had to critique any element of the novel, I would have liked to have learned more about Carmilla. Where did she come from? How did she become a vampire? What initially drew her to Lenore? I understand that much of Carmilla's appeal stems from her mysterious nature, but it would have been fascinating to learn more about the human woman behind the vampire.

In the end, I strongly recommend Dunn's *Hungerstone*. The story represents a fascinating queer reappropriation of the vampire genre into one of sapphic emancipation and self actualisation in the face of patriarchal exploitation.

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