

**Linking the *Ghayb* and the Speculative in Islamicate Arcane Traditions Through
a Critical Analysis of the Selected Speculative Fiction**

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degree of MS in English Literature to the Department of English, Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the entanglement of the unseen (*ghayb*) with contemporary speculative fiction, arguing that Islamicate arcane traditions, historically under-represented within theology and literature, are emerging as significant narrative tropes that contest the predominant position of Judeo-Christian arcane frameworks in global contemporary speculative fiction. In doing so, it analysis G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012), Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013), and P. Djèlí Clark's *A Master of Djinn* (2021) as narrative laboratories where Qur'anic eschatology, Islamic numerology, Sufi allegory, occult sciences, and arcane cosmologies morph into speculative instruments of resistance, reorientation, and renewal. This research examines '*ilm al-ghayb* (knowledge of the unseen) as both a theological construct and a speculative device, arguing that it facilitates a reconfiguration of the literary domain beyond Western rationalist frameworks. Utilising Islamic theology, the anthropology of religion, and esoteric studies, it challenges the relegation of Islamicate arcana to superstition, instead re-establishing them as epistemological frameworks with contemporary and futuristic potential. The novels analysed illustrate the defiance of hidden knowledges to imperial epistemologies, the interplay of esoteric practices such as *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation), *ḥaqīqa* (ultimate truth), and alchemy with speculative motifs, and the critique of modernity, empire, and class through djinn cosmologies and mystical orders. Ultimately, this research study sets forth that Islamicate speculative fiction not only contests Judeo-Christian narrative dominance but also establishes a pluralistic canon that reclaims the unseen as a sacred, resistant, and empowering motif, opening avenues for the reimagining of global contemporary speculative fiction.

Keywords: *Ghayb, Speculative Fiction, Islamicate Arcana, Theology, Judeo-Christian Arcane, Occult Sciences*

DEDICATION

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and Merciful.

This work is dedicated with deepest love and gratitude to my beloved parents. To my dear father, who has always been there for me, from the first steps of my childhood to the long nights of study and struggle. His unwavering support has been for me what Allah calls “a strong pillar” (Qur’an 28:35), a source of stability that I could rely on. And to my dear mother, whose own dream of higher education remained unfulfilled, yet who turned her desire into a bright legacy by educating me and my siblings. She planted the seeds of knowledge and faith in us and lived the truth of “light upon light” (Qur’an 24:35) so that her aspirations might bloom through us. Her prayers, said softly at night, have been like rivers of *barakah* flowing under every success. They own any greatness that this work may have because I am just the vessel for their sacrifices, love, and duas. May Allah (SWT) wrap them in His mercy, grant them a long life full of *barakah*, and reward them the eternal gardens where rivers flow.

DECLARATION

I, **Muhammad Danyal Khan**, Registration Number **743-FLL/MSENG/F22**, do solemnly declare that the thesis entitled “*Linking the Ghayb and the Speculative in Islamicate Arcane Traditions Through a Critical Analysis of the Selected Speculative Fiction*” is the result of my independent research. This research study has been conducted under the supervision of **Dr. Asma Mansoor** and is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in English Literature.

I also affirm that this work has not been submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree or qualification at this or any other institution of higher learning. I also undertake and declare that the work done for this thesis will not be used in the future to get any other degree from this or any other university or institute. In line with academic norms, all sources that were used to write this thesis have been properly credited.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
DEDICATION	ii
DECLARATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Chapter 1	1
Exploring Islamicate Arcane Traditions in Contemporary Speculative Fiction: An Introduction	1
1.1 Unveiling Islamicate Arcana: A Glimpse of Recondite Elements in the Selected Texts	5
1.2 Research Objectives	6
1.3 Research Questions	7
1.4 Significance	7
1.5 Tentative Chapter Division.....	7
Chapter 2	9
Enchanting Realms: Islamicate Arcana and Literature through the Ages	9
2.1 Shifting Paradigms: The Rise of Islamic Speculative Fiction	10
2.2 <i>Ghayb</i> as a Concept and Tool: Bridging Reality and the Speculative.....	14
2.3 Redefining Mystical Knowledge: How <i>Ghayb</i> shapes SF Narratives.....	15
2.4 The Unseen in Islamic vs. Judeo-Christian Tradition: A New Arcane Framework	17
2.5 From Comparative Religion to Comparative Literature: Islamicate Perspectives on Arcana	22
Chapter 3	25
Unseen Realities: <i>Ghayb</i> in Contemporary Speculative Fiction	25
3.1 Conceptualizing <i>Ghayb</i> : Philosophical and Theological Roots	26

3.2 <i>Ghayb</i> as Resistance in <i>Alif the Unseen</i>	30
3.3 <i>Ghayb</i> in <i>The Golem and the Jinni</i> : A Hybrid Lens.....	35
3.4 <i>Ghayb</i> as State and Spectacle in <i>A Master of Djinn</i>	46
3.5 Comparative Reflections	54
Chapter 4.....	63
Interweaving Esoteric Threads: Islamic Arcana in Contemporary Speculative Fiction	63
4.1 Mapping Islamic Arcana: Traditions, Symbols, and Practices.....	64
4.2 Arcane Currents in <i>Alif the Unseen</i>	67
4.3 The Esoteric and the Elemental in <i>The Golem and the Jinni</i>	71
4.4 Arcane Orders and Djinn Cosmologies in <i>A Master of Djinn</i>	76
4.5 Synthesis: Islamicate Arcana as Speculative Framework	81
Chapter 5.....	87
Reclaiming the Unseen: Concluding Arguments on Islamicate Arcana as Critical Speculative Practice	87
5.1 Arcane Architectures: Muslim Esotericism as the Framework of Speculative Worlds.....	87
5.2 Veils of the Unseen: The Narrative Permeation of <i>Ghayb</i> in Speculative Fiction	90
5.3 Strategic Esotericism: Moulding the Arcane While Skirting Controversy.....	92
5.4 Contributions of the Study.....	95
5.5 Implications and Future Directions	98
5.6 Concluding Reflections	100
Works Cited.....	103

Chapter 1

Exploring Islamicate Arcane Traditions in Contemporary Speculative Fiction: An Introduction

Global contemporary speculative fiction (henceforth, SF) incorporates various religious stimuli ranging from the Kabbalistic to Christian and Muslim arcane beliefs. One sees a predominance of Judeo-Christian traditions and beliefs influencing contemporary SF. Writers like J. R. R. Tolkien, Dan Brown, and J. K. Rowling, to name a few, draw heavily from Christian occult and esoteric themes in their works of fiction. While Judeo-Christian arcane traditions have harnessed analytical attention, the influence of Islamic arcane traditions on global contemporary SF, such as Islamic numerology, Qur'anic eschatology, astrology, necromancy, occultism, magic, sorcery, alchemy, astrology and divination, requires a closer inspection. Islamic esotericism and occult are the primary subjects of my study as it investigates the concept of Muslim arcane tradition and how it has shaped contemporary SF. It explores its significance in the genre's evolution, and the unacknowledged dimensions of its influence. In order to advance the study of Muslim arcane tradition in the context of contemporary SF, I examine the incorporation of Islamic recondite elements in three novels, that is, *Alif the Unseen* (2012) by G. Willow Wilson, *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013) by Helene Wecker and *A Master of Djinn* (2021) by P. Djèlí Clark. Wilson, who is well-known for writing comics, especially the *Ms. Marvel Series*, draws heavily from her experiences as an American Muslim convert with connections to the Middle East, an influence that permeates her writings. Similarly, Clark effectively incorporates elements of Islamic mythology into his works of fiction, skillfully integrating angels and jinns, a blend deeply influenced by his multicultural background. Additionally, Wecker, a Jewish American SF author, married to a Syrian-American Muslim man, adeptly intertwines Jewish and Islamic mythologies and arcane elements, crafting a narrative that transcends cultural boundaries and showcases her prowess in the realm of SF.

To establish these concepts further in my research, the strongest theoretical support for my argument is the idea of *Ilm al-ghayb*, that is, the hidden, as found in the Holy Quran and pondered upon by scholars, most notably Mark Sedgwick, El-Sayed El-Aswad, Francesca Leoni and Liana Saif. The Holy Quran holds an elevated status when discussing *ghayb* or hidden knowledge. Supplementing my argument is Saif vis-à-vis her references to the theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. In his interpretation of the Holy Quran, known as *Mafatih al-Ghayb* (“*The Keys to the Mysterious*”), Al-Razi acknowledges that “the science of the purification of the interior”, *ilm tasfiyat al-batin*, is a branch of human sciences that seeks “to make manifest the spiritual lights and divine revelations” (21). According to Saif, for Al-Razi, “the scholars of the esoteric”, ‘*ulama’ al-batin*, are the sages/philosophers (*al-hukama*) whose intellect is so advanced they are capable of comprehending what “the scholars of the exoteric” cannot (21). Thus, they are able to perceive the unseen, a dimension of existence upon which the Quran stresses. It clearly states: “This is the book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear God. Those who believe firmly in the unseen (*ghayb*), are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what we have provided for them” (2:2–3). Delving deep into the concept of *ghayb* in his monograph *Keys to al-Ghaib: A Cross-Cultural Study*, El-Aswad posits in his scholarly work that the Muslim perspective on the universe involves the coexistence of “two inseparable worlds”: *Ilam ash-shahadah*, that is, the visible world and *Ilam al-ghayb*, that is, the invisible world of angels and jinns (4). Additionally, there are two types of *ghayb*: the first is the absolute *ghayb*, which pertains to events like the beginning and end of the world, the resurrection, and the essence of souls or spirits. The second is called the relative *ghayb* which is bestowed by God on prophets and esteemed individuals, particularly in regards to prophesying specific matters concerning certain past and future events (4). In a similar vein, Saif mentions Al-Ghazali’s stance who supports *ghayb* by quoting the esotericist Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896): “The scholar may obtain three sciences: the knowledge of the *zahir* (exoteric) which he grants to the people of the

zahir, the knowledge of *batin* (*ilm al-batin*, esotericism) that he may only reveal to its people (*ahl al-batin*, esotericists), and a knowledge that is between him and God Almighty which he reveals to no one” (23). This is the reason why Al-Ghazali states that “whoever says that the *haqiqa* (truth) contradicts the *shari’a* (law) or that the *batin* (esoteric) contradicts the *zahir* (exoteric), it is closer to apostasy (*kufir*) than to faith (*iman*)” (qtd. in Saif 23).

Also pertinent to my argument are Saif and Leoni who both consider the occult sciences as “an integral part of the vibrant Islamicate intellectual and scientific enterprise” (7). Regarding Islamic engagement with other religions, Saif states that its interaction “with Buddhism, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism had an organic influence on Islamic culture and its religious and esoteric practices, and this same political and economic aspiration created channels of entanglement that reached Europe and the US” (12). Saif further affirms that “the Traditionalist conceptualisation of Islamic esotericism was centred on a universalist version of Sufism.... However, due to its existence within the boundaries of Western esotericism, the Traditionalist take was adopted in the representation of Islam within the field” (48). She discusses the term “Islamic Esotericism” and its connection to the West first appeared in the Traditionalist writings of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Henry Corbin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mircea Eliade (12). Similarly, Christopher Partridge states that “the role of the traditionalist is therefore to demonstrate the importance of the esoteric and, in doing so, to show the connected nature of all the various ancient systems of thought (308). In line with this, I argue that the spread of Muslim arcane tradition and mysticism in the West is inspiring writers to incorporate aspects of Islamic esotericism, occult, and mysticism into their works of fiction, which is why, deriving from Muslim arcane tradition, contemporary SF utilises Islamicate recondite concepts to construct and legitimise literary speculations about the future. This is also the reason why Muslim arcane tradition is currently being revived in relation to contemporary SF and that, as a result of its growing popularity in this genre, it is a subject

that can further be investigated more thoroughly.

The selected novels for my research aid me in investigating how global contemporary science fiction has been highly influenced by Muslim arcane traditions and what happens when they mold Islamic arcane traditions. Selecting these different works by writers of varying beliefs and practices helped me highlight how various writers of science fiction are using Islamic Arcana as a package and to formulate its effects on the genre. The writer of *Alif the Unseen* is an American Muslim convert and is married to an Egyptian Muslim. Her protagonist is an Arab-Indian hacker who goes by the online pseudonym Alif. Similarly, Wecker, the author of *The Golem and the Jinni*, is a Jewish writer wed to a Syrian Muslim. The protagonist, Chava, the golem (a mythical creature made of clay in Jewish Kabbalah), originates from Poland, created by a Jewish rabbi in the city of Warsaw before being brought to life and later journeying to America. Lastly, Dexter Gabriel, better known by his pen name Phenderson Djèlí Clark, the author of *A Master of Djinn*, is an American writer. His protagonist, named Fatma el-Sha'arawi, hails from Cairo, Egypt. Selecting such diverse writers, with respect to their varying religious beliefs, aligned with my research study and helped me enrich my analysis by highlighting the various aspects of Judeo-Christian and Islamic Arcana in contemporary science fiction. Expanding upon such a broad base, this study may not only lead to more research in the realm of global contemporary SF but also strengthen the bridge between the esoteric tradition and global contemporary SF in the future.

Highlighting the influence of the former on the latter, this qualitative study examines the confluence of Muslim arcane tradition and global contemporary SF. Engaging with the concept of *Ilm al-Ghaib*, within the Islamic context, the research analyses recondite elements, characters and significant events in *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni* and *A Master of Djinn* through close textual analysis to illumine their connection to Muslim arcana and global contemporary SF. In so doing,

it addresses the dearth of studies that trace the impact of Islamic arcane traditions on global contemporary SF and endeavours to bridge the gap between it and Islamicate arcane traditions.

1.1 Unveiling Islamicate Arcana: A Glimpse of Recondite Elements in the Selected Texts

To investigate these notions, my study of *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni* and *A Master of Djinn* proposes the idea that global contemporary SF has been highly influenced by the Muslim arcane tradition, which, in Islam, is considered as *Ilm al-Ghayb*. Islamic arcane beliefs and practices are blended with global SF, thus depicting the impact of the Islamicate arcane and its hidden knowledge on contemporary SF. For instance, Wilson, in *Alif the Unseen*, blends fantasy with mysterious recondite Islamic beliefs. In the novel, a 23-year-old hacker named Alif defends the rebels, and Islamic fundamentalists against official monitoring in an unknown city during the Arab Spring under an oppressive Middle Eastern government. The story concludes with a significant political upheaval. Using the concept of *ghayb*, Wilson has employed a number of Islamicate recondite elements in the plot. The novel's major jinn characters, Dina and Vikram, are examples of this, as is the existence of a Forbidden Book (*Alf Yeom wa Yeom*) that is evocative of occult rituals as seen in various Islamic arcane traditions. The power of holy words in Islamic mysticism is reflected in the use of Arabic calligraphy as a magical element. The novel presents the 'Silsila of Djinn Magic' which parallels Sufi spiritual lineages or *silsilas*. Moreover, it includes allusions to Qur'anic verses for magical and protective purposes, emphasising their significance in Islamic arcane tradition.

In a similar vein, the novel *The Golem and the Jinni* is a blend of Jewish Kabbala and Islamic esotericism, depicting the power of creation through magic. The story revolves around the slavery of mystical creatures, that is, a Golem called Chava and a Jinn called Ahmad. By the end of the story, they come together, become close, and learn to get along. With respect to narrative of the novel, Wecker skirts controversy by deftly fusing together a variety of Islamic obscure and enigmatic themes to convey

his understanding of *ghayb*. Ahmad, the Jinn, for instance, embodies the lore regarding jinn, such as their origins in smokeless fire and their shape-shifting power. Drawing on Islamic jinn folklore, the story explores the multifaceted social structures and relations among the jinn. Similar to how golems are conceptualised in Jewish and Islamic esotericism, Chava the Golem is brought to life by magical powers. Additional characters in the novel, such as Boutros Arbeely and Rabbi Avram Meyer, with connections to more extensive esoteric practises, also display an expertise in esoteric traditions.

Magical events and supernatural elements can also be traced in *A Master of Djinn* set in a world where magic and technology share space. The protagonist of the novel is an adolescent woman named as Fatma el-Sha'arawi who works for the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments and Supernatural Entities in Cairo. As an agent, at the end of the novel, she prevents the collapse of the universe by uncovering the killer Al-Jahir's evil scheme with the support of her Ministry colleagues and her girlfriend Siti. Intriguingly, Clark incorporates Islamicate esoteric elements and mysterious figures into the story. The narrative, which reflects conventional Islamic ideas, includes a variety of magical artefacts and portrays a complex djinn community. The Mahmal, the Sharif Dervishes, and the mysterious figure Al-Jahiz are significant elements that enhance the plot by referencing Islamic arcane tradition.

1.2 Research Objectives

With the above context in mind, the present study aims to:

1. Investigate how Muslim arcana is instrumental in shaping contemporary SF via the selected novels by Wilson, Wecker and Clark.
2. Examine how the idea of *ghayb* permeates into contemporary SF vis-à-vis *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni* and *A Master of Djinn*.
3. Explore the ways through which Wilson, Wecker and Clark, mold Islamic esotericism while avoiding religious controversy.

1.3 Research Questions

Aligned with my research objectives are the following three research questions:

1. In what manner does Muslim arcana shape contemporary SF by Wilson, Wecker and Clark?
2. How does the concept of *ghayb* permeate into the selected SF?
3. In what ways do the selected SF writers mould Islamic esotericism while skirting controversy in their works?

1.4 Significance

Granting significance to my study its investigation of the relatively unexplored importance of Muslim arcane tradition in contemporary SF. Prior to this, no study has been conducted on this angle in terms of contemporary SF, specifically vis-à-vis *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni* and *A Master of Djinn*. My research deflects attention away from Judeo-Christian arcane traditions and their influence on contemporary SF and foregrounds how Islamicate arcane traditions add to the thematic texture of contemporary SF while configuring the genre's evolution. In mainstreaming Islamic arcana and its recondite features, my research marks the entry of this line of thought in the prevailing debates surrounding contemporary SF.

1.5 Tentative Chapter Division

This dissertation is based on five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction; it will present a brief introduction to the topic, problem statement, research questions and objectives, and the thesis' organization. The second chapter is titled "Enchanting Realms: Islamicate Arcana and Literature through the Ages". It will address the ways the Islamicate esoteric traditions have shaped contemporary SF. The third chapter is titled "Unseen Realities: *ghayb* in Contemporary Speculative Fiction"; it will unpack the concept of *ghayb* and its link with the selected novels. The fourth chapter is titled "Interweaving Esoteric

Threads: Islamic Arcana in Contemporary Speculative Fiction”; it will unravel how the selected writers mold Islamic esoteric elements in the selected texts. The conclusion will be covered in the fifth chapter. It will address the research findings and offer solutions to the research questions.

Chapter 2

Enchanting Realms: Islamicate Arcana and Literature through the Ages

In this chapter, I delve in the debate about the paradigm shift in global contemporary SF genre and the rise of Islamicate SF. In the similar way, I explore the concept of *ghayb* and its modulations as it shifts through religious and literary dimensions. In this regard, I primarily focus upon the ideas of Sedgwick, El-Aswad, Doostdar, Leoni and Saif, since they help me develop my argument, specifically related to Islamicate occult and arcana. The reason behind utilizing the idea of *ghayb* lies in its unique capacity to bridge Islamic metaphysical belief systems with futuristic story telling. Unlike the Judeo-Christian notions of the hidden or otherworldly, *ghayb* is not just a fantastical element; rather, it is a theologically grounded and epistemologically rich concept deeply embedded in the Qur'anic worldview. When placed within SF, *ghayb* provides a non-materialist and faith-inflected rationale of the universe that challenges the mainstream secular-scientific paradigms of genre fiction. In this way, the concept of *ghayb* allows me to theorize SF through an Islamicate hermeneutic, which frames the genre as an arena where revelation, imagination and futurity merge, thereby transcending the philosophical and narrative boundaries of the genre. This also makes my work innovative and uniquely positioned at the nexus of belief and imagination thus offering a fresh Islamicate paradigm that both challenges and expands the boundaries of global genre theory.

This chapter also foregrounds my take on the contemporary SF writers utilizing the Islamicate arcane as a package without acknowledging its due credit. In doing so, it clarifies my views on how the Western connection to Judeo-Christian arcane traditions relates to the genre, supported by relevant theoretical and conceptual support. Also, this chapter investigates the fictional representation of Islamicate recondite elements and theoretical perspectives of various scholars with regard to its

incorporation in the global contemporary SF. To further strengthen my argument, I have cited diverse instances of contemporary SF writers such as Ahmed Saadawi, Ahmed Tawfiq, Basma Abdel Baz, Saladin Ahmed, Brian Aldiss, Ian McDonald, Usman T. Malik, Tahereh Mafi, Shannon A. Chakraborty, Levent Şenyürek, and Dawoud Kringle. Serving as a literature review, this chapter engages with the previous research concerning the global history of Islamicate SF. For this, I have focused on the scholarly works of Rebecca Hankins, Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, Jorg Matthias Determann, and Ahmed A. Khan. With this in mind, this chapter traces the existing debates regarding the influence of Islamicate SF on global contemporary SF and its impact on the genre's evolution. While some previous research has already investigated the subject of Islamic SF and its various dimensions, however the consideration of Islamicate themes and elements utilized by contemporary global SF writers, as well as the ways Islamic SF challenges Judeo-Christian nexus within the genre, remains an unexplored area, a gap which provides my study with the necessary interventionary space.

2.1 Shifting Paradigms: The Rise of Islamic Speculative Fiction

SF, as a genre, has widely been perceived as a Western phenomenon. Despite the fact that a significant portion of some of the best works of Western SF, especially *Dune*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, etc. have extensively absorbed elements from Islamic theology, culture and civilization. According to Hankins, since inception, religion has acted as a double-edged sword within the realm of SF; as a muse as well as a thesis (215). Speaking in the similar context, she states that having a remarkable number of SF writers incorporating Islamicate arcana in their works depicts a widespread reflection of the religion and its followers within their settings, plots and characters of the stories. Such works have challenged the prevailing Western master narrative that has historically disenfranchised non-Western contributions, in addition to reinforcing SF as a global phenomenon. To this, I argue that Islamicate SF needs to be added to the list of SF traditions as a distinct category of SF. Drawing from existing scholarship,

including the works of Aroosa Kanwal, I contend that Islamicate science fiction deserves recognition as a distinct genre of SF.

Historically speaking, the Islamic world has a rich heritage of high fantasy. Inspired by religious stories and texts, fictional stories, with elements that could be described as proto-science fiction, have been produced by Islamicate cultures than any other traditions. Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, interviewed by Diana M. Pho, acknowledges that with the most remarkable ancient works such as *One Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa-Layla)* in the Middle East and *The Adventures of Amir Hamza (Dastan Amir Hamza)* in India and Al-Qazwini's tale titled *Awaj bin Anfaq* shows the extensive history of the intersection between Islam and SF that goes well back into the past. Similarly, some researchers consider Ibn Nafis's 13th century novel *Theologus Autodidactus* as the first work of SF (*Towards a Global History of Islamicate Science Fiction*, Ahmad and Hankins 215).

While approaching history from an Islamic perspective (in the realm of SF), Hankins asserts that the early visions of sci-fi were based on utopias which somehow depicted a belief in a future inspired by technology and science (216). For illustration, authors such as Sadeq Hedayat, a 20th-century Iranian writer, while "reflecting on the loss of traditional society" in his works, notably *Sag-e Velgard (The Stray Dog)* (1942) and *Ab-e Zendegi (The Elixir of Life)* (1944), utilized sci-fi. Begum Ruqqiya Sakhawat Hussein, one of the pioneering Bengali Muslim women writers, wrote the very first feminist work of sci-fi work, *Sultana's Dream* (1905), anywhere in the world. Another Indian Muslim sci-fi writer, Izhar Asar, produced multiple sci-fi novels in the 1950s, such as one of his earliest short stories, *Mashinon ki Baghawat (Rebellion of the Machines)* (1953), shows machines rebelling against humans. Similarly, sci-fi inspired utopias were the visionary sparks from Kemal Ataturk's secular revolution in Turkey. A prime example is Raif Necdet's *Semavi Ihtiras (The Celestial Passion)* (1933), a novel set in a future secular republican Turkey where women have more freedoms than in the West and religions do

not appeal to the people. Anchored in the core ideas of Islamic society and revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt produced its own futuristic utopias. The most notable example of these works is Ahmad Raif's *Al-Bud al-Khamis (The Fifth Dimension)* (1987) which revolves around a group of people who are frustrated by the issues on Earth (injustice and systemic corruption, widening social inequality and moral decay, the collapse of secular ideologies) and take a rocket to Mars, thus finding an alien society ruled by just rulers ruling under a system akin to the moral and legal system of Islam. The utopia in the book is also a reflection of how the Muslim moral-legal tradition, which is based on ideas of justice (*adl*), communal welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), accountability (*ḥisab*), and spiritual unity (*tawḥid*), can be reimagined as a blueprint for a future civilisation. This shows that there is a unified alternative to the broken secular orders that fail to deal with corruption, inequality, and existential despair. Such utopias imagined in the novels are assertive of the fact that Islam and SF have been well connected since their inception, subsequently thriving through time.

Similar to its American counterparts, pulp fiction established itself in the Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey. Initially beginning in the 1970s, Ibne Safi's Imran Series of novels was very popular in Pakistan for an extended period of time. While not adhering strictly to the SF genre, the narratives blended science and fantastic inventions. In Egypt, Nabil Farouk authored a series of Arabic sci-fi novels, *The Future File (Malaf Al Mostakbal)*, over the span of 1984 to 2009. Apart from this, sci-fi has been employed as a means of resistance against colonialism, such as the Nigerian Muslim writer Muhammadu Bello Kagara's sci-fi story *Gandoki* (1940) and the Ethiopian Amharic writer Makonnen Endalkaccaw's sci-fi narrative *Yayne Ababa* is an eminent example of this. The latter blends Islamic theology with cosmic horror in the guise of a microscope; through which, metaphorically, the veil of worldly realities is lifted. Similarly, Yusuf Izaddin Isa, another Egyptian writer, produced a series of radio talks in the 1940s which initially contributed to the popularization of

SF in the Arab world. Urdu's SF traditions can be traced back to works such as Munshi Nadim Sehbai's story *Naqli Rais (Fraudulent Aristocrat)* (1933). A landmark in Central Asian SF literature is the 1980s Russian novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* by the well-known Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov; which, intriguingly, explores the encounter between humans and extraterrestrial beings.

Owing to the occurrence of major global events, especially the failure of the Arab Spring, the Iraq war, the 9/11 incident, and the purported War on Terror, have contributed to the emergence of a new wave of various dark dystopias, such as in Egypt, Ahmed Tawfiq's *Utopia* (2018), Basma Abdel Baz's *The Queue* (2016), and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013). Apart from this, because of the huge contribution and influence of Islamicate SF on the global contemporary SF, writers of varying beliefs and practices incorporate Islamic theological fantasy and culture as a package. A case in point is the contemporary American writers, especially Wilson's *Cairo* (2007), her recent novel *The Bird King* (2019), and Saladin Ahmed's *Throne of the Crescent Moon* (2012) are novels which vividly capture the atrocities and turmoil of war in the Middle East and Europe. The British novelist Brian Aldiss likewise addresses these notions in his novel *H.A.R.M. (Hostile Activities Research Ministry)* (2007), in which a British Muslim, falsely charged with terrorism, makes his way into a parallel world during the ordeal of torture.

Inspired by Islamic cultures and fantasy, Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad and Ahmed A. Khan edited the first anthology of Islamicate sci-fi short stories, *A Mosque Among the Stars* (2008). Similarly, the release of anthologies like *Palestine 100* and *Iraq 100* imagines the futures of these Islamic countries a century into the future, earning significant critical recognition. Because of the extensive contribution of contemporary SF writers and new voices in Islamicate SF on the global level, this domain continues to evolve under new influences.

2.2 *Ghayb* as a Concept and Tool: Bridging Reality and the Speculative

The Islamic universal order, according to Alireza Doostdar, embodies a number of ethereal entities and realms that transcend the physical and perceptible world. They manifest themselves as “angel, jinn, heaven and hell, the throne (*arsh*), news of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) in the form of prophecy and inspiration, so on” (Doostdar 27). As believers in the holy Qur’an, Muslims hold a theological position regarding these entities, as is mentioned in the second chapter, The Cow (*Al Baqarah*), “This is the book; in it is the guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear God. Those who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them” (29). Belief in the *ghayb* informs Muslims’ understanding of reality. It is not a fantasy but a valid form of knowledge. This could be stated in the light of Imam Ghazali’s and Ibn Arabi’s metaphysical ideas that the spiritual realities are not less real rather differently accessed. The concept of *ghayb*, as an unseen reality, has helped subvert contemporary SF literary tropes. It is because of this significant influence of Islamicate arcane traditions, *ghayb* now serves as a conceptual framework to engage with realities beyond empirical science, thus beginning to bridge the gap toward the speculative and futuristic ideas.

In a similar context, with the growing influence of Islamicate traditions, the concept of *ghayb* has opened up novel narrative spaces for contemporary SF writers to imagine extraterrestrial worlds through spiritual epistemologies. For instance, contemporary SF writers (from the Muslim world or decolonial thinkers) are using *ghayb* to subvert the prevailing Western Judeo-Christian notions of SF. Set in near-future Istanbul, the British sci-fi writer, Ian McDonald’s SF novel *The Dervish House* (2010) weaves Sufi-mysticism, nanotechnology and political espionage all the while exploring Islamic concepts of time, fate and spirituality within a hyper-modern setting. Levent Şenyürek, a Turkish SF novelist, reflects on Sufi philosophy where the protagonist delves into mystical reasoning, touching on the notions of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being), dream states and altered consciousness through divine

understanding as a kind of epistemological rupture which grants access to hidden realities (*ghayb*). The Iranian-American young adult fantasy novelist, Tahereh Mafi, in her series *This Woven Kingdom* (2022) reimagines the story of a jinn-heir princess, inspired by Persian mythology and the *Shahnameh*, foregrounding pre-Islamic and Islamic Persianate themes. In the historical fantasy novel *The City of Brass* (2017), set in the 18th-century Cairo and a mythical djinn city as part of *The Daevabad Trilogy*, the American SF writer Shannon A. Chakraborty draws heavily on the Islamic and Middle Eastern arcane mythologies as the characters grapple with hidden histories, divine prophecies and unseen forces rooted in the *ghayb*-centric cosmology of Islamic tradition. Usman T. Malik, the Pakistani-American SF novelist, reflects on a Pakistani-American family returning Karachi and becoming ensnared in the lore of a forgotten jinn family in his novella *The Pauper Prince and the Eucalyptus Jinn* (2015). The narrative delves into generational memory, spiritual inheritance, and metaphysical journeys all grounded in the Qur’anic and folkloric understanding of the unseen. The writings of these authors are the literary examples where the Islamicate unseen or divine forces shape narratives. With such contributions coming from these diverse writer’s position *ghayb* not as irrational but as an imaginative and spiritual entry into speculative spaces, what I refer to as “sacred SF”.

2.3 Redefining Mystical Knowledge: How *Ghayb* shapes SF Narratives

According to Suhr, Islamic theology explicates *al-Ghayb* as “the hidden, the unseen, the invisible” which incorporates the divine face of God, angels, jinn, paradise, hell, the concept of past and future occurring, subsuming the other realities shrouded by visible objects (1). Islamicate theological studies foreground how Muslims’ daily life manifests this invisible domain in dreams, Sufi visions, *nazar* paranoia, and the *barzakh* (the intermediate realm) amidst life and death (Suhr 1). The epistemological friction between *al-shahada* (the visible) and *al-ghayb* (what remains hidden) underpins SF’s entanglement with revealing the veiled realms and pushing the boundaries of human perception.

Ghayb holds a long chain of divine mysteries, jinns, angels, eschatological futures, and unseen

realities. The classic Sufi manuals, such as *Futuh al-Ghayb (Revelations of the Unseen)* by the early Sufi Shaikh Abdul Qadir Gilani embodies seventy-eight treatises charting the ascent through successive spiritual states, each unveiling the hidden. It serves as a proto-portal narrative where each of the stages of the hidden is ascended by the seeker through layers of esoteric insight toward closeness with the divine (al-Jilani). The manual lay stratified stairs of unveiling secret knowledge thus supplying a framework for speculative portals and unveiling plots. In Simon Sorgenfrei's view, Sufism represents Islamic esotericism, where the exoteric Qur'anic expressions serve as a veil for successive layers of wired meanings accessible only to the spiritually initiated (Sorgenfrei 5). Such recurring features reappear in modern contemporary SF where protagonists traverse through techno-metaphysical veils. For instance, the American writer Saladin Ahmed in his novel *Throne of the Crescent Moon* (2012) blends Islamic folklore and mysticism with SF underlining the dichotomy of good and evil in the esoteric realms. Similarly, Jamshed Akhtar, the Indian SF author, in his novel *The Ultimate Revelations* (1996), formulates a hypothesis by bringing together all the divine revelations on earth, thus contemplating that the holy Qur'an embodies hidden future wisdom beneath its layers of meaning. Such narratives fuse religious philosophy with SF to place emphasis on divine instructions.

Hankins and Ahmad argue that Muslim SF authors have revived the hidden-knowledge narrative threads, drawing them out of marginalization and incorporating Islamic cosmologies into global contemporary SF traditions (Hankins & Ahmad 215). Similarly, Jorg Matthias Determann's *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* (2021) ponders on how Muslim thinkers welcomed the contemplation of extraterrestrial life, treating distant worlds as part of the unseen realm while utilizing their expansive lens of the cosmos to probe moral, theological and political dilemmas. For instance, the American SF writer Dawoud Kringle in his novel *A Quantum Hijra* (2013), includes elements like time travel and space travel. The novel merges Islamic Sufi and mystical elements with speculative science

fiction. In effect, the Islamic concepts of the arcane knowledge and the unseen (symbolized by Sufism and Djinn lore) are integrated into a tale of interstellar travel and time travel, offering a narrative blend of Islamic *al-ghayb* epistemology and SF cosmology. My research coincides with this intersectional space by looking at how Islamicate arcana, such as *al-ghayb*, spiritual jurisprudence, and prophetic imagination, resurface in contemporary SF as narrative tools that question the Judeo-Christian SF tradition and reconfigure the way realities are constructed. By analyzing such works, I argue how Islamic epistemology doesn't just decorate the genre but actively reorients its ethical and cosmological axes.

2.4 The Unseen in Islamic vs. Judeo-Christian Tradition: A New Arcane Framework

The concept of *Ima'an bil ghayb* (believe in the unseen) lies at the core of Islamic faith for the fact that belief in invisible realities (God, angels, jinn, life hereafter) is obligatory for a Muslim. Distinct from Western occult traditions, the *ghayb* is not considered as a secret or exotic knowledge, rather an accepted realm of reality. Saif puts this as, “the word *ghayb*... refers to realities such as the world of angels and the afterlife, and these are not esoteric ideas but realities...which all Muslims must believe” (19). Muslims (to some extent) accept that the realm of *ghayb* could be attained. This stands in contrast to Western arcane, which often regards the occult as an unknown craft to be uncovered.

Saif contends that the holy Qur'an is understood to possess layered meanings, an inner (*batin*) and outer (*zahir*) dimensions (2). In Islamic theology, the analogous term *batin* (the inner meaning) refers to the hidden layers of interpretation of the holy Qur'an by mystics (similar to esotericism), yet remains distinct from *ghayb*. This is the reason why the Sufi saints and Shi'a imams emphasize the esoteric modes of spiritual understanding. In Islamic discourse, *batiniyya* can be understood as a native form of “esotericism,” having positive mystical connotations (2). Islamic esotericism (termed as *batiniyya* by Saif) has historically been interwoven with the mainstream religious traditions of Islam,

not a clandestine cult. The idea of *baṭin*, which includes hidden knowledge, layered reality, and metaphysical access, finds deep resonance in the selected novels. The arcane in *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and *A Master of Djinn* is not just fantastical; it is based on Islamicate conceptions about the unseen, symbolic hermeneutics, and spiritual epistemologies that are similar to *baṭin*-oriented thought.

Sedgwick asserts that Islamic and Western esotericism have shared origins and exerted mutual influence, however sociologically they differ: Western esotericism has often been regarded as “rejected knowledge,” while “Islamic esotericism has mostly been close to the mainstream”, occasionally controversial but fundamental to the tradition (Sedgwick 216). He stresses that “the term ‘Western esotericism’ seems to exclude Islam...[yet] Islamic conceptions of esotericism have historically been close to Western ones” (216). However, both are informed by the same prophetic lineages and draws on Hermetic and Neoplatonic ideas. For instance, medieval Persian alchemists, Kabbalists and Sufis all referenced Plato, Hermes and Angelology. Leoni highlights the “debt of Islamic occultism to other traditions – from Greek and Bedouin divination, to Persian and Indian occultist knowledge” (Leoni 12). A number of Muslim scholars translated Ptolemy, contributed to the development of Indian astrology and framed divination in Islamicate traditions. For instance, arcane arts such as geomancy and dream interpretations were traced to prophets (Idris/Enoch and Yusuf /Joseph), emphasizing a “shared prophetic tradition linking Islam to Judaism and Christianity” (12).

Contrarily, the classical Judeo-Christian arcane tradition has become both reductive and overly familiar. Western fantasy and occultism have relied on a fixed and narrow range of tropes: Kabbalistic symbols, angels vs. demons, Solomonic spells and medieval grimoires. These narrative tropes are derived from Christian medieval cosmology and Renaissance Hermeticism. Though rooted in a rich tradition, these motifs frequently manifest themselves as clichés in contemporary storytelling. Critically,

Western esotericism has usually been perceived as “marginal and controversial”, a body of disowned knowledge (Sedgwick, *Is There Such a Thing as Islamic Esotericism* 216). The marginality of this tradition could be traced to the Enlightenment secular turn: institutional Christianity positioned magic as heretical and moved to suppress it further. As Sedgwick and his contemporaries note that scholars long treated “Western esotericism” as a self-contained, Eurocentric field distinct from the Middle East (216). Historically, Western arcane traditions regarded non-European traditions as exotic. Consequently, such perspectives give rise to epistemological biases, wherein representations of pre-Christian paganism and African witchcraft are constructed through a distinctly colonial lens. Similarly, Islamic and other Eastern arcane systems were insufficiently studied and systematically misrepresented. As the Western scholar Antoine Faivre states that “esotericism” was frequently conceptualized through a restrictive Euro-Christian lens (3). According to Saif, Islam is “often the first to be called upon in the problematization of Western esotericism”, however this tradition was marginalized by the framework itself (3). These concerns highlight the limitations inherent in relying exclusively on Judeo-Christian arcane traditions. As Sedgwick argues, juxtaposing “Islamic” vs. “Judeo-Christian” arcane as mutually exclusive reinforces a simplistic and fragile dichotomy (216). In reality, however the Islamic arcane tradition offers an extensive archive of arcane lore that Western fantasy has barely tapped.

In contrast to the Western arcane traditions, the Islamicate arcane world is vast as it includes astrology (*ilm al-nujum*), geomancy (*ilm al-raml*), numerology (*ilm al-a'dad*), alchemy, talisman, dream interpretation, saintly miracles, Qur'anic charms and the philosophical-mystical gnosis (*irfan*). For instance, the Islamicate worldview describes multiple planes of existence: the sensory world (*alam al-shahadah*), the imaginal world (*alam al-mithal*), where souls and spirits reside, and the divine realities. Famous Sufis like Ibn 'Arabi consider the imaginal realm as a bridge between the physical and purely spiritual. These layered cosmologies foster imaginative worlds rich with unseen beings (jinn, qarin,

spirits of saints). Apart from Judeo-Christian angels and demons, the Islamicate arcane tradition conveys a structured cosmology involving ranks among the jinn (from benevolent marids to elemental jinn), angels (such as Gabriel, Israfil) having distinct roles, and a host of spiritual entities (*shaytan*, *ghul*, *kinanah*, *ghulaman*). The discussions about such creatures are so common in Islamicate traditions that every town has a local jinn legend: every dream a divine message. Similarly, the Islamicate esoteric science draws heavily from the holy Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. Most of the occult motifs are associated with Adam or Idris (Enoch) as the first alchemist or astrologer. In Islamic theology, making petition to God, or invoking sacred names (*dhikr*, *ruqyah*) serve as the spiritual communion with God, such as, the concept of the greatest name of Allah (*Ism al-Azam*) – which perfectly answers any prayer – is an esoteric motif. Reciting Qur'anic verses as protective spells and amuletic inscriptions of divine names reflect a well-established spiritual custom. Based on such motifs woven into Islamicate culture, a Muslim fantasy world considers magic not as a heresy rather as a natural law. Lloyd D. Graham highlights the Islamicate occult knowledge that “Islamic talismans contain pious supplications in Arabic to God (or his intercessors) for help and protection...augmented by relevant verses from the holy Qur'an and the invocations that rely on some of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God (*al-asma al-husna*) ...as well as arcane symbols” (Graham 2). Speaking in the same context, a recent Brill volume *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice* (Saif and Leoni, eds.) explores a range of manuscripts and sources on magic, talismans and lettrism etc. It emphasizes on the study of a 10th century Islamili “*Epistle on Magic*” by Ikhwan al-Safa and medieval manuals of astral talismans (Saif 162). This depicts that the pre-modern Islamicate world produced an immense occult and esoteric textual lore, however much of it remains untranslated or investigated in the West.

Drawing on such unique Islamicate arcane themes and narratives, the Islamicate SF has provided the genre with novel frameworks such as basing the magical scenarios on astrological realm as described

in al- Qurtubi's *Ghayat al-Hakim* (the Latin *Picatrix*), or incorporating geometric figures found in Islamicate grimoires as plot symbols. Even if the conventional fantasy has eschewed them, a majority of the mainstream writers have now begun employing the foregoing subject matter. For instance, the Indo-Pakistani and Middle Eastern SF writers have spun Sufi cosmology and jinn mythology in their SF stories, such as Usman T. Malik's novella *The Pauper Prince and the Eucalyptus Jinn* or the contemporary Middle Eastern SF anthologies, which reimagine the Islamicate jinn and spirit worlds beyond orientalist tropes. Even Western authors, especially Ian McDonald (*The Dervish House*), draw on Islamicate culture in their works by incorporating Sufi mysticism, Ottoman history, and Islamic philosophical motifs, utilising elements like dervishes, Islamic art, and esoteric symbols to shape the narrative's cultural and metaphysical landscape. Because of such an enormous flux in the contemporary SF genre, SF is gradually decolonizing its enchantment.

Resultantly, Islamicate arcane traditions offer a rich alternative framework for contemporary SF writers. In contrast to the Kabbalistic Sephiroth (the ten mystical emanations or powers of divine energy in kabbalah), it sets out unique esoteric realms (jinn tribes, saints as magicians, cosmological trees of blessings). This is the reason why many scholarly voices (Sedgwick, Saif, Leoni, El-Aswad) emphasize on Islamicate arcane not just as monolithic or primitive, but as historically dynamic and culturally nuanced. By utilizing the *ghayb*-inspired literary tropes, the contemporary SF writers revive the SF spiritual landscape, exceeding the Judeo-Christian arcane to enter a more globally imaginative SF arena. As a result, with Islamicate arcane on the rise, *ghayb* is shaping the contemporary SF narratives. The concept of *ghayb* challenges and redefines mystical knowledge within contemporary SF by weaving into the narratives Islamic arcane, especially Islamic numerology, Qur'anic eschatology, astrology, necromancy, occultism, magic, sorcery, alchemy, astrology and divination. This reframing contests the dominant Western tropes of the SF genre, proposing alternative frameworks for engaging with futuristic

visions.

2.5 From Comparative Religion to Comparative Literature: Islamicate Perspectives on Arcana

The study of esoteric or arcane themes has developed beyond the realm of comparative religion (focusing on doctrinal parallels) to a broader comparative literature approach that treats mysticism and myth as narrative frameworks. In shedding light on the ways in which Islamicate arcane traditions, such as Sufi doctrine of *simiya* (the esoteric knowledge of symbols and letters) and the theurgic practices specified in the *Sahms al-Ma'arif*, intersect with Judeo-Christian arcane frameworks, specifically Kabbalah, comparative religions and comparative literature provide a rich critical lens for contemporary SF, allowing for stories that reframe magic as both metaphysical and socio-political forces. By defamiliarizing the established Western ontologies, the Islamicate mystical praxis's doctrines like *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) and the ritual linkages of celestial and terrestrial realms transform arcane lore into narrative novums, which resonates with Darko Suvin's cognitive estrangement. On the other hand, Practical Kabbalah's disciplined invocation of heavenly names and amulets indicates how Judeo-Christian arcane negotiates purity and impurity, thus reinforcing comparative analysis of power, authority and resistance in speculative worlds. Scholars of theology and comparative religions, especially Saif, use Marshall Hodgson's concept of the "Islamicate" to decenter Eurocentric genre tropes, revealing how transcultural arcana—from meditative Sufi foresight to jinn-infused cosmologies in *One Thousand and One Nights*—reshape the global contemporary SF ethics and aesthetics (Lawrence). The selected novels for this study explicitly demonstrate this critical framework. In *Alif the Unseen*, Wilson employs jinn lore and Qur'anic codes to weave together Islamic metaphysics, digital mysticism, and political resistance. Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* reimagines Jewish and Arab magical traditions in 19th-century New York, where they are brought to life through cross-cultural exile. In the same way, Clark's *A Master of Djinn* envisions an entirely distinct Cairo bursting with

esoteric knowledge, occult technologies, and Sufi-influenced politics. Complementing this, recent anthologies such as *Islamicates* and interdisciplinary research at centers for magic and esotericism, reveal the Islamicate arcane as a dynamic force in SF genre formation, foregrounding the underrepresented voices and spiritual subversions that both invigorate and reinvent the genre.

Within the Islamicate context, traditions like Sufism, Shi'i *Batiniyya*, and *ilm al-kalam* (theology) provide rich cosmological and metaphysical insights, such as mystical unity (*ta'wid*), hidden knowledge and *ulum al-ghayb* (occult sciences: alchemy, talismans, astrology, lettrism, mysticism, and dream interpretation, etc. Contemporary SF and fantasy writers draw on these facets for speculative worldbuilding, character types and metaphysical elements, resulting in narratives that both converge with and diverge from Western esoteric tropes (Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, etc.). Key instances emerge from both Muslim-majority literatures and from diasporic/Western authors influenced by Islamicate arcana and Sufism. For instance, known for his Sci-Fi Sufism, the artist Saks Afridi's *Space Mosque* project weaves futuristic technology with Islamic mystical imagery (Afridi). In his exhibition text, he describes a Space Mosque that "arrives from the future, granting all humans on Earth one prayer manifested every 24 hours...Prayers become the ultimate currency" (Afridi). Similarly, Saladin Ahmed's short story collection *Engraved on the Eye*, explores Islamic mysticism and folklore including supernatural creatures, Middle Eastern culture and exotic settings. Graphic novels like *Habibi* by Craig Thompson, which uses Qur'anic calligraphy, Islamic mysticism, and geometric art to tell a story set in a post-apocalyptic world, are other examples of how arcane concepts enrich speculative worlds milieus. Within a dystopian framework, the graphic novel becomes a meditation on divine beauty, trauma, and cultural hybridity through the thematic and visual integration of sacred symbols, esoteric parables, and spiritual longing. Building upon the examination of Islamicate arcane traditions in SF, the next chapter turns toward a more focused theological and narrative category: the concept of

ghayb. While chapter 2 investigated the broader theological, historical, cultural and symbolic sources of Islamicate arcana and esotericism, Chapter 3 examines how *ghayb*, which has its roots in Qur'anic ontology and Islamic epistemology, serves as a narrative device and a metaphysical motif in the selected novels. The chapter explains how *ghayb* offers counter-hegemonic imaginaries, challenges predominant epistemologies, and reconfigures speculative tropes through close textual analysis and philosophical underpinnings. Most significantly, the next chapter puts *ghayb* at the centre of the Islamicate arcana, positioning it distinct from and opposing the dominance of Judeo-Christian arcane frameworks. The chapter demonstrates an Islamicate genre of SF that asserts its own theological profundity, narrative logic, and imaginative sovereignty through investigating how each novel expresses *ghayb*.

Chapter 3

Unseen Realities: *Ghayb* in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

This chapter explores how *ghayb*, or the unseen, serves as a narrative tool with roots in Islamicate arcane traditions in the three contemporary SF novels: Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*, Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni*, and Clark's *A Master of Djinn*. I look into how these novels incorporate *ghayb*, which comes from the Qur'an and esoteric Islamicate conception of the hidden, to express resistance, create alternative futuristic epistemologies, and subvert prevailing Judeo-Christian speculative paradigms. In light of this, I investigate how *ghayb* operates in overlapping domains of literature, theology, and identity, manifesting through djinn, mystical texts, esoteric institutions, and unseen forces. In doing so, I contextualise the selected novels in the broader literary and theological discourses of *ilm al-ghayb* and Islamicate occult sciences, such as Qur'anic eschatology, numerology, divination, and alchemy. This approach is significant because, in these texts, *ghayb* is not just a supernatural or mystical force; rather, it is an ideological framework and narrative that carries religious, socio-political critique and SF futuristic reverberation. Through the speculative lens of the invisible, these works of literature provide rich ground for reimagining subject matter like surveillance, technological control, diasporic identity institutional religion, and class in equality.

In addition, I examine how *ghayb* functions differently in each of the three novels based on the generic orientation and cultural context of each work. *The Golem and the Jinni* imagines the *ghayb* through diasporic hybridity and interfaith mysticism in early 20th-century New York, while *Alif the Unseen* reinforces the intersection of modern technological advances and mystical knowledge in a repressive Middle Eastern regime. In contrast, *A Master of Djinn* institutionalises the arcane in a steampunk Cairo, criticising bureaucracy, empire, and identity politics through the unseen. The various ways that *ghayb* has been utilised as a speculative mode; sometimes mystical, sometimes material, but

always strategically and epistemologically charged, are revealed by a comparative reading of these novels.

This chapter thus outlines the way Islamicate unseen realities become crucial structuring tools throughout the three novels, with *ghayb* serving as the central interpretive lens. Using the Qur’anic foundations, current scholarship, and literary analysis, the following sections will investigate *ghayb* as both a concept and a strategy, framing the invisible as a productive and disruptive force in contemporary SF rather than as absence.

3.1 Conceptualizing *Ghayb*: Philosophical and Theological Roots

The concept of *ghayb* is utilized in Islamic thought to refer to the hidden, unseen realities. God honours the righteous as “those who believe in the unseen” (Qur’an 2:3), establishing belief in *ghayb* as the cornerstone of faith. El-Aswad, in his study of *Keys to al-Ghaib: A Cross-Cultural Study*, states that the term “*ghayb*” in classical ontology refers to everything that is hidden from the senses, including the face of God, angels and jinn, future events, divine mysteries, and the afterlife realms of paradise and hell (281). The *shahada*, or the visible world of observed phenomena, is frequently contrasted with it. According to Sedgwick, the word “*ghayb*” occurs 49 times in the Qur’an (25 times with the word “knowledge,” ‘*ilm*’), emphasising that some truths are beyond the realm of empirical knowledge (279). *Ghayb*, which includes those facets of creation “of which knowledge may be had, or may not be had,” is therefore “the opposite of the visible” but still real (280). Importantly, in Islamic epistemology, *ghayb* is a lived category rather than merely an abstract absence; it is a realm of truth that is confirmed by revelation, prophecy, and imagination rather than by empirical evidence.

In contrast to Judeo-Christian tradition, Islamic tradition draws a less strict line between occult phenomena and religious truth. *Ghayb* encompasses entities and powers that may be referred to as supernatural or paranormal in Judeo-Christian arcane traditions, such as angels, jinn, and divine decrees,

but these are firmly part of mainstream Islamic *aqida* (creed). Angels and demons, according to Sedgwick, “belong to religion proper quite as much as the Day of Judgement does” in Islam (280). To put it another way, what after Islamic cosmology is integrated under the single ontology of *ghayb*, Post-Enlightenment Judeo-Christian arcane frameworks might divide into religious vs. occult or natural vs. supernatural categories. Leoni, in her study of *Islamic Art and the Supernatural*, states that the Holy Qur’an itself has been historically treated as a source of protective and esoteric power, legitimized by the Prophet’s instance of utilizing Qur’anic prayers for healing. The distinction between prayer and magic is blurred in such situations; however, believers are convinced that a Qur’anic amulet is effective since the word of Allah embodies *baraka* (divine blessing) when used reverently, not because it manipulates jinn. Islam holds that believing in the unseen is fundamental to the entire Muslim worldview and is neither optional nor peripheral. It is believed that God knows the unseen, and that the holy books and prophets have partially revealed this knowledge to humanity. For instance, the Holy Qur’an discusses the existence of jinn and devils in the most candid way and asserts time and again that only God is fully aware of *ghayb*, while humans only understand what God intends for them to know. Therefore, wearing *ghayb* requires humility and an understanding of the limitations of human reason.

Ghayb can be accessed epistemologically through avenues that go beyond standard, logical reasoning. The prophetic imagination and divine revelation (*wahy*) are the main acceptable paths. Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali and Ibn ‘Arabi, held that the human heart or inner eye is cleansed by faith, it can see the invisible through angelic inspiration, spiritual unveiling (*kashf*), or real dreams. Human “penetration into the *ghayb*” can take two forms, according to Sedgwick: the illegitimate use of sorcery or magic, and the legitimate use of piety (fulfilling religious duties, praying, and remembering God) (280). While acknowledging the effectiveness of such forces, Islamic law and theology generally condemn attempts to manipulate unseen forces (e.g., *sihr*) as exceeding the acceptable boundaries.

However, it can be difficult to distinguish between religious marvel and (il)legal magic.

Imagination and intuition play a great role in conceptualising *ghayb*. The intermediate imaginal realm (*'alam al-mithal*), which is accessible in dreams and contemplative visions, is described by Islamic mystics, particularly in the Sufi tradition, as a place where invisible realities take on visionary form. According to the anthropologist El-Aswad, ideas of *ghayb* are “embedded in popular imagination” and permeate Muslim daily life through ritual, dreams, and folklore (1). While ordinary believers may not participate in philosophical discussions about the unseen, they frequently acknowledge its existence in practice by reciting prayers for protection from the evil eye, saying *Insha'Allah* (if God wills) about the future, or attributing unexplained misfortunes to jinn or divine decree. What the West might consider superstition is actually an acknowledgement of *ghayb* in many Muslim cultures, such as when a farmer invokes invisible beings when pouring out hot water or when a parent attributes a child's illness to the jealousy of spirits. Modernists have occasionally written these practices off as folklore, but they actually represent a lived epistemology in which the material and immaterial coexist and interact.

Comparing this worldview to secular and occult frameworks in the West is pertinent. The Enlightenment gave rise to modern secularism, which mainly confined the invisible to metaphor, superstition, or at most, speculative fantasy. According to Sadaf and Kanwal, in Western science and literature, the default “cognitive majoritarianism” has frequently been materialist and empiricist, giving little space to sacred unseen forces except as fictional tropes (4). Western esoteric traditions, such as spiritualism, theosophy, and ceremonial magic, did preserve a discourse on hidden realities, but they were usually positioned in opposition to orthodox religion, as arcane secrets for the initiated few, rather than as an essential component of public creed. In contrast, Islam has long upheld the *ghayb* as an integrated continuum, according to which belief in the unseen is a shared duty (*fard*) and that invisible forces under God's control permeate the everyday world. As Sedgwick states, “the distinction between

religion and esotericism is harder to make in Islamic traditions than it is in Western thought,” (280). Since the Holy Qur’an makes numerous references to jinn and angels, a devout Muslim must acknowledge them as actual, albeit unseen, parts of the cosmos. This fosters a cultural imagination that allows for the realistic narration of elements that might be deemed fantastical in a Western secular context, such as magic, hidden beings, and sacred marvels, without compromising plausibility. Given that the cosmological canvas already contains parallel worlds and extraordinary beings, one could argue that Islamicate literature has an inherent speculative element.

However, the idea of the *ghayb* has not been abandoned in the contemporary era. Some reformers attempted to eradicate superstitious folk beliefs for the sake of modernity by downplaying or metaphorising the invisible as a result of the assault of colonialism and scientific rationalism in Muslim societies. However, the urge for arcane knowledge, futuristic visions, and alternative ways of knowing, remains, as we will see in the novels under consideration. The secular presumption that reality is restricted to what is readily apparent or quantifiable is actually challenged by contemporary Muslim writers and artists who frequently re-engage the *ghayb* as a form of cultural resistance. According to Sadaf and Kanwal, non-Western authors of SF, such as Pakistani and other Muslim storytellers, use Qur’anic cosmology, local myth, and Djinn lore to “encourage familiarity with alternative world views,” thereby redefining the genre on indigenous terms (1). They challenge what those scholars refer to as the “cognitive majoritarianism” of Western SF by reintroducing the *ghayb* into narrative, creating room in the imagination for previously marginalised forms of power and knowledge (4).

In the sections that follow, I examine how the story worlds of three contemporary SF novels make reference to Islamicate recondite elements and the *ghayb*. In *Alif the Unseen*, Wilson reinterprets the idea of *ghayb* through a cyberpunk lens, fusing digital technology with the mystical world of jinn to create a story of epistemic and political resistance. The *Golem and the Jinni* by Wecker explores how

creatures of Jewish and Arab magical tradition negotiate identity and faith in the New World by incorporating a folkloric *ghayb* into the historical immigrant milieu. When the invisible becomes visible, Clark's *A Master of Djinn* raises issues of power, spectacle, and belief by imagining a different Cairo in which the Islamicate arcane has been bureaucratised and used as a tool of state. *Ghayb* functions as a dynamic narrative tool rather than just a background in these novels. It turns into a tool for challenging authority structures, elevating the voices of the oppressed, and putting forth liberating ideas. Each work of fiction entails a dilemma of what it means to believe in the unseen in contemporary world while discussing what the implications of that belief are for freedom and power.

3.2 *Ghayb* as Resistance in *Alif the Unseen*

The novel *Alif the Unseen* by Wilson is firmly rooted in the notion that the invisible world can provide subversive power in opposition to oppression. The book centers on a young hacker (also known as Alif) who learns that the world of information technology and the world of the jinn, or entities of *ghayb*, intersect in unexpected ways. It is set in an unnamed Middle Eastern emirate during a digital uprising. Wilson, herself a Muslim convert, explores the notions of belief, futuristic imaginations, and political resistance by blending cyberpunk elements with Islamicate recondite elements. Eventually, it turns in a digital-mystical hybridity, where codes and occultism, hackers and jinn, come together to challenge an authoritarian regime.

Alif initially presents himself as a skeptic, a secular-minded netizen who defends online dissidents but pays little attention to religion or the paranormal. When he acquires the enigmatic book *Alf Yeom* (*Arabic for Thousand Days*), his path drastically changes. This ancient book, which turns out to be a legendary compendium of jinn lore, serves as the pivot between the visible and invisible worlds. The revelation of esoteric knowledge is explicitly framed in the *Alf Yeom*. “That title is no accident – this is the inverse, the overturning of the nights. In it is contained all the parallel knowledge of my

people, preserved for the benefit of future generations. This is not the work of human beings. This book was narrated by the jinn,” explains Vikram the Vampire, a jinn who ends up becoming Alif’s uneasy ally (Wilson 89). By proposing a counter-text, that is, *Thousand and One Days* written by Jinn, Wilson plays on the famous *Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*), a collection of human folktales. As a result, the *Alf Yeom* represents a repository of *ghayb*, a book that is literally from the invisible world and contains knowledge that is secret from human civilization. It challenges the status quo just by existing in Alif’s possession. The *Alf Yeom* is desired by the state repression forces, who are represented by the sinister official known as ‘the Hand of God,’ as a means of solidifying their hold on power. On the other hand, if Alif and his friends are able to decipher the book’s mysterious, magical code, it would turn into a tool for their freedom.

Wilson draws an analogy between cyberspace and *ghayb* incorporating the motifs of hacking and coding. Cyberspace is a parallel reality where people adopt hidden identities and an invisible realm of data. In the novel, hackers and activists evade government censorship by effectively becoming “unseen” online. Alif is skilled at hiding himself and his clients from the state’s surveillance system because he is a gray-hat hacker. The jinn’s metaphysical unseen and this digital unseen have fascinating parallels. *Alif the Unseen* does, in fact, specifically equate the two realms: the novel operates on many levels, both visible and invisible, at the same time. “Wilson equates cyberspace, where people hide behind virtual names and identities, with the subtleties and ambiguities of the ancient parables,” the *Los Angeles Times* review pointed out (Ulin). The world of spirits and the internet are both presented as liminal spaces with their own set of rules, accessible to those with the knowledge to navigate them. Along the way, Alif discovers that occult spellcraft and coding are related disciplines. He once encounters a mystic who argues that *Ta’wil* (esoteric interpretations) and numerical transpositions in religious texts foreshadowed the development of the first computer algorithms. These particulars support

the main idea of the book, which is that faith and imagination are forms of programming reality. According to Alif, stories are a form of (secret) code that allows people to dream reality (or the future) into being. Such as he says, “So the stories aren’t just stories... They’re really secret knowledge disguised as stories” (Wilson 93). This notion that beliefs and stories have the ability to create the world is a clear reference to the epistemic principle of *ghayb*. It implies that beneath the surface of events lie deeper patterns (the ‘source code’ of destiny, one might say) that are revealed by myth, scripture, and inspired storytelling.

The character of Vikram exemplifies *ghayb* as resistance. He gives Alif access to the unseen and is a jinn who exists on the boundary between the two worlds. Alif is led through dangerous encounters with folkloric figures by Vikram and his sister (a jinnyia who poses as a human convert), including an old marid, ifrits restrained by an ancient Solomonic seal, and the mysterious *Sheikh* of the Desert. Alif is compelled by these experiences to reevaluate his materialist assumptions. The novel's setting turns into a transitional battlefield between secular authority and spiritual insurgency as he moves through the ‘cross angles’ between the mundane city and the ethereal jinn realm. Armed with its surveillance technology, the authoritarian state is ill-prepared to deal with truly transcendent forces, as the jinn repeatedly show. For instance, Alif outsmarts the state’s most advanced systems when it creates a quantum-like computer virus based on the erratic stories of *Alf Yeom*. It behaves like a mischievous jinn in cyberspace, avoiding all algorithmic pitfalls. The implication is obvious: the hegemonic order is confounded by *ghayb*. In the face of the chaos and inventiveness of the unseen, the regime’s tools of control, cameras, censorship, and the logical bureaucratic authority represented by the “Hand”, finally fail.

A major component of the novel’s motif is Alif’s own journey from skepticism to belief. At first, Alif speaks of jinn and the *Alf Yeom* with casual incredulity. However, he gets closer to accepting

metaphysical truth with every trial. A pivotal moment occurs in the old city's catacombs, where Alif takes sanctuary in Sheikh Bilal's underground mosque. Alif's neighbor, the sheikh, is a pious elderly man who stands for grounded faith in the midst of the fantastic. Sheikh Bilal continues to pray despite the supernatural conflict raging all around them. In a pivotal scene, he calmly declares that "Conscience is the ultimate measure of a man" and that he answers to God above all else while kneeling in *salah* during an attack (183). Alif is deeply affected by his unflinching *iman* (faith) in the face of adversity. The strength of belief is also exemplified by Dina, a teenage girl who is Alif's childhood friend. Although Dina chooses to wear hijab, which Alif once derided as being outdated, her veil actually represents her inner conviction and clarity of vision rather than oppression. According to *Los Angeles Times*, Dina is "the moral center of the book for her flinty courage, her ability to see and respond to events as they are" (Ulin). The fact that Dina is among the few people in the narrative who firmly believe in the existence of jinn as they are described in the Holy Quran is no coincidence. Her straightforward, matter-of-fact faith in the *ghayb*'s literal truth contrasts with Alif's waning skepticism, and it consistently saves their lives. In one case, Dina spots a good-natured jinn in disguise and extends Islamic hospitality to him (saying *bismillah* over food), while Alif almost offends the creature. Wilson makes the argument through Dina that "wonder and awe" don't have to be remnants of a past era; they can be essential to practicing faith, even (or particularly) for the young and disenfranchised (245).

Alif's viewpoint changes epistemically at the end of the novel. He now perceives the *ghayb* folks as actual agents in his world rather than as fantastical or terrifying superstitions, and as a result, he has become aware of the transcendent. This change is highlighted by a crucial discussion. When confronted by a jinn who is reluctant to aid humanity, Alif begs that since there are so many "religious fanatics," belief must still exist (245). The jinn respond scornfully. "Superstition is thriving. Pedantry is thriving. Sectarianism is thriving. Belief is dying out. To most of your people the jinn are paranoid fantasies...

Find me someone to whom the hidden folk are simply real, as described in the Books. You'll be searching a long time. Wonder and awe have gone out of your religions. You are prepared to accept the irrational, but not the transcendent. And that, cousin, is why I can't help you" (245).

This critique, delivered by a character from *ghayb*, strikes at the heart of Wilson's project. It makes a distinction between genuine belief infused with wonder and mindless superstition or dogmatism (pedantry, sectarianism). According to the jinn, modern society has lost the ability to experience true spiritual awe, or the transcendent, but is willing to accept irrational beliefs and conspiracy theories. Alif replies that he does know someone who holds the exact same beliefs as Dina, who does believe in the invisible simply and completely. Alif shows his own development by calling upon her: he now appreciates the very aspect of faith that he once detested. The jinn is convinced enough to help, provided that Alif and Dina depart the hazardous Empty Quarter as soon as their assignment is completed. The combination of jinn magic, human technological ingenuity, and the moral fortitude derived from faith results in Alif's ultimate triumph over the Hand of God. By the end of the novel, Alif is a different young man who has seen the world outside of his computer screen. He is by no means a wide-eyed mystic. His willingness to, for instance, invoke God's name and accept a fate he cannot predict in advance demonstrates his leap of faith in the invisible. As he types out new code in one of the final scenes, Alif reflects that maybe all these tales and hardships are "a string of bones speaking the word God", an intriguing metaphor Wilson employs to imply that the animating spirit of the divine is hidden behind the clatter of keyboards and gunfire (238).

Ghayb operates as a multifaceted tool of resistance in *Alif the Unseen*. In terms of politics, it allows dissidents to outsmart a surveillance state (the censor's system was crashed by the jinn and the *Alf Yeom*). Culturally, it recovers an Islamic legacy of wonder that the regime had appropriated and distorted, revealingly wrapped in pseudo-religious power as "the Hand of God" (28). In terms of

epistemology, it frees the protagonist from a colonized mentality that valued Judeo-Christian (Western) reason over Islamicate arcane knowledge. By fusing technological and mythical elements, contemporary Muslim SF “blurs the dividing line between ‘possibilities’ and ‘impossibilities’,” democratizing whose reality counts, as Sadaf notes (15). This blurring is best illustrated by *Alif*, which asks readers to picture a world where a jinn could exist as real as a data packet and where faith in God and jinn could be just as empowering as any technology or hack. By doing this, the novel subtly makes the case that wonder, the ability to embrace the transcendent unknown, can have profoundly altering effects. Re-enchanting the world (or, in *Alif*’s case, the World Wide Web) is an act of liberation, according to Wilson’s Islamicate cyberpunk vision. *Ghayb* turns into a call to action against political and intellectual oppression rather than a haven for fantasy. It is, in the end, a fresh start is made possible by *Alif*’s restored *iman bil-ghayb* (faith in the unseen); similarly, the initial letter of his handle, *Alif*, denotes a beginning. The believers “establish prayer and spend from what We have provided,” according to God, who first characterizes them as believing in the unseen in Chapter 2 of the Qur’an (2:3). *Alif*’s story can be interpreted as the path to that all-encompassing belief: after he comes to believe in the invisible, he is able to act morally, resist injustice, and create a more liberated future.

3.3 *Ghayb* in *The Golem and the Jinni*: A Hybrid Lens

Through the lens of historical fantasy interwoven with an account of immigrants in the 1890s New York, Wecker’s novel *The Golem and the Jinni* provides a rich exploration of *ghayb*. Despite being written by a Jewish-American, the book combines two characters from Middle Eastern mythology: a jinni (genie) from Islamic/ Syrian folklore and a golem from Jewish Kabbalistic tradition. Wecker crafts a narrative that veers between the folkloric and the metaphysical by situating the *ghaybi* beings in the gritty, material world of immigrant neighbourhoods at the turn of the century. The characters and readers are forced to navigate the lines separating the supernatural from everyday life as the unseen is brought

to life on Manhattan's streets. In this section, I analyse how the novel contrasts and enhances the Islamicate concept of *ghayb* with the Jewish Kabbalistic concept of the hidden, interpreting the jinni as a *ghaybi* being par excellence; one who straddles the line between fable and reality. I also talk about the role of the invisible in the diasporic space, especially as it relates to immigrant identities that are looking for a place to call home.

The novel's jinni, whom people eventually call Ahmad, is explicitly a creature of *ghayb*. In Islamic cosmology, jinn are a part of the invisible world. They are made of smokeless fire and are typically invisible to human eyes, but they possess free will and physical abilities. Wecker's jinni is said to have been imprisoned by a wizard in a copper flask for more than a millennium. He was created in the Syrian desert in the 7th century, which coincides with the early Islamic period. A Syrian Christian tinsmith in New York unintentionally releases the jinni, which makes it stand out in the contemporary metropolis. Despite his extraordinary handsome looks and charisma, he is not human in nature. In addition to not being able to sleep, eat, or get hurt like a regular man, he can covertly use heat to protect himself or repair metal. Crucially, he is unable to fully utilise his abilities or transform back into a pure ethereal form because of the iron cuff that he wears on his wrist; the cursed shackle from the wizard's spell. The jinni serves as a semi-visible unseen; he is an embodiment of *ghayb* who must live among people while his true identity is kept secret from most.

Wecker imbues the jinni with a nuanced personality that emphasises the conflict between folkloric presence and metaphysical being. Similar to how jinn are frequently portrayed in folklore as irrational or hedonistic, Ahmad is arrogant, seductive, and initially amoral. However, he also has the ability to grow and possesses an inquisitive intelligence. Early in the novel, one could see how he perceives the world differently from humans. After being set free, "the Jinni stood at the railing at Castle Garden... transfixed by the view" of the harbour in New York (Wecker 25). The vast water and the busy

cityscape captivate this desert and fire creature. His recollections of wandering the Middle East and listening to caravan storytellers around campfires in the oasis are recounted in the narrative. Wecker subtly incorporates authentic Islamic and folkloric details: the jinni recollects stories about “Sulayman, the human ruler who... had yoked the jinn to his rule, the first and last of the human kings to do so” (28). This is a clear reference to King Solomon (Sulayman), a prophet and legendary figure from the Qur’an who led armies of jinn in Islamic lore. By incorporating such details, the novel recognises an invisible Islamicate tradition. A jinn bestowed with longevity like him still recall the danger of wizards and their binding spells, the jinni even later comments in dialogue on human fascination and fear of his kind. In these situations, the jinni is not merely a fantastical figure; rather, he is a part of a universe that is reminiscent of Islamic esotericism.

In contrast, Jewish mysticism, more especially, the Kabbalistic and Eastern European legend of an artificial person made of clay and brought to life through sacred rituals, is the source of the golem. A rebellious rabbi secretly creates Wecker’s golem (later named Chava) for a man who longs for the ideal wife. The golem’s existence raises ethical concerns regarding hidden knowledge from the moment of her creation. Rotfeld, the golem’s first master, calls a golem “a beast of burden... a lumbering, unthinking slave” in a conversation with Yehudah Schaalman, the dark Kabbalist who created her (7). Schaalman cautions that it would be extremely difficult and risky to give a golem human-like characteristics, such as self-awareness and free will. The novel establishes a contrast between two applications of hidden knowledge in these opening pages: the natural, divinely-established order of creation and Schaalman’s reckless experimentation with the occult, which was motivated by Rotfeld’s self-centred desire. Since only God is able to create life, the golem’s very existence is an illegal act of *batin* (esoteric) magic. Schaalman even predicts that “no golem has ever existed that did not eventually run amok. You must be prepared to destroy her” regardless of how well-intentioned the intention (9).

You have to be ready to ruin her. This foreshadows the central tension of Chava's character: can she restrain her natural impulses as a telepathically sensitive, super-strong being? Will her *ghaybi* origin, clay energised by sacred secrets, cause catastrophe?

The golem escapes into the streets of New York after Rotfeld passes away during the transatlantic flight, leaving the recently awakened Chava masterless. She is saved by Meyer, a kind elderly Orthodox rabbi who soon realises who she really is. Rabbi Meyer is a considerate, moral religious leader who assists the supernatural protagonist in navigating the human world, much like Sheikh Bilal in *Alif the Unseen*. He names the golem Chava, which means "life" and is related to the Hebrew word *chai*, and teaches her as a parent would teach a child (123). Chava gains the ability to control the overwhelming flood of desires she perceives from everyone around her under Rabbi Meyer's tutelage. The rabbi teaches her a crucial lesson that echoes both Jewish and Islamic morals: that people must be judged by their actions rather than their transient thoughts. One of the golem's abilities is a sort of telepathy of desire: she can hear the unsaid wishes and fears of those around her. This is both a gift and a torment, an example of *ghayb* intruding on the mundane. For Chava, others' inner thoughts are typically invisible, but she perceives them as clearly as spoken words. He cautions that she should not act on someone's brief wish for something negative because it does not represent their true intentions. This is basically theological advice; in Islam and Judaism, God judges long-term decisions and intentions, not every errant whim that crosses the mind. This is a difficult but important idea for Chava, who is literally designed to obey: it adds ambiguity and free will to her otherwise deterministic life. Wecker uses Chava's struggle to highlight a crucial point: in order for a golem, a creature born of the *ghayb*, to coexist morally, it must acquire human moral judgement. The golem, a creation of Kabbalistic occultism, is reintroduced into the context of religious knowledge through the rabbi's mentoring of Chava. Rabbi Meyer exemplifies a responsible interaction with the unseen that prioritises humility, self-control, and

the well-being of others, in contrast to Schaalman's unscrupulous use of hidden knowledge.

One of the novel's central dynamics is the friendship (and hinted romance) between two *ghaybi* immigrants, which arises when the paths of the golem and the jinni finally intersect. It is remarkable how both of them recognise the other as non-human right away when they first meet. The jinni discovers Chava's true nature while strolling through a park at night: "My kind can see all creatures' true natures... But I've never seen... (one like you)" he says, at first incredulously (166). Chava, on the other hand, senses intuitively that Ahmad is different from the other men because he exudes a sort of elemental presence rather than overwhelming desires. Ahmad introduces himself in a vulnerable moment for both parties: "My name is Ahmad...I am a Jinni. I was born a thousand years ago, in a desert, halfway across the world" (166). He effectively identifies himself as a *ghaybi* being in that scene, disclosing a secret he has long kept, even from Arbeely, his closest human confidante. This confession is important and cathartic for Ahmad because "he had not realised until that moment how much he'd been longing to tell someone, anyone" (166). The *ghayb* here longs for recognition. Chava returns the favour by whispering, "A golem," revealing who she really is (166). As if "she'd told the most dangerous secret in the world," Chava panics instantly and runs away out of fear of being rejected or attacked (166). Ahmad, however, is thrilled, even elated, to have discovered "a mystery better than any mere distraction, a puzzle waiting to be solved" (167). An unlikely friendship between these two exiles from the unseen is formed when he discreetly pursues her.

Their relationship allows Wecker to compare and contrast the two esoteric traditions. Despite having different cosmologies (Islamic and Jewish), the golem and the jinni share an outsider status. Both experience intense human loneliness. Chava works in a bakery and makes an effort to be like any other woman, but her literal inhuman strength and her ignorance of social conventions make her stand out. Suspecting Chava's stoicism or extraordinary strength, one of the Syrian women in the tenements says,

“she’s different, somehow” (145). Ahmad, on the other hand, fits in with Little Syria’s male-dominated coffeehouse culture a little better, he even apprentices himself to a metalsmith, but he is restless and resents human limitations. Both must actively pretend to eat and age in order to avoid suspicion. In private, they can let down their masks when they meet for walks at midnight. In one intriguing scene, Ahmad uses *ghayb* fire to amuse Chava. He does this by heating the tips of his fingers until they glow like candles, creating dancing lights that make Chava think of fairy tales. These instances highlight how the golem and the jinni are essentially personified cultural memories despite their unseen appearance. Each represents the mythos of their respective people: Ahmad represents the jinn of Arab mythology, who are magnificent and free but also potentially perilous, while Chava represents the fear and hope of the Golem of Prague legend, the guardian who might go awry.

In the novel, the diasporic space acts as a liminal backdrop where immigrant identity and the *ghayb* intersect. Somewhat hidden from the Protestant American mainstream, the immigrant communities in New York around 1900 are worlds within worlds. Little Syria and the Jewish quarter are depicted with vibrant realism, complete with packed tenements, street sellers, neighbourhood rumours, and religious assemblies. Belief in the invisible is not wholly alien in these settings. Although Maryam Faddoul, a Maronite Christian coffeehouse owner and a mother figure in Little Syria, may not be aware that there is a real jinni among her, she and her neighbours are from cultures where it is normal to discuss afrits, miracles, and evil eyes. An instance is the tragic ice cream vendor Saleh, a former Muslim ascetic who became mentally damaged and partially blind after coming into contact with a malevolent spirit. Saleh’s viewpoint, brief in the novel, is telling: one night, he sees Ahmad in his actual form, “a man... his face was made of fire,” and he is unsure if this is a sign of his own insanity or if it is real (168). Saleh’s background hints that some holy people or those who are afflicted can see jinn when others cannot, a belief that is present in both Muslim and Christian Middle Eastern folklore. In his

situation, the *ghayb* traumatises his life as an immigrant.

For the main characters, their immigrant context deepens the trope of otherness. Many immigrants resonate with Chava and Ahmad's experiences in that they also grapple with the conflict between assimilation and maintaining one's true identity. Because of her golem nature, Chava, for example, is almost too eager to serve and adapt; she wants to live up to others' expectations. Rabbi Meyer gently cautions her against losing herself in the pursuit of universal approval. On the other hand, Ahmad rejects the notion that he should change his nature in any way; he defies human expectations by sneaking out to roam at night and seducing a wealthy socialite by showing up in her dreams. Each is encouraged to balance these instincts by their friendship. Interestingly, neither of them fits neatly into the group that should claim them: Chava is raised by a Jewish rabbi but later works for a Jewish-owned bakery that is more secular in practice, and Ahmad is adopted by Christian Syrians (despite being a figure from Islamic folklore). The novel illustrates diaspora as a location with movable boundaries of identity in this way. Beyond the religious barrier that traditionally might distinguish a Polish golem story from a Syrian jinni story, the invisible creatures create their own small diasporic kinship.

Schaalman, who unpredictably connects the two threads, serves as a crucial point of comparison between the novel's Kabbalistic mystery and Islamicate *ghayb*. One can find out that the golem's creator, Yehudah Schaalman, has also arrived in New York, albeit under a false identity. In essence, Schaalman is a deviant occultist who is obsessed with obtaining godlike power and eternal life. He has pursued this by studying a variety of dark arts, suggesting that his expertise goes beyond Jewish Kabbalah and may even include Near Eastern magic. It is revealed towards the end of the book that Schaalman was the same wizard who had enslaved Ahmad centuries prior. The two *ghayb* stories are masterfully connected by this revelation: the same man who contravened the divine order by creating a golem also did so by imprisoning a jinni. Schaalman is essentially a cross-cultural symbol of the arrogance of hidden

knowledge. He represents the illegitimate approach to the unseen, what Sedgwick describes as attempting to use magic to break through the *ghayb* in order to gain personal power. Schaalman's villainy draws attention to a philosophical commonality between Islamic and Jewish worldviews: tampering with creation and commanding spirits are viewed as dangerous transgress that can result in self-destruction.

Schaalman attempts to control the golem and the jinni in the final confrontation by using his mastery of occult commands. In keeping with the legend that a jinni's name confers power, he learns the jinni's true name and gains control over him. He also takes advantage of the golem's innate ability to respond to commands from a master. The occultist is using his slaves, one of fire and one of clay, to gain ultimate power in this scene, which serves as a warning. Schaalman actually wants to transform his soul into the immortal form of the jinni. Importantly, however, Schaalman is thwarted by the very humanity and free will that Chava and Ahmad have developed. Chava, who has developed empathy and self-control, manages to withstand the order to destroy the jinni long enough to attack Schaalman, upsetting him, even though it comes at a high personal cost as she almost gives in to her own violent rage. For his part, Ahmad has developed enough compassion and empathy, particularly his care for Chava, to discover a new purpose that goes beyond self-centred freedom. Together, they defeat Schaalman, who realises in his final moments that he's misused the secrets of creation. The rabbi, who shows up at the end, laments Schaalman's passing in a moving moment. He notes that Schaalman had begun as a pious scholar but had become corrupted by his desire for knowledge that was hidden at all costs. Therefore, Wecker compares *ghayb* approached with arrogance and *ghayb* respected with humility in the finale. Schaalman's Kabbalistic schemes are portrayed as having upset his soul's equilibrium, which may be a reference to the Islamic belief that experimenting with *sihr* (sorcery) engenders divine wrath. The golem and jinni, on the other hand, find some sort of redemption by claiming moral agency

and mutual loyalty, even though they are the result of “unlawful” magic.

The novel’s diasporic setting, a multicultural metropolis where people of many religions and ethnicities live side by side, highlights how universal the invisible is. In a poignant minor scene, Rabbi Meyer and Maryam Faddoul, a Maronite woman, have a conversation made easier by the fact that Maryam’s husband speaks Yiddish from their business interactions. These intercultural friendships suggest that immigrants are more united by common experiences and values than they are by differences in doctrine. Similarly, the novel subtly contrasts the functions of religious communities in dealing with the invisible: the Syrian Arab and Islamic community has its own lore for an unfamiliar man like Ahmad, while the Jewish community has legends to rely on when a golem appears. Such creatures might have been greeted with pitchforks or used as miracles in the Old World, but in the New World, they are primarily greeted with curiosity, occasionally with fear, but eventually with a curiously practical acceptance by those in the know (most notably Rabbi Meyer). Like in *Alif the Unseen*, the city’s contemporary, secular authorities are unaware of the *ghayb* operating right under their noses. No police officer ever understands the precise cause of the enigmatic occurrences (fires, disturbances) surrounding the characters in *The Golem and the Jinni*. Although the unseen is not visible to the general public, it has a significant impact on the immigrant characters’ lives.

Comparatively, *The Golem and the Jinni* view the *ghayb* more as a tool for cultural and personal exploration than as a direct political instrument. Finding one’s place, whether or not one is human, is the central point of the novel. Wecker is able to externalise sentiments of longing and otherness that are typical of immigrant narratives through Islamicate arcane and *ghayb* elements. Chava is an exile by nature; she was born in transit and has no choice but to live in the community she chooses. Ahmad is also in exile; torn from his eternal desert existence and thrust into the world of death, he is like an immigrant uprooted by circumstances beyond his control. As a result, their story can be interpreted as

an allegory of assimilation: two exceptional immigrants attempt to pass as normal while secretly maintaining their true identities. The fact that they open up to one another illustrates the necessity of friendship and understanding across cultural boundaries. In this sense, the *ghayb* serves as a narrative strategy in Wecker's novel to bring Arab and Jewish heritage into dialogue. Two traditions' folktales collide on an equal footing. In one scene, Ahmad explains to Chava the idea of Jinn society and how they don't like being confined or bound. Chava then explains to Ahmad the parts of human behaviour that baffle him. These interactions, the Arab Jinni and the Jewish Golem learning from and growing through the process, are subtly suggestive of cross-cultural interaction.

The novel also invites a comparison of how various unseen frameworks address issues of faith and agency. Chava has a conscience and a sense of purpose because of Rabbi Meyer's moral code and compassionate monotheism; according to the rabbi's blessing over her, she aspires to "be an aid, a comfort, and a protector to her people" (87). At first, Ahmad, who comes from a pre-Islamic pagan background (the jinn in the book don't seem to be very religious), is more free-spirited and even sceptical of people's religiosity. He observes how fleeting and contradictory people are and is amazed by their fascinating paradox of intelligence and self-destruction. But living with people gradually softens his contempt. He starts to defend his new human friends. It could be argued that Ahmad becomes more humane by learning humility and dedication, whereas Chava becomes more human by learning self-control and empathy. The best of human religious values, concern for others before oneself, are internalised in both journeys. While Ahmad gains a small amount of *rahma* (merciful compassion) to counterbalance his fiery nature, Chava gains a spark of divine *hesed* (loving-kindness) in Kabbalistic terms, tempering her raw *gevurah* (strength).

Finally, how *ghayb* depicts wonder in a modernising world encapsulates the comparative element of the novel. *The Golem and the Jinni*, set in 1899, depicts a world where rational advancement

collides with the traditional values held by immigrant communities, creating a space between modernity and memory. The magical aspects are handled by the narrative voice with a delicate realism; they are fantastical, to be sure, but not out of proportion to the situation. When the jinni travels out-of-body over Manhattan rooftops or the golem summons a tiny spark of life to animate dough (one brief experiment), the prose asks us to consider these events as merely a part of these characters' lived reality. This speaks to a larger theme: that even as immigrants create new lives, the unseen intersects with immigrant identity by giving them a connection to the enigma of their home countries. Wecker suggests that communities rely on a kind of commonplace magic to survive, such as faith, camaraderie, and the retelling of old tales to make sense of unfamiliar situations.

Ghayb is used in *The Golem and the Jinni* to explore issues of coexistence, freedom, and otherness. Together, the golem, a Kabbalistic creation with eerie inner life, and the jinni, a *ghaybi* being forced into folkloric human presence, traverse a diasporic environment that challenges their inherent qualities. The golem's scripted obedience and the jinni's fiery autonomy are two hidden arcane traditions that are compared in the novel. Additionally, it combines them into a single warning story about the abuse of occult knowledge through the antagonist Schaalman. In the end, the mystical aspects of both Islam and Judaism confirm a shared message: that the exercise of power from the invisible must be guided by conscience and compassion. A rabbi teaching a golem and a jinni learning human ways are two examples of the story's comparative reflections that show how the Islamicate speculative imagination can interact with other cultural imaginations. Although Wecker's novel does not specifically mention Islam like Wilson's does, it does participate in an Islamicate framework of the fantastic by accurately portraying a jinni and honouring the outlines of jinn mythology. By doing this, it emphasises how the *ghayb* can serve as a bridge between the Arab and Jewish cultures, the past and present, and the immigrants' new and old worlds. For supernatural beings and the human immigrants

who surround them, the unseen becomes a common language for comprehending what it means to not quite fit in.

3.4 *Ghayb* as State and Spectacle in *A Master of Djinn*

Clark's *A Master of Djinn* explores the concept of *ghayb* through steampunk spectacle and alternate history. The novel, which is set in a reimagined Cairo in 1912, imagines a society in which the *ghayb* has not only gained social acceptance but has even become a bureaucratic requirement. Once invisible, magic and supernatural beings are now monitored and controlled by Egypt's fictitious Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments, and Supernatural Entities. After a well-known mystic from the 19th century named Al-Jahiz unexpectedly opened the door to the invisible world a few decades earlier, Clark's Cairo is a thriving, contemporary city that is powered (quite literally) by djinn magic. In this world, colonial rule has been overthrown, and Egypt is a proud global power that has used magical advancements to drive out the British and quickly industrialise. However, the novel implies that the unseen still has the ability to disturb and criticise social evils, despite the fact that *ghayb* has become semi-visible and commercialised (djinn working alongside humans, enchanted technology in everyday use). *A Master of Djinn* examines the *ghayb* as a spectacle and a state tool, posing the questions of what happens when the mystical is appropriated by an institution or empire and, on the other hand, how genuinely unchecked *ghayb* phenomena reveal the class, gender, and imperial injustices that lie beneath Cairo's glittering exterior.

The protagonist, Fatma el-Sha'arawi, is a special agent of the Ministry, a bold girl in a traditionally male field, renowned for her keen sense of humour and taste for well-tailored English suits. As a character, Fatma occupies the space between the visible and invisible realms. In essence, she works as a detective in a fantasy world, methodically looking into crimes involving ancient gods, magic, and djinn. *Ghayb* has institutionalised the idea that where there are magical crimes, there must also be

magical law enforcement, which is why she has her job. With a mix of awe and irony, Clark depicts the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments, and Supernatural Entities. Its magnificent downtown headquarters, designed by Djinn architects, features a glass dome and mechanically shifting *mashrabiya* screens that form geometric patterns. On the one hand, it is a shining symbol of modern Egypt's embrace of the arcane. The massive orrery-shaped mechanical brain in the Ministry's lobby was created by djinn and functions as a sort of magical computer that controls the structure and possibly the city's tram system. All of this points to a society that has made the invisible more technologically advanced. Once rumoured to be creatures of fire and smoke, the djinn are now engineers, architects, and citizens. Presumably, they even pay taxes. Brass and clockwork combined with Qur'anic cosmology create a powerful picture of an Islamic steampunk modernity.

However, Clark is careful to demonstrate that integrating the *ghayb* into the establishment has drawbacks of its own. Fatma frequently runs into bureaucratic inertia or scepticism from her superiors regarding truly uncanny occurrences. Like any big organisation, the Ministry has its share of office politics, bureaucratic red tape, and complacency. Director Amir, Fatma's boss, is characterised as a "overworked bureaucrat" who handles mountains of paperwork; he seems less like a mystic and more like an overworked civil servant (Clark 90). A layer of satire is added by this nearly banal depiction of the gatekeepers of *ghayb*: even the amazing can become ordinary when subject to governmental regulation. Notably, Fatma defies some Ministry rules, such as the dress code, by wearing her fitted suits and flamboyantly "flouting proper Ministry uniforms" (92). Because she is a woman and somewhat of a trailblazer, the narrative is able to criticise the Ministry from within.

Someone calling forth the legacy of Al-Jahiz, the long-dead mystic who first let magic loose into the world, is at the heart of *A Master of Djinn's* plot. A shadowy figure who poses as Al-Jahiz reappears and begins carrying out dramatic killings, threatening to topple the current order by inciting the djinn

and the impoverished to virtuous wrath. The antagonist uses *ghayb* as a political statement, accusing the current Egyptian elite of betraying the egalitarian promise of the magical revolution, as well as a spectacle, staging magical fiery killings of wealthy Orientalists. Here, Clark deftly uses *ghayb* to examine class and empire. The antagonist, the self-proclaimed *Master of Djinn*, notes that although Egypt is now strong and free, not everyone benefits from its wealth. Though they are free, djinn and other supernatural creatures frequently work for the wealthy, as evidenced by the narrative's depictions of djinn servants caring for affluent homes. Even if factories are partially powered by magic, workers still toil in them. Secret societies and economic might are still used by the British and other foreign interests to try to take advantage of Egypt's arcane riches. In other words, inequality endures despite the appearance of a proud, independent Cairo full of marvels. Here, the unseen serves as a mirror to the seen social order.

Fatma must traverse Cairo's underbelly as well as high society in her capacity as an investigator. The spectacle of *ghayb* is being used for prestige and amusement through her eyes. For instance, the use of boilerplate automatons (such as mechanical eunuchs) as servants or the attendance of European diplomats and Egyptian elites at parties where djinn perform miracles are mentioned. One site of spectacle is the Hermetic Brotherhood of Al-Jahiz, a covert occult fraternity made up of some local elite and European expatriates. Wearing robes, they perform pseudo-mystical rituals that draw inspiration from the Judeo-Christian occultism (their regalia includes a scimitar emblem and a golden crescent). This Brotherhood can be interpreted as a critique of the Judeo-Christian arcane: privileged outsiders cherry-picking symbols of exotic power without truly understanding, and experimenting with *ghayb* as a trendy pastime. The novel's inciting crime, the mysterious burning of the entire Brotherhood at a mansion, reveals the emptiness of their pretences; they attempted to steal *ghayb* and were spectacularly defeated. The papers describe it as a fire, but if she's involved, there's probably more to it, Fatma jokes.

In fact, *ghayb*, the unleashed power of an ifrit, rather than a common cause, killed them.

Another way that *ghayb* and social issues interact is through Fatma's persona as a Muslim woman in a leadership role. Fatma is one of just two female agents at the Ministry, demonstrating that the existence of magic in Clark's alternate Egypt has not necessarily destroyed patriarchy. Some of her male coworkers are skeptical of her; in fact, there is office wagering on how long it will be before she ejects her new partner. But in this world, Egypt is a little forward-thinking: women have just gained the right to vote, and one meets people who are up to date. Nevertheless, Fatma's fitted suits, which defy gender expectations, attract attention. At first, one police officer responds to her by saying, "It's you!" (41). A Sa'idi woman special investigator dressed in Western attire is a novelty that "boggles the senses" of many people (42). This relates to the idea that the *ghayb* may also challenge gender norms. Any sceptics are proven incorrect by Fatma's proficiency in handling cases involving djinn. Another instance of seen/unseen crossover occurs in Fatma's personal life when she falls in love with Siti, a woman who turns out to be half-Djinn and a worshipper of the ancient Egyptian gods. *Ghayb* in this world provides alternative pathways for identity, including queer identity and spiritual syncretism, to flourish beneath the authoritative narratives of religion and state, as demonstrated by Siti's very existence (a human-Djinn hybrid, secretly preserving old pre-Islamic faith).

One of the most fascinating aspects about *A Master of Djinn* is how it imagines that the institutionalisation of *ghayb* only reframes mystery and injustice rather than eliminating them. Laws and statutes pertaining to magic are specifically mentioned. When Fatma confronts an extraterrestrial, for instance, she cites "violation of our statutes, laws, and criminal codes on the ethical use of magic" and formally apologises on behalf of the Egyptian government for its unauthorised summoning (416). Fatma "by the book" shows diplomatic courtesy to Ifrit lords from another realm, but this almost bureaucratic handling of a potentially apocalyptic encounter is done for a bit of humor (416). It emphasises that even

genie kings are subject to Ministry regulations. Ironically, though, the Ifrit King is unimpressed by human customs; he refers to Fatma as a “talkative mortal” and essentially disregards her request (416). This moment reveals a truth: *ghayb* in its unadulterated form is untamable, beyond complete subjugation, regardless of how much people believe they can control the unseen with ministries and laws. The *ghayb*’s transcendent aspects are embodied by the Ifrit lords, who are enormous, elemental forces whose disregard for human politics emphasises their unearthly might.

The novel reaches its spectacle-filled climax when the Ifrit King and his eight fellow lords awaken (as a result of the Al-Jahiz’s interference). Giant fiery djinn fill the sky of Cairo, announcing a new era and requesting that all lesser djinn submit to them. *Ghayb* becomes a spectacle of possibly biblical (or in this context Qur’anic) proportions. Although it is a terrifying situation, Clark uses it to make a point about power relationships. In his speech, the Ifrit King essentially adopts the rhetoric of human imperialists: he questions why Djinn are subject to mortal rule and asserts that superior beings, such as his own, ought to rule. This vision is actually rejected by the half-djinn Siti, who compares the Ifrit’s hierarchical arrogance to that of human oppressors: “Mortals already play this game... How are you any different?” (418). She challenges. The ancient patriarchy and feudalism of the unseen itself are called out by a character who represents a minority (a queer, half-supernatural woman). This is a potent moment of inversion. The fury of the Ifrit King demonstrates that chauvinistic tyranny and bigotry are not exclusively human traits; even grand djinn are capable of such behaviour. In the end, the threat is eliminated by the unity of the less powerful djinn and humans. The Ifrits’ call for dominance and war is met with resistance from regular djinn. In essence, the masses of djinn reject their alleged betters. This aptly mirrors human conflict in the novel: the masquerading masked villain attempted to incite class conflict by citing resentment and invoking *ghayb*, but his own prejudices (a white Western man taking on the symbolic authority of Islamicate esotericism lacking any cultural or theological basis)

undermined him, and the common people (both Djinn and human) saw through the manipulation.

Fatma's status as a singularly contemporary heroine is cemented by her ability to navigate through these layers, class struggle, colonial tensions, and gender biases, while addressing *ghayb* phenomena. She possesses a sharp analytical mind in addition to a sword-cane. In the same way that Cairo in the story unites East and West, she is able to bridge cultures by quoting Rumi or Hafez one moment and then writing a Scottish play the next. *A Master of Djinn* argues via Fatma that embracing the *ghayb* does not have to imply a rejection of reason or progress. Instead, she can strike a balance by using forensic science and reasoning to solve mysteries while also honouring the advice of traditional beings (such as the ghouls and guardian angels that appear in the story). In this world, the *ghayb* is a part of reality that should be thoroughly examined and comprehended rather than simply being a mystery. This hybridity in her approach reflects the hybrid genre of the novel, which is a detective procedural mixed with fantasy. In fact, Abigail, an amateur American scholar in the book, catalogues occult artefacts and studies the djinn with a fervour that borders on science. Even though Abigail is portrayed with a hint of humour, her presence demonstrates how even foreigners can interact with the *ghayb* in ways that go beyond colonial fetishisation.

The text is replete with commentary on class-based society, exposing the socioeconomic hierarchies that influence the lives of marginalised working communities and highlighting their struggles. Rich British Brotherhood members are the villain's first targets, serving as a symbolic retribution against colonialists who commercialise Egypt's culture. Subsequently, the villain uses the annoyances of poor labourers to incite unrest; he manipulates crowds with grandiose miracles like summoning flames or Al-Jahiz illusions. These are propaganda-style *ghayb* spectacles. In a rapidly industrialising Cairo, where some workers feel replaced by magic and others are oppressed by new capitalists, Clark depicts those scenes with ambiguity. However, it also shows how a demagogue uses

the spiritual fervour surrounding Al-Jahiz's legend to manipulate the workers. The resolution reveals that the faux was a phoney with self-serving intentions; solidarity and constructive change, rather than the veneration of a myth of the past, are the true paths to liberation for the oppressed.

In *A Master of Djinn*, the weight of history is also examined through the unseen. This fictionalised version of a historical figure, Al-Jahiz, represents the point at which tradition and modernity clashed. He forced a rethink of what civilisation meant when he opened his *ghayb*, unleashing both wonders and chaos. The fact that his name serves as a rallying cry for both radicalism (the villain's revolution) and progress (the founding of the Ministry) which shows how *ghayb* can be a double-edged sword, much like technology or any other strong force. It has the power to liberate (such as liberating a country and enabling women like Fatma to pursue careers), but it can also oppress or divert by creating new forms of violence and new inequalities). Because of Clark's nuanced portrayal, *ghayb* is viewed as a component of the socio-political fabric rather than being romanticised or demonised.

In terms of Islamicate imagination, *A Master of Djinn*, stands out for envisioning a world in which Islamic metaphysics structurally influences contemporary life. Even while riding in airborne trams, people invoke *Bismillah* as the daily call to prayer echoes with the hum of automatons. This world rejects the Judeo-Christian dichotomy of magic versus reason. In such a world, *ghayb* is not confined to superstition. Even the tensions of this integration are mentioned in the novel: while more liberal factions rejoice in the prosperity that djinn technology brings, traditionalist preachers in Cairo's mosques condemn the Ministry for trafficking in djinn, viewing it as experimenting with forbidden arts (a reference to how some conservative voices might respond). This argument, which has been transformed into a magical idiom, reflects ongoing debates in Muslim societies concerning modernity vs. authenticity and science vs. faith.

Even though Fatma frequently works with supernatural beings, her faith is subtle but present.

She instinctively recites passages from the Holy Quran for protection in one scene when she is faced with a resurrected undead (a trope that crosses into horror), as suggested by her earlier invocation of the Quran to ward off djinn. Her partner, Hadia, is more overtly religious (wearing a hijab, etc.), and the text demonstrates that piety and *ghayb* science are compatible. Hadia is a capable and eager new agent. Abigail, an American, is actually the embodiment of secular modern scepticism; she initially questions certain spiritual issues until she is directly faced with them. Even so, she adjusts fast. Clark might be arguing that a balanced worldview, one in which spiritual understanding and scientific investigation coexist, emerges in a world where the invisible is undeniable. In contrast to the disenchantment narrative that dominated much of the thinking of the 20th century, this model is refreshingly optimistic.

A Master of Djinn employs the *ghayb* motif within a carefully crafted sociopolitical framework. It poses the question: who would gain and who would lose if the invisible were included in the visible order? It provides complicated answers. Possibly a utopian result of *ghayb*-as-resistance, we see a proud, independent Cairo, freed from Western imperialism, exactly the sort of “democratizing...futures” that Sadaf and Kanwal describe in their book, *Contemporary Pakistani Speculative Fiction and the Global Imaginary* (13). However, utopia is not complete; we still need to fight against bigotry, misogyny, and class stratification. *Ghayb* can offer resources and mirror images to assist in achieving justice, but it does not equate to it. The Ministry’s very existence in Clark’s Cairo is an institutional recognition that reason and wonder can coexist. Traditionally, saints, shamans, or occult scholars, now professionalised in trench coats and tarbooshes, filled the role of mediators between the human and the invisible, which is what Fatma and her colleagues literally do. One of the main ideas of the novel is emphasised by this light-hearted modernisation of the mystic: the unseen is only as good or bad as those who use it. Oppression results when supremacists, whether colonial occultists or Ifrit overlords, use the *ghayb*. It turns into a tool for protection and emancipation when used by morally upright, compassionate

individuals (such as Fatma, Hadia, or Siti). The novel suggests that *ghayb* in SF can be a potent critique of power itself by shedding light on the schemes of empire, elevating the voices of subalterns (a woman of colour named Fatma literally engages in equal-opportunity negotiations with ancient Djinn kings), and dramatising the never-ending conflict between the oppressors and the liberated.

3.5 Comparative Reflections

When comparing these three diverse novels, it is evident that *ghayb* is used as a purposeful narrative technique that influences both genre and form in addition to serving as subject matter. Each novel combines elements of historical fiction, mystery, fantasy, and science fiction, but it does so through an Islamicate perspective that distinguishes it from its more secular or Western counterparts (the Judeo-Christian arcane). Wilson effectively builds what could be called ‘djinnpunk’ in *Alif the Unseen* by fusing cyberpunk thriller with Islamic cosmology. The narrative structure of the novel alternates between high-tech chases and mythic quests, with the virtual world of hackers and the *ghayb* world of jinn and ifrits intersecting. Wilson reinforces the dual reality by using alternating tones, such as reverent, fairytale cadences in scenes set in the jinn realm and sharp, slangy humour among Alif’s hacker crew. The unseen serves as both a structural motif (the novel begins with a folktale-like ‘Chapter Zero’ set long ago in which the jinn’s secret book is first written, framing the entire story) and a plot catalyst (the mystical book, the source of Alif’s problems). By purposefully referencing Islamicate literary heritage (*Alf Layla wa Layla*, etc.), this reiteration of classical frame tales invites readers to think of contemporary hackers and jinn as a part of an ongoing storytelling tradition. *Ghayb* is used in *The Golem and the Jinni* to revolutionize SF and fantasy tropes. Wecker uses the supernatural secrets of the golem and the jinni as the mystery that slowly comes to light, structuring the novel as an overlapping of two immigrant origin stories. Since Chava is oblivious to human customs and Ahmad cannot remember who bound him, their identities are initially unknown to both others and themselves. The story is thus

driven by unseen information: the reader is given tidbits of backstory in well-timed revelations (for example, the scene of Ahmad being trapped by the wizard is presented in a later flashback after he recovers his memory). This gradual unveiling reflects the process by which immigrants pick up new cultural practices piece by piece and the gradual development of trust between strangers (golem and jinni).

Furthermore, Wecker frequently switches between the viewpoints of different human supporting characters (the ice cream vendor, the Rabbi, etc.), each of whom only observes a single aspect of the paranormal activities. By doing this, the novel creates dramatic irony, which builds suspense and empathy because the reader frequently understands the hidden aspects of Chava or Ahmad's personalities while the other character does not. In this way, the suspense and emotional resonance of the novel are fuelled by *ghayb*, in the sense of concealed identity. In contrast, Clark uses *ghayb* as the foundation for world-building in his genre-bending detective adventure, *A Master of Djinn*. Making the invisible visible is, in essence, the goal of the entire scene. In contrast to the typical hidden magical world cliché (such as Harry Potter's wizarding world), we as readers enjoy exploring this alternate Cairo where magic is commonplace. Clark envisions *ghayb* integrated rather than kept underground, and as a result, there is less of the anxiety that Wilson and Wecker feel about keeping secrets in the story. Instead, a traditional whodunit plot, murders, hints, suspects, transposed onto a fantasy canvas provides the narrative tension. Because the culprit could be a man, ghoul, ifrit, or, as it turns out, a combination of these, the *ghayb* dimension increases the mystery's complexity and stakes. Clark uses *ghayb* to simultaneously subvert two genres by combining detective procedural and fantasy epic. The way that *ghayb* enables intertextuality with scripture and folklore, enhancing the narrative layers, is a noteworthy tactic used in all three texts. Allusions to narratives from legend or verses in the Holy Qur'an serve as symbolic foreshadowing and Easter eggs. In *Alif the Unseen*, for example, the name Alif itself alludes

to the first letter of the Arabic alphabet and, consequently, to the first chapter of the Holy Qur'an (*Alif-Lam-Mim*), suggesting beginnings and mystical knowledge. The characters in *The Golem and the Jinni* attend a theatre production of *Tausend und Eine Nacht* (*Thousand and One Nights*) in a deft reference that places their own narrative within the context of Middle Eastern fantasy. In order to keep the reader continuously determining which aspects of this world are historically accurate and which are purely fictional, Clark intersperses *A Master of Djinn* with Arabic proverbs and allusions to real-life Cairene landmarks. In these stories, *ghayb* serves as a tool for world-bridging, bridging literary traditions, cultures, the past and present. In a more general sense, authors can "bring together tropes and motifs from...the imaginative worlds of local folklores (and) Islamic mythical worlds" to create something new through SF, as noted by Kanwal and Mansoor (245). Each of the three writers accomplishes this by recombining genre conventions and cultural motifs into hybrid forms through the use of the invisible as a sort of narrative alchemy. In addition to being visually appealing, this narrative technique makes the implicit claim that *ghayb* stories are adaptable and up to date, able to address current audience and concerns while maintaining their mythic essence.

The selected works facilitate a productive comparison between the more prevalent secular or Western models of SF and what we might refer to as Islamicate speculative imagination. Although all three texts fall under the general Anglophone fantasy tradition, they are unique in that they base their fantastical elements on Islamicate ideas of the unseen rather than, say, European (Judeo-Christian) folklore or wholly made-up magic systems. This shift results in tropes that many contemporary readers find novel and refreshing, but it is more than a window dressing change; it is a refocusing of theme and perspective. Magic and the supernatural are frequently isolated from religious belief in Judeo-Christian (Western) SF, or even purposefully opposed to it. Vampires and ghosts roam an implicitly godless world governed by occult laws, while wizards use a quasi-scientific system to cast spells. In contrast, the

supernatural is directly linked to religious cosmology and divine order in these Islamicate narratives. Since “dogmatically speaking, *ghayb*...(is) known only unto God,” as Saif points out, any use or interaction with it by mortals has a spiritual context (19). This is demonstrated in *Alif the Unseen* whose earlier, ego-driven attempt literally blew up in his face. Alif only uses the power of the *Alf Yeom* after infusing it with moral purpose and faith. The message is consistent with the Islamic ethos: higher truth and ethics must take precedence over knowledge, even magical knowledge. In *Alif the Unseen*, humility and good intentions are more significant than mastery, whereas in Western fantasy, the cliché might have been how the chosen one successfully masters the ultimate spell. Similar to this, the Golem and the Jinni incorporate their fantasy into conversations about souls, free will, and what constitutes goodness, all of which are traditionally religious topics. The romance or the immigrant experience as social realism might have been the only themes of a Western secular adaptation of this tale. Wecker instead immerses the metaphysical in the real world: Chava and Ahmad literally debate whether or not they have souls, and these are plot-relevant questions rather than merely philosophical ones (e.g., can a soulless golem evolve, or is she destined to run amok in the end? Will the jinni’s essentially immortal perspective prevent him from genuine empathy?). By using *ghayb* creatures, Wecker turns immigrant characters from objects of pity or discrimination into almost archetypal figures; in doing so, the novel reflects on belonging on two interrelated tiers: first, within the larger order of Creation itself, where creatures made of clay and fire, such as the golem and the jinni, represent alternate ways of living that are approved by divine cosmology; and second, within the contested social landscape of America, where immigrants must navigate their place in a country that frequently marginalises them. By contrasting these two aspects, Wecker implies that the more fundamental issue of determining one’s proper position in the fabric of existence as determined by the Creator is inextricably linked to the fight for acceptance in America. This is a distinctly Islamicate perspective: the magical is grounded in the moral realm.

Aligning her argument with Leoni, Khosroshahi states that the magical frequently coexists with the religious in Islamic tradition. Wecker's narrative, in which a Rabbi uses Hebrew prayers to calm a golem and an Arab mother strings iron beads around her baby to keep jinn away, shows how religious practices and the supernatural can coexist without conflict. The difference from secular models is perhaps most noticeable in *A Master of Djinn* because Clark subverts the typical colonial biases of Western genres like steampunk and Victorian mystery. In this instance, Egyptian and Djinn engineers are responsible for churning marvels, while the British are continuously depicted as either extinct or incompetent in the face of legitimate magic. Lord Worthington's, an arrogant British aristocrat in the novel, tragic attempt to subjugate arcane forces highlights both his ignorance of the local culture and the larger parody of colonial arrogance.

Typically, steampunk might depict British gentlemen tinkering with clockwork and ether. Clark's world, in which an Egyptian Ministry appropriates European bureaucratic form to manage ancient djinn lore and a Hermetic Brotherhood of Englishmen seeks Islamic occult wisdom, supports Sedgwick's claim that it is incorrect to treat Islamic and Western esotericisms as completely distinct because "they have common origins...and transfers...they are situated together" (24). The locus of arcane power and authority in these stories, however, is firmly in the Islamic realm, which makes it stand out. The antagonists either abuse spiritual knowledge or serve as warning tales of overreach (such as Schaalman, whose doom carries a whiff of karmic justice for trying to play god with God's secrets); the heroes are frequently believers (to varied degrees) or convert to faith. These pieces pose the question: what if mystical power were a public legacy of Cairo or a secret reality of the Middle East rather than the exclusive domain of a small number of neo-pagans in Europe? How does that alter the conventional genre narrative about who is the hero or the sidekick, who is knowledgeable, and who needs to be educated? The texts provide refreshing answers: the native believer (Alif, Dina, Fatma, etc.) who was

underappreciated turns out to be the key to solving the mystery or saving the day, while the Western sceptic, such as Alif's American convert friend Dina, becomes the amazed student. Kanwal and Mansoor have expressed a postcolonial desire to "re-centre...and revive" indigenous speculative traditions in contemporary SF, which this inversion attempts to address (244). That is what the selected novels do. Crucially, they enhance Western genre conventions rather than rejecting them. *A Master of Djinn* revels in clever banter and action set-pieces as much as it does in commentary on Britishers; Alif reads as much like a page-turner thriller as a spiritual allegory; and *The Golem and the Jinni* is as much about human love and identity as it is about djinn fires. However, by incorporating *ghayb* into their stories, they present a comprehensive picture in which the lines separating the visible and invisible, the scientific and the miraculous, the modern and the traditional are fluid and porous. Unlike secular fantasy, believing in the unseen is ingrained in these worlds and is not considered naiveté. Even though it is inhabited by fantastical creatures, the Islamicate imagination depicts a universe that is ultimately subject to divine moral order. Therefore, these novels consistently tie power to ethical and spiritual considerations, whereas secular SF frequently examines power in a vacuum. The reunification of the meaningful and the enchanted is perhaps their unique contribution to the genre.

Apart from the aforementioned, the *ghayb* motif is used repeatedly in *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and *A Master of Djinn* to convey themes of resistance, emancipation, and reorientation for both characters and readers. Access to the arcane gives marginalised characters the ability to resist oppressive forces and overcome social or personal constraints in each story. In *Alif the Unseen*, the jinn and digital activists literally work together to topple a despot. As Alif tells the Hand, all the hidden facts and voices silenced by the regime are rising in the dark to shatter the façade of power. *Ghayb*, represented by the magic book and the jinn's assistance, turns into a weapon for the oppressed, what one could refer to as 'resistance knowledge.' The novel's climax, in which the masses overthrow the

State Security forces using the reactivated internet (a once-hidden network) and possibly some jinn intervention, reads as a manifesto on the liberating power of information, whether it be of a mystical or every day sort, when it is freely disseminated. In terms of Islamic esoteric knowledge historically being less marginal and more integrated, this echoes a dynamic observed by Sedgwick: in *Alif the Unseen*, the unjust social order cannot endure once hidden knowledge is democratised. *Ghayb* serves as a revolutionary equaliser in this context. Resistance and liberation take on a more intimate, yet no less important, aspect in *The Golem and the Jinni*. Both the golem and the jinni fight against bondage: Ahmad finally faces the real iron shackles as well as the symbolic chains of isolation and rootlessness, while Chava battles society's attempts to confine her and her innate servile programming. Both of them benefit from their friendship, which gives them the freedom to express themselves, behave naturally (even by secretly changing their shape), and envision futures beyond simple survival.

Furthermore, they oppose the fates that cruel creators (the wizard for Ahmad, Rotfeld for Chava) have imposed on them by uniting against Schaalman. By the end of the novel, Ahmad chooses empathy and connection over arrogant seclusion, and Chava makes her own decisions, even considering ending her life on her own terms. Liberation as self-determination is embodied in these arcs. It is important that they handle this in the New World because Wecker seems to imply that the diversity and fluidity of immigrant life, which is a sort of *ghayb* to mainstream America, provides a space for self-reflection. Their tale shifts the focus of the immigrant narrative from the drama of assimilation to a fanciful reflection on the soul and free will. Last but not least, *A Master of Djinn* overtly presents the *ghayb* as a weapon of anti-colonial resistance: Al-Jahiz's use of magic was what drove the British out, a daring reversal of historical truth. By highlighting racial and class injustices, the false Al-Jahiz seeks to use that legacy to ignite a second revolution. Even though his tactics are evil, they are motivated by justifiable grievances from a colonised or enslaved past (the antagonist is a Sudanese man who endured

imperialism). Thus, even in this case, the torch of liberation is carried by the invisible, the cults, the ancient magic, albeit twisted by the retaliation of one antagonist. On the plus side, Fatma and her coworkers embody Egypt's free present: they are people of colour, religious, and frequently female, and they boldly defend their city and sovereignty. Even though the Ministry is bureaucratic, it serves as a reminder that Egypt now controls its own destiny and the authority that comes with the *ghayb*. By focussing on Egyptian perspectives and incorporating Western characters like the naive Sir Dalton and the haughty Worthington as comic relief or counterpoints, Clark reorients the colonial gaze. Instead of a British detective in a deerstalker cracking the case, the reader is redirected to cheer for an Egyptian woman wearing a bowler hat. One senses a common goal among the three novels: to recover the story of the marvellous. In these tales, *ghayb* is depicted as a multifaceted source of empowerment that is consistent with the protagonists' moral principles and cultural values rather than being a satanic horror or an Orientalist curiosity. By doing this, these writers free the idea of the invisible from exoticism and bring it back to the experiences of their characters. The reader is also reoriented: they are encouraged to view golems and jinn as relatable creatures or even metaphors for ourselves (one's hidden hardships and desires for independence), rather than as monsters or other entities. The novels gently lead readers, particularly those in the West, to view the world through a different civilisational lens by incorporating Qur'anic and folkloric allusions throughout. This perspective views the unseen as an accepted aspect of reality rather than a work of fiction. By emphasising non-Western cosmologies and protagonists without apologising, these works effectively decolonise contemporary SF by engaging and entertaining readers with the genre's own tools, myth, wonder, and action. *Ghayb*, or the invisible reality, is a rich source for contemporary SF that is simultaneously intriguing, significant, and in line with cultural authenticity. The unseen in these novels is ultimately a force for good and broadened perspectives, whether it is used to overthrow a government, reunite estranged souls, or rebuild a country. Every story paints a picture of a

world in which the lines separating the visible and invisible have blurred, offering the possibility of both individual and societal change. It is a potent message that suggests we might discover new avenues for justice, love, and self-awareness in our own, less mundane world if we re-engage with the *ghayb*, with mystery, faith, and imagination.

In this chapter, I have looked at how the Qur'anic concept of *ghayb* serves as a dynamic narrative force in three works of contemporary SF: *A Master of Djinn*, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and *Alif the Unseen*. Through these analyses, I demonstrated that *ghayb*, that fosters resistance, reorientation, and epistemic pluralism, not only challenges prevailing Judeo-Christian epistemologies but also functions as a speculative mode with a strong foundation in Islamicate ontologies. The unseen, represented by djinn, divine revelation, mystical books, and hidden forces, reconfigures narrative structure and ideological positioning in each novel, as this chapter illustrated, drawing on Islamic theological discourse and Judeo-Christian arcane scholarship. The following chapter will build on this foundation by delving deeper into the substantive and symbolic presence of Islamic arcana and examining the ways in which esoteric traditions like alchemy, occult sciences, Sufism, and *ta'wil* are woven into the texts' speculative fabric. In Chapter 4, I examine how Islamic esotericism animates the speculative imaginary and helps to construct alternate cosmologies, metaphysical landscapes, and reimagined power structures in the selected novels through rituals, sacred symbols, spiritual genealogies, and mystical allegories.

Chapter 4

Interweaving Esoteric Threads: Islamic Arcana in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

In this chapter, I further unpack my discussion of the *ghayb* as moving to a broader spectrum of esoteric practices, symbols, and cosmologies, delving deeper into the entanglements of Islamic arcane traditions and contemporary SF. Although the previous chapter explained how the hidden functions as a narrative and epistemological force in contemporary texts, the current chapter focusses on the more complex fabric of Islamicate arcana, which includes Sufi allegories, occult sciences, embodied ritual knowledge, *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation), and *ḥaqīqa* (ultimate truth). I aim to demonstrate how contemporary authors revive the Islamic arcane as a metaphysical tool and a counter-discursive tactic against the prevalence of Judeo-Christian mystical tropes in global SF by placing these traditions within speculative literary frameworks. Therefore, the chapter focuses on how devotion, ritual, and the unseen are reimagined as living and breathing frameworks for imagining alternative modernities and futurities rather than as outdated remnants of premodern religiosity.

I examine how the weaves of Islamic arcana confer on SF an esoteric depth and cultural specificity through extensive examinations of Clark's *A Master of Djinn*, Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni*, and Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*. In order to illustrate how mystical traditions mediate issues of identity, belonging, and power, every work employs arcane impulses, whether through the elemental cosmologies of clay and fire, the Sufi allegorical figure of the Simurgh, or the imagined brotherhoods that preserve subversive knowledge. I discuss how these novels create speculative worlds where the sacred and the futuristic are not mutually exclusive but rather reinforce each other by examining the interaction of symbolism, ritual, and myth with digital technologies, diasporic voyages, and postcolonial irony. Therefore, the fourth chapter describes the recent development of Islamic arcana as a speculative

framework that challenges the epistemological constraints of empire and its secular imaginaries, redefines cultural belonging, and reclaims metaphysical authority.

4.1 Mapping Islamic Arcana: Traditions, Symbols, and Practices

Islamic culture has long fostered an arcana of hidden knowledge that encompasses the occult sciences as well as mystical spirituality. Sufism, the esoteric aspect of Islam, along with a rich history of numerology, astrology, alchemy, talismanic magic, and other occult practices, are frequently used to frame this (Balayil). El-Aswad, in his article, “The Perceptibility of the Invisible: Cosmology, Religious Rituals, and Embodied Spirituality among the Bahraini Shi’a”, states that the term “esoteric Islam” describes the inner, concealed teachings (*batin*) that lie behind the external (*zahir*) manifestations of religion (73). Sufi mystics, who consider themselves to be heirs of the Prophet’s hidden wisdom, have been seeking inner truth (*haqiqa*) for more than a thousand years through practices like poetry, allegory, and meditation (*dhikr*) (Kamada). At the same time, Islamicate scholars of the Middle Ages publicly investigated occult sciences, divination, astrology, alchemy, and numerology as valid fields of study (often referred to as *‘ulum al-ghayb*, sciences of the unseen). Such practices never completely disappeared from Muslim societies, despite occasional criticism from the orthodox community. Indeed, a fundamental part of Muslim worldviews is the belief in an invisible realm of jinn, angels, the Evil Eye, and other mystical forces. Western scholars occasionally avoid using terms like “occult” or “supernatural,” but Muslim interlocutors acknowledge that they are inherently “talking about phenomena beyond nature and encompassing the divine,” reflecting Islam’s long-standing acceptance of the “world of the unseen,” as curator Leoni points out (9). There is a complex web of spiritually motivated symbols and hidden sciences, which contemporary SF writers can draw upon as the rich reservoir of Islamic arcana, when crafting SF.

A distinctive hermeneutics of the hidden, or methods of interpretation (*ta'wil*) that reveal several levels of meaning in scripture and narrative, is at the core of Islamic esotericism. In the *Perceptibility of the Invisible*, El-Aswad explores that both *ẓahir* (visible) and *batin* (hidden) meanings are thought to be present in the Qur'an itself (73). Each Qur'anic verse contains seven thousand layers of meaning, all of which exist without contradiction, according to a saying frequently cited in Sufi and Shi'i traditions (73). Mystics look for the inner truth (*ḥaqīqa*) that lies behind the literal text through *ta'wil*, or esoteric exegesis. For instance, esoteric reading may allegorise the same verse as a map of the soul's journey to God, while exoteric commentary may focus on legal or historical context. According to this paradigm, knowledge is divided into two categories: the inward, inspired knowledge of the heart (*'ilm al-batin*) and the external, acquired knowledge of Islamic law and theology (*'ilm al-ẓahir*). In the *Perceptibility of the Invisible*, El-Aswad mentions that the inner *batin* path "is aimed at knowing God," whereas the *shari'a* (the apparent law) is intended for worshipping God (73). Symbols, metaphors, and numerological hints that are only understandable to those who are initiated may be used to convey this secret knowledge. Islamic mystics, for example, give meaning to the Qur'anic letters and numbers: the enigmatic, disconnected letters (*ḥuruf al-muqatta'at*) that start some chapters are believed to hide cosmic truths. In addition to reading sacred history for hidden cycles and prophecies, esoteric cosmology adds to the rich Islamicate discourse on eschatology and numerology. Arcane numerological systems, such as the *abjad* system, which assigns numerical values to Arabic letters and finds mystical significance in their sums, were created as a result of the Qur'anic prevalence of sacred numbers (3, 7, 40, 99, etc.) and end-times signs. These customs demonstrate how Muslims have traditionally embraced multiple levels of meaning (textual, numerical, and symbolic) in their quest to understand the mysteries of God.

The transmission of secret knowledge through ritual and spiritual authority, as well as the arcane as embodied practice, are equally significant. In most Islamic esoteric traditions, a master (*shaykh* or

murshid) who has been initiated into the arcane truths himself must provide guidance. With their own chain (*silsila*) of approved masters dating back to the Prophet, traditional Sufi orders (*Tariqas*) operated as mystical fraternities and frequently protected specific occult practices or esoteric teachings (such as alchemical methods, prayer formulas, or talismanic symbols). Thus, esoteric knowledge existed not only in theological epistemes but also in bodies and communities, such as the *Mevlevi* dervishes' twirling dance, the *Naqshbandi* silent *dhikr*'s breath control, or the charms made by a master of *ilm al-huruf* (letter magic). Although these rituals may seem like foul arts or superstitions to many outsiders and insiders (including many orthodox Muslims who consider such practices to be *bid'a* or even shirk), these are spiritual power tools in their own right. Mediaeval treatises on magic, for instance, frequently start by outlining the level of devotion or spiritual purity required of the practitioner in order for the enchantments to be effective (Balayil).

In Islam, arcane practices were frequently associated with authority and intention. For instance, talismans or astrology could be accepted if they were used for guidance or healing by a devout sage, but they were frowned upon if they were used for self-serving sorcery (*sihr*) (Leoni 9). In Islamicate societies, people who are said to possess arcane knowledge, such as saintly Sufis, alchemists, dream interpreters, and sorcerers, have historically inspired both reverence and terror. They are thought to control spiritual forces that exist outside of reality. The *sahir* (magician) who casts spells and the *wali* (Sufi saint) who performs miracles are two sides of the same coin; both rely on occult forces through mastery and divine favour (*baraka*) through purity, but they both live in the liminal space of arcana. Yet, while the magician is proscribed for manipulating occult forces through technical mastery, the saint is venerated for channelling divine favor (*baraka*) through purity. According to Sedgwick, these esoteric figures were romanticised as the keepers of an ancient wisdom that linked Islam to earlier spiritual traditions, and they evolved into mythic bearers of tradition (qtd. in Balayil). All things considered,

Islamic arcana is a spectrum rather than a single entity. It includes everything from practical magic to mystical theology, from astrological charts to Qur'anic numerology, and it is represented by tales, customs, and lineages that have persisted into the present day.

The three contemporary SF novels that are being examined, *Alif the Unseen* by Wilson, *The Golem and the Jinni* by Wecker, and *A Master of Djinn* by Clark, consciously draw on this multifaceted Islamicate arcana. By incorporating folk magic, occult lore, and Sufi-like mysticism into its imaginative plot, each novel successfully reclaims the world of the unseen as a literary realm. These writers craft tales that speak to the depth of Islamic traditions by weaving together esoteric elements, such as astrological and alchemical motifs, Sufi allegories, and Qur'anic symbols. The following analysis looks at how each novel maps and reimagines Islamic arcana: *A Master of Djinn* imagines a postcolonial steampunk Cairo where djinn politics and secret orders rewrite history; *The Golem and the Jinni* explores souls and selves by fusing Middle Eastern folklore with Jewish Kabbalistic magic; and *Alif the Unseen* combines the digital and the arcane in a cyber-Sufi adventure. In the following sections, I will uncover through interpretive literary analysis that the esoteric motifs in these works (from divination and numerology to magic and mysticism) are not just decorative; rather, they create a speculative framework that addresses issues of identity, power, and knowledge. Every novel poses the same question: what happens if the obscure, hidden aspects of Islamicate culture are revealed to the contemporary world? As I will unearth, the findings are creative, revolutionary, and profoundly illuminating.

4.2 Arcane Currents in *Alif the Unseen*

The techno-fantasy thriller *Alif the Unseen* by G. Willow Wilson suggests that the digital age may serve as a new stage for the occult and mystical by overtly fusing Islamic arcana with cyberspace. Alif, the young Muslim hacker protagonist of the book, unintentionally ends up taking on the role of keeper of a top-secret book of Jinn lore. He and the reader are drawn into a world where occultism and

code are intertwined in this ancient text, *The Thousand and One Days (Alf Yeom)*. Under the cyberpunk exterior of the book, Wilson frames Alif's journey as a contemporary spiritual quest by utilising Sufi allegory and Islamic mythological motifs. Interestingly, the story uses the myth of the Simurgh, a legendary bird king from Persian Sufi poetry, as a metaphor for the metamorphosis that Alif experiences. The birds of the world set out on a treacherous quest to locate their ruler, the Simurgh, by travelling through seven valleys of spiritual enlightenment in Farid ud-Din Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, written in the 12th century. Only thirty birds eventually make it to the Simurgh's home, where "each one sees his/her reflection in the celestial bird," demonstrating that Simurgh (Persian for thirty-bird) is actually the sum of all the birds. (Kamada) The soul's journey to realise that the Divine Beloved is reflected in the seekers' own collective being is depicted in this timeless Sufi allegory. Wilson acknowledges this allegorical structure in *Alif the Unseen* by incorporating fables from the *Alf Yeom* into the story, which parallel and direct Alif's development. Alif has an epiphany when he reads a story about "a stag and a doe" that is actually a coded parable, an avatar for something else (185). Sheikh Bilal, the Sufi character who resides in the book, uses allegory and symbolism in his speech. He reminds Alif that every word in the Holy Qur'an has layers of meaning "which exist without contradiction at all times," and he likens reality to a multilayered text (185). Such advice prepares Alif (and the reader) to see past outward manifestations and is reminiscent of the Sufi hermeneutic of *ta'wil*. In allegorical terms, Alif's transformation from a cynical, secular hacker to someone who recognises the hidden unity of things can therefore be interpreted as a 'journey of the soul', a journey reminiscent of Attar's birds, but modernised for the twenty-first century.

Treating language, symbols, and code as interchangeable forms of arcana is one of *Alif the Unseen*'s intriguing breakthroughs. Wilson blurs the distinction between cyber and sacred by explicitly drawing a comparison between mystical language and computer language. According to the novel, the

ancient *Alf Yeom* is a collection of Jinn folklore that also serves as a storehouse of secret knowledge, “not just stories...really secret knowledge disguised as stories” (93). Alif learns that the book’s symbolic stories are a code unto themselves, capable of granting unheard-of abilities in the digital world. Thus, the novel implies that occult symbols and programming code function according to the same principle: both are esoteric scripts that, if read and used, have the power to alter reality. The *Alf Yeom* pushes Alif further into the hidden world (*ghayb*) of jinn and arcane signs. Alif already exists in a liminal space of hidden networks and encryption as a grey hat hacker. In a pivotal scene, Wilson makes this convergence tangible when Alif figures out how to convert the mystical ideas of the *Alf Yeom* into computer code. He draws a revolutionary conclusion from Sheikh Bilal’s teaching that the words of the Qur’an contain multiple layers of truth at once: what if a computer could be trained to think in metaphors rather than binary? Alif develops a quantum-like algorithm that defies conventional zero-or-one logic by feeding the computer the magical tales of the *Alf Yeom*. He exclaims with excitement, “All modern computers are pedants, but I will teach yours to recognise multiple origin points...systems of multivalent cause and effect” (187). He is essentially giving the machine an arcane consciousness, which allows it to process reality on several levels simultaneously, much like a Sufi mystic does when they simultaneously perceive spiritual and literal meanings. The end result is a program that operates on metaphor and behaves in an unpredictable, almost magical way, a sort of sacred technology. This union of the esoteric and the digital is what allows Alif to defeat his enemy (the State’s digital surveillance, represented by the Hand). He describes the *Alf Yeom* as a dynamic text that “varies depending on who reads it” in a triumphant passage. “The dervishes saw the Philosopher’s Stone, but I see codes” (187). This line blatantly conflates alchemical transmutation (the Philosopher’s Stone) with programming and dervishes, or Sufi seekers of truth, with hackers. Alif believes that the key to deciphering code is what the ancient Sufi adepts believed to be the secret of transforming ordinary matter into gold. Wilson thus proposes a

continuum between contemporary information science and ancient arcana. Both require an introduction to hidden patterns and deal with the manipulation of symbols to bring about change in the real world. Wilson daringly portrays cyberspace as an extension of the invisible spirit world by having jinn, creatures of smokeless fire from Islamic mythology, literally infect and inhabit the Internet in the novel. The implication is that rather than eradicating the mystical, contemporary technology has provided the arcane with a new medium for manifestation. Humans now believe they can “ascend to the heavens” with plastic and electricity (technology), but if they “climb too high” without wisdom, “the angels will ask you where you’re going,” as wryly noted by Vikram the jinn (95). His caution sums up the theme of the novel: while combining technology and arcana can be empowering, it also necessitates ethical restraint and humility.

Wilson also examines, frequently with a satirical undertone, the conflict between secular modernity and sacred tradition throughout *Alif the Unseen*. A critique of contemporary educated Muslims who accept strict law (*fiqh*) but reject the spirit world as superstition is voiced by the character Intisar, Alif’s lost love, whose dissertation becomes entangled with the *Alf Yeom*. Even as they strictly adhere to legal minutiae, she ironically observes in her thesis (which Alif reads while on the run) that “the Quran speaks of the hidden people [jinn] in the most candid way, yet... the educated faithful will not admit to believing in them” (95). Citing Intisar’s *Variations of Religious Discourse in Early Islamic Fiction*, this observation strikes a chord as a meta-commentary on the novel’s endeavour. By purposefully reclaiming the reality of the invisible in an Islamic context, Wilson is filling a gap that Intisar points out. Putting genies back in the postmodern bottle of science fiction, Wilson reclaims the sacred in a secular genre by making jinn and mystical books tangible in the narrative. According to academic Rebecca Hankins, Muslim writers of SF frequently employ the genre to creatively “[re-center] Islamic themes” and combat the disillusionment of contemporary narratives (3). *Alif the Unseen* is, in

fact, a groundbreaking example of Islamic cyberpunk, in which occultism and Qur'anic eschatology serve as the foundation for a story about resistance and state surveillance. When mystical chaos breaks out in the city at the novel's climax, humans and jinn band together in what is as much a spiritual as a political uprising. The result points to a complex lesson: genuine sovereignty is found in a higher order of truth that can be seen through faith, imagination, and occult wisdom, not in totalitarian regimes or unbridled technology. Sufi metaphysics, djinn folklore, and linguistic and numerical mysticism are just a few of the arcane currents that Wilson's novel channels into the modern cloud. In doing so, *Alif the Unseen* suggests that the Islamic esoteric tradition is a living resource rather than a holdover from a pre-modern era, and it even provides a framework for comprehending the infosphere and today's challenges.

4.3 The Esoteric and the Elemental in *The Golem and the Jinni*

As a historical fantasy, Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* incorporates two legendary arcane creatures: a jinni from Arabic/Islamic lore and a golem from Jewish folklore. Wecker draws on the esoteric roots of both Jewish Kabbalah and Islamic Middle Eastern magical traditions to explore themes of creation, freedom, memory, and the soul through their interwoven story. Alchemy and sorcery permeate the novel's premise, which is that a man named Otto Rotfeld hires a Polish Kabbalist to create a golem, a humanoid made of clay that is animated by spells, to be his ideal wife. In both Islamic and Jewish occult legends, the arcana of necromancy and artificial creation is strongly referenced in this act of creating life from inanimate matter. A closely-kept secret in Jewish mysticism, the golem-making ritual is said to entail intoning sacred formulas and permuting Hebrew letters of the Divine Name. This practice is comparable to Islamic alchemists' attempts to animate matter or alchemists' attempts to create homunculi. As a living embodiment of secret lore, or "the deathless knowledge of Jewish mystics from centuries past," the golem, Chava in the novel, thus symbolises forbidden knowledge incarnate (302). Although she was created without a soul in the conventional sense, she nevertheless acquires empathy,

curiosity, and even a conscience, which begs the question of soul and agency. Wecker examines the ethical ramifications of esoteric power through Chava's viewpoint. A character remarks at one point that the spells that are used to create and control the golem are "no more than, say, a knife" and are not intrinsically evil; it all depends on the intention of the person using them (404). This is consistent with the ancient occult philosophy principle, which is also reflected in Sufi thought, that knowledge is neutral in and of itself, and that its light or darkness depends on the practitioner's heart. The novel poses the following question through Chava: Is she destined to be a soulless tool or can an arcane creation possess an inner moral compass? As the golem, free of her master (Rotfeld dies on the journey to America), must establish her own identity and purpose in an immigrant community that would fear her if they knew her true nature, the answer gradually becomes clear.

The journey of Ahmad, the jinni, a creature of elemental fire from the Syrian desert, runs parallel to Chava's. Before a wizard bound him in a copper flask and sealed it with iron, Ahmad (the name he takes in New York) was a powerful djinn. This fate is reminiscent of the Solomonic legends in which sorcerers or King Solomon himself imprisoned jinn in bottles. According to Islamic folklore, jinn are made from smokeless fire (Qur'an 55:15) and live for millennia, frequently knowing old secrets or hidden treasures. Wecker's jinni has lived for more than a millennium; he estimates that he has been imprisoned since the early mediaeval period. However, he has amnesia regarding the events leading up to his shackling and is unable to remember who or why he was shackled when he emerges in New York. Ahmad's journey is therefore one of memory and soul, one of regaining lost freedom and knowledge. Like the *ghayb* nature of spirits, he is essentially esoteric in that ordinary humans cannot see him unless he chooses to reveal himself. It becomes evident that his story is about the hubris of mortals who seek eternal life and dominion through arcane means when he eventually remembers the wizard's name (after coming across hints and having dreams). The antagonist of the book, who is now identified as Yehudah

Schaalman, the Kabbalist who created the golem, has been using alchemy and sorcery to try to find the secret of immortality, which is how he trapped the jinni so long ago. Here, Wecker skilfully blends Islamic and Jewish esoteric traditions: the Kabbalist binds a djinn by combining Talmudic magic with probably acquired Arab occult science, a crossover that highlights the region's common mystic heritage. In the past, syncretic charms that invoked the names of God in multiple languages were found in many Middle Eastern grimoires, and mediaeval Jewish and Muslim occultists did in fact share knowledge. Schaalman's pursuit of "life eternal" drives him to engage in the most heinous forms of black magic, from syphoning the jinni's quasi-immortal essence to creating a golem as an obedient wife (265). Thus, a central theme is the alchemy of life and soul: Ahmad's potentially endless life and Chava's artificial life become mirror images that captivate and seduce the antagonist who lacks both. Wecker examines what it means to be human when constrained by magical laws through these characters. Despite being supernatural, the golem and the jinni both struggle with issues of faith, freedom, and belonging that are incredibly human.

The evocation of the protagonists' elemental nature and how that contributes to esoteric symbolism is one remarkable aspect of *The Golem and the Jinni*. Chava, the golem, is made of clay, or earth, and her attributes reflect this: she is strong, steady, and able to hear the unsaid wishes of those around her, possibly a reference to the golem's nature as a creature shaped by human desire. The jinni Ahmad is of fire; he is erratic, fervent, imaginative, and ephemeral. According to classical and alchemical systems, fire and earth are traditionally antagonistic elements, and Chava and Ahmad do, in fact, have quite different temperaments. However, their unusual love and friendship point to a mystical equilibrium of factors. In a particularly striking scene, the two stroll across Manhattan's rooftops at night, a transitional area between the ground and the sky, and the story highlights how completely safe it is for "you and me," if no one else (249). The jinni learning consideration and caution (qualities alien

to a flame) and the golem experiencing the thrill of the open night (typically alien to an earthbound being) give this nighttime adventure the flavour of an initiation. Each subtly tempers the other. The joining of opposites (earth and fire, clay and heat) evokes alchemical marriages and, in fact, may be interpreted as a metaphor for intercultural or interfaith union. Such moments are resonant with mystical metaphor. As in Islamic legend, where jinn whisper ideas to human artisans or where King Solomon's jinn create magnificent works, the elemental jinn was frequently used in literature as a carrier of hidden knowledge, inspiring poets and guiding sages. Ahmad's amnesia causes him to have incomplete knowledge in Wecker's novel, but he nevertheless possesses the sensibilities of a different world. When asked if he believes in God, for example, he responds that he has seen things older than any scripture and seen various faiths rise and fall. This viewpoint of cosmic detachment is esoteric in and of itself. He then uses a small magical trick (melting metal with his hands) to show off his strength, evoking the way jinn might give curses or gifts in folklore. Ahmad must, however, acquire empathy and moral responsibility, two qualities that, according to the novel, characterise a soul. In addition to being a real flame, the fire inside of him represents the conscience that slowly grows inside of him as a result of Chava's natural kindness.

In the melting pot of immigrant New York, the golem and the jinni come together to form what could be called an arcane intersection of mysticism. Although their esoteric traditions, Arab-Islamic and Jewish Kabbalistic, have never directly intersected in the past, they find common ground in their otherness in the New World. With the addition of a layer of hidden magic that only these two outsiders genuinely share, this reflects the experience of immigrants, Jewish and Syrian communities coexisting in Manhattan. Wecker explores the search for identity in a world of change and diaspora using this premise. In order to blend in with Little Syria, Ahmad apprentices to a metalsmith, which calms his restless nature and allows him to imitate human form and labour. Chava, on the other hand, tries to pass

as an ordinary woman in the Jewish quarter, despite concealing her superhuman strength and the need to follow others' impulses. Each is required to "counterfeit" a human identity, which begs the question of who they really are (333). Do their chosen actions or their arcane origins define them? When they start sharing their peoples' stories with one another, intercultural mysticism takes over. For example, the golem explains how she was created and the word on paper that gives her life, while the jinni recalls the desert spirits and the wizardry he has seen. In one heartwarming scene, Ahmad shows Chava how to listen for the spheres' music in the busy city; he sees a symphony or pattern in the cacophony of the city that she at first finds impossible. This is similar to the Qur'anic notion that all living things sing God's praises unbeknownst to us (Qur'an 17:44) or Sufi notions of a hidden harmony in creation. Even though Wecker takes a subtle approach, there are esoteric undertones and Qur'anic echoes in these instances. Rabbi Meyer, a kind Orthodox rabbi who learns Chava's secret and becomes both her confidant and a student of arcane knowledge (he reads the pages of a spell book Chava obtains), is another example of the arcane crossroads in action. Rabbi Meyer's willingness to assist and his intellectual curiosity about golem and jinn lore highlight a balance between faith and mysticism. He views Chava as similar to the Golem of Prague legend and interprets her existence through a religious lens, offering her moral guidance. In one scene, he subtly cautions Chava against disclosing arcana to the public by telling her that it is wise to remain invisible because people are afraid of things they do not understand. The novel's message that intercultural understanding, in this case between religious and mystical worldviews, is essential for both individual and collective wholeness is emphasised by his function as a mediator between the arcane beings and human society. By the end, both of the main characters have matured: Ahmad regains his memory and resists giving in to despair or retaliation, while Chava overcomes the destructive commands ingrained in her, thwarting her creator's attempt to manipulate her once more. Their destinies are intertwined in a way that implies knowing one another

makes one more human. In order to examine immigrant identity and the creation of selfhood in a foreign country, *The Golem and the Jinni* employs esoteric fantasy. The narrative's integration of Islamic folklore and Kabbalistic magic is a statement in and of itself, reminding us that mystical traditions can act as cultural bridges rather than obstacles. In Wecker's novel, a Jewish and an Arab mystical being learn from one another and discover a common humanity, much as scholars have pointed out the "debt of Islamic occultism to other traditions—Greek, Persian, Indian" and vice versa (Leoni 12). The text engages with various folklore sources, such as the Golem legend, the 1001 Nights jinn tales, and Qur'anic and Talmudic references, to produce a new myth that is richer for its hybridity (arcane intertextuality in literary terms).

4.4 Arcane Orders and Djinn Cosmologies in *A Master of Djinn*

A Master of Djinn by Clark is a vivid example of Islamicate steampunk, set in an alternate 1912 in which Egypt's social and political landscape has changed due to the reintroduction of magic. The enigmatic character of Al-Jahiz, a Sudanese mystic who unlocked the door to the world of the djinn and let magic loose forty years prior to the events of the novel, is at the centre of this metamorphosis. In Clark's imaginative history, Al-Jahiz's deed resulted in the British colonists being driven out of Egypt and the emergence of a contemporary Egyptian superpower endowed with supernatural creatures and technologies. The novel can explore rival cosmologies of power and covert arcane orders against this backdrop. The most prominent of these is the fictional occult society that is central to the mystery, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Al-Jahiz. The Brotherhood is a group of enthusiasts from Europe and America (and later some Egyptians) who are committed to learning about and using the wisdom of Al-Jahiz. It is essentially a secret society and mystical order that is based on actual Victorian occult fraternities such as the Golden Dawn. In a scene where members gather in a chamber decorated with a banner featuring a hexagram (the alchemical Seal of Solomon symbol of the four elements united), flanked by the zodiac

signs and an all-seeing eye, Clark depicts the inner sanctum of the Brotherhood with rich esoteric symbolism. The group's leader is seated on a throne-like chair beneath this esoteric imagery, and its motto is "*Quaerite veritatem*" (Seek the truth) (14). These specifics firmly establish the Brotherhood's roots in the Western occult tradition, both hermetic and syncretic, but their entire mission revolves around Al-Jahiz, an African Muslim mystic. In this scenario, Europeans literally worship the insights of a Sudanese sage who outwitted them, inverting colonial dynamics rather than European Orientalists stealing Eastern wisdom. In order to preserve and research the magical artefacts (swords, talismans, and manuscripts) that Al-Jahiz left behind, the Brotherhood gathered a vault of artefacts pertaining to his adventures. By doing this, they conflate academic research with magical practice, much like how ancient Oriental manuscripts and grimoires were gathered by occult orders in the past. The main character of the book, Fatma (a Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments and Supernatural Entities agent), learns that the Brotherhood has valuable items and secrets in its vault, which have made them the target of a lethal imposter posing as the returned Al-Jahiz.

A Master of Djinn is replete with references to Djinn, magic, and political subversion. The idea that Al-Jahiz's magic ended British occupation is a fanciful depiction of anti-colonial resistance and an overt rewriting of history. Clark symbolically implies that native spiritual heritage, in this case, Islamic and African mysticism, could triumph where conventional weapons failed by arming Egypt with djinn allies and magical fire. The antagonist of the novel, who dons a golden mask and declares himself Al-Jahiz returned, carries on this theme. In order to upend the political system and inspire the populace to revolt, he plans events (such as the murder of Brotherhood members by mystical fire). In a pivotal encounter in the streets of Cairo, this masked impostor manipulates the populace with esoteric rhetoric, accusing the ruling elite of plotting with foreign powers and Brotherhood "idolaters" to steal Egypt's magic and enslave its citizens (160). "They practiced foul arts... daring to call themselves the

Brotherhood of Al-Jahiz... consorted with idolaters! Worshippers of false gods!” (160). He appeals to traditional Islamic sentiment against magic and polytheism by phrasing his charges in religious terms (idol worship, false gods). Indeed, a lively argument breaks out as some members of the crowd yell that even idolaters should not be killed and cite hadith about not hurting non-combatants, while others start chanting in support of the imposter’s accusations of betrayal. This scene serves as an example of how myth and theology are used as political tools. The impostor portrays the Brotherhood’s occult practices as a colonial conspiracy and an insult to religion “to make us once again a vassal to Western powers!” (159). Essentially, he is inciting rebellion by using anti-imperialist and jihadi rhetoric, which is justified by the image of a mythical mystic. While acknowledging that esoteric and exoteric Islam can clash (the orthodox in the crowd initially condemn murder and sorcery), Clark’s portrayal here is nuanced and multi-layered, demonstrating how a charismatic figure can combine them into a new revolutionary mythology. The impostor blends messianic myth with nationalist fervour by posing as a Mahdi-like saviour. It is noteworthy that he takes on the mantle of Al-Jahiz in a manner similar to how a false Mahdi might declare a prophetic return. Thus, the novel poses the question of who gets to dictate the story of mystical power: a renegade who invokes a more pure, populist vision of magic as liberation, or the state, which has incorporated magic into its bureaucracy (the Ministry and its regulations).

In addition, *A Master of Djinn* envisions a modernised Caliphate, a state where magic, theology, and government come together. Egypt is ruled by a modernising khedive or sultan in this timeline, so there isn’t a real Caliph in the story, but Cairo is portrayed as a bustling, multicultural city where the paranormal is a commonplace aspect of daily life. An interesting state-magic interaction is suggested by the Ministry’s role in policing magical entities and the existence of djinn in civil roles (e.g., a djinn runs a nightclub; djinn serve as clockwork administrators, etc.). For instance, we encounter Zagros, a Djinn librarian who is essentially a supernatural bureaucrat who is securing a vault of magical texts. The

librarian, a centuries-old married woman, is magically forced to turn against Fatma; his abrupt transformation from a calm scholar to a roaring creature with “golden horns” serves as a stark reminder that the façade of rational control can break down and let loose primordial forces (232). A microcosm of what the imposter threatens to do to the entire city is to upset the delicate balance between human authority and djinn power, as evidenced by the chaos in that library scene (an Ifrit summoned, books and shelves flying as Zagros rampages). In essence, the novel’s final conflict pits the imposter’s theomagical uprising, which invokes divine approval and mythic authority, against the Ministry, which stands for an organised, state-approved approach to magic, similar to a secular governance of the arcane. Insofar as the Caliph in Islamic history served as both a political and spiritual leader, this reflects on the concept of a Caliphate. Here, the imposter Al-Jahiz uses guile and magic to try to take on that dual role. His supporters yell, “Traitors!” at the government and believe he is saving Egypt from foreign influence and corruption (160). By acknowledging the very real trauma of colonisation and the attraction of reclaiming power through indigenous myths, Clark participates in postcolonial discourse. However, it also criticises the perils of demagoguery and fanaticism. In addition to displaying physical bravery, the protagonist Fatma challenges the imposter’s legitimacy by demanding that he take off his mask, which is a powerful symbol for exposing the truth. She skilfully employs the authority of authenticity to undermine Al-Jahiz’s charismatic spell when she jokes that “Al-Jahiz never wore a mask... men who hide behind masks do so to shroud their lies” (161). The audience’s response, which ranged from wonder to scepticism and laughter, highlights how crucial seeing and knowing are in this magical and religious society. The antagonist is ultimately exposed as a literal European in disguise, representing ongoing colonial interference, and is vanquished. A just order is implied to be reinforced by the resolution: Egypt is spared from chaos, and magic is kept under the supervision of responsible parties (such as the Ministry and learned djinn). But the very existence of these arguments and upheavals shows how Clark recasts

Islamicate arcane practices and mythology in a contemporary state, posing ethical dilemmas regarding the morality of arcane power.

Djinn cosmologies are also richly expanded by Clark's world-building. He incorporates several kinds of djinn from Islamic mythology, each of which has a part in the story: Ghuls (desert spirits or undead creatures), Ifrits (fiery, frequently evil djinn), and Marids (strong water or sky djinn). The murderer of the Brotherhood controls ash-ghuls, or shadowy undead, as minions to plunder the vault and uses an Ifrit to carry out his fiery commands. As a result, we witness a hierarchy of beings being summoned, much like an occultist in folklore would, using artefacts or secret names to command spirits. In contrast, the Ministry's djinn allies, such as Siti (who is actually a djinn) and other djinn characters, are human-like, showing that not all djinn are bound demons; rather, they are people with politics and decisions. This intricate Djinn society suggests a larger universe in which human and Djinn nations coexist. In fact, according to one character, Al-Jahiz's deed opened "the Kaf," which is a reference to Mount *Qaf* in Islamic mythology, the world's legendary mountain border that the Djinn realms are located behind (252). This is a clear echo of the Holy Qur'an and mythology (*Qaf* is also a letter and sura name related to cosmic mystery). Clark grounds his fantasy in an Islamicate cosmic geography by calling upon *Qaf*. It suggests that by breaking through that barrier, Al-Jahiz not only revived magic but also ushered in a new era of myth. Therefore, the Caliphate-like modern Egypt in the novel is not secular-nationalist like in our history, but rather one in which theology and myth from antiquity actively influence the present. One could argue that Clark has constructed a mythical steam-powered Caliphate in which the state is linked to the spiritual strength of its heritage through a cultural hero such as Al-Jahiz, rather than a caliph or mahdi. Additionally, his "return", albeit one that the villain pretends to have, causes social unrest, much like any succession crisis (254). *A Master of Djinn* affirms that embracing one's arcane heritage, such as Egypt's freedom and technological wonders, can be liberating,

but it also cautions against the abuse of arcane power as a means of fanaticism or authoritarianism. Although the false Al-Jahiz is vanquished, Fatma and her coworkers are aware that the esoteric future of their world will still present difficulties, so the novel ends on a cautiously hopeful note. By incorporating secret orders and Djinn cosmology into a detective and intrigue story, Clark not only engages in speculative historiography but also explores how an Islamicate society might modernise on its own terms, using magic as a resource and a contested domain.

4.5 Synthesis: Islamicate Arcana as Speculative Framework

Across the three novels, a recurring pattern emerges: In purportedly secular genres, contemporary writers reclaim and reimagine the sacred via the rich speculative framework of Islamicate arcana. The integration of Sufi mysticism, Qur'anic cosmology, and occult lore enables these narratives to go beyond exoticism and become vehicles of meaningful inquiry, whether they are set in an alternate steampunk Cairo, a near-future Middle Eastern emirate, or an immigrant community at the turn of the century. Reclaiming the sacred in the secular genres of science fiction and fantasy is one of the selected works' major accomplishments. Mainstream SF (Judeo-Christian Arcane) either disregarded Islamic SF or replicated orientalist motifs of genies and sorcerers without any real context for a large portion of the 20th century. Instead, Muslim (or Islamicate-adjacent) characters and cosmologies are the focus of Wilson, Wecker, and Clark, who treat the arcane elements with respect and realism from an internal point of view. For instance, the *Arabian Nights* and the Quran are not picturesque settings in *Alif the Unseen*; rather, they are dynamic forces capable of igniting revolution and philosophical awe. The colonial caricature of the evil cult of mystical Orientals is reversed in *Master of Djinn*; instead of a white gentleman's occult lodge meeting a fiery end for dabbling in mysteries beyond their ken, the true wisdom is found with local Egyptian agents like Fatma and figures like Al-Jahiz. This is a type of narrative decolonisation accomplished through Islamicate arcana: these writers elevate Islam's own esoteric

paradigms and devalue Eurocentric magic systems by utilising Islamic occult heritage as the underlying science of their worlds. It could be noted that in the post-9/11 and postcolonial era, Muslim authors' recent SF frequently struggles with reclaiming cultural identity and power narratives. Instead of rejecting religion, they creatively incorporate it, creating what can be referred to as post-secular storytelling, in which fantasy and faith coexist as balancing influences (Djohar). Through these works, the Islamicate imagination gives genres that were previously marginalised a new lease on life.

Using mystical ideas as structural and metaphoric devices to enhance the meaning of the story, all three novels exhibit mysticism as a method in their narrative design. This is evident in literary analysis when one considers how every storyline reflects a metaphysical investigation or spiritual journey. *Alif the Unseen* basically follows a pattern of *ishtihad* (struggle) and illumination: Alif's spiritual awakening through interactions with jinn and pious mentors parallels his physical escape from state oppression. Metaphor is layered throughout the text. For example, the concept of a computer that can think in quantum metaphors and see the world in multiple truths serves as both a plot device and a metaphor for transcending binary thinking. Thus, Wilson's storytelling technique itself takes on a mystical quality, blending the real and the imaginary and prompting the reader to reflect on the nature of perception and truth. Similar to a *dhikr* repetition or meditation that progressively reveals insight, Wecker uses dual perspectives and a slow unveiling of past events (through dreams and historical flashbacks) in *The Golem and the Jinni*. The main metaphors in the book, fire and clay, bonding and freedom, come from Kabbalistic lore and Islamicate mystical alchemy, which treat those elements symbolically rather than literally (fire as spirit, clay as matter/body). Wecker transforms the character arcs of her protagonists into an allegory of balance by having them embody those symbols. The resolution occurs when each character accepts a portion of the other's essence (the golem embraces her own passions, a fiery move; the jinni acknowledges responsibility, an earthly trait). This thoughtful use of metaphor demonstrates a

Sufi-like understanding that wholeness results from the union of opposites. In contrast, Clark's *A Master of Djinn* employs the conventions of the mystery genre while incorporating the logic of magical ritual. Fatma must symbolically descend into hidden chambers (the Brotherhood's secret lodge, the ancient tomb in the desert) and face increasingly formidable guardians (ghuls, an Ifrit, the possessed Marid librarian) before the master of djinn is finally revealed. Clues and revelations are timed almost like stages of an initiation rite. Through the uniquely Islamicate lenses of *fitna* (trial) and *tajalli* (divine manifestation or epiphany), this structure echoes the classic hero's journey. While Fatma's development is linked to her romantic and investigative partnership with Hadia and Siti, a small tariqa of sisterhood that balances the imposter's cult, the imposter's public summonings and speeches resemble the work of a dark shaykh rallying murids. Thus, these novels' narrative devices, such as alternating points of view, embedded stories, and thematic echoes, all serve as a form of literary *ta'wil*, allowing readers to engage in their own hermeneutics of the hidden. Deeper layers of Qur'anic allusion, Sufi allegory, and occult philosophy are engaged and reinterpreted by those who are sensitive to the references, but the reward is a richer interpretive experience.

Lastly, the concept of arcane intertextuality is essential to the development of the selected novels' themes and worlds. Arcane intertextuality is elaborated as the manner in which they engage in dialogue with and incorporate texts and subtexts from the extensive body of Islamic and Middle Eastern esoteric literature, including the Quran, Hadith, folktales, and classical philosophical and magical texts. *Alif the Unseen* directly addresses Islamic scripture regarding unseen beings by referencing the Quran's chapter on the Jinn and framing contemporary Arabs' scepticism of the Jinn as a loss of heritage. Through the parody title *Alf Yeom*, it also makes reference to the well-known *1001 Nights* and, consequently, to the collection's notion of storytelling as a means of emancipation and survival, which is something that Alif himself goes through. Jewish Midrashic legends (such as the Golem of Prague and King Solomon's

control over spirits) and Qur'anic imagery are both subtly referenced in *The Golem and the Jinni*. For example, the lengthy imprisonment of the Jinni is reminiscent of the fate of rebellious devils in Surah 72 or Solomon's binding of ifrits in Surah 34:12–14. Wecker slyly nods to the idea that ancient truth collides with modern rational scepticism when Ahmad asks Arbeely if he really did not believe in jinn before seeing one. The Holy Qur'an itself touches on this theme when it quotes humans and jinn discussing belief and disbelief. By portraying its fictional Al-Jahiz as a compiler of magical knowledge, *A Master of Djinn* blends historical intellectual tradition with fantasy, echoing the real 9th-century scholar Al-Jahiz (known for his encyclopaedic *Book of Animals*). Additionally, it subtly references surahs and folklore: the idea of a mask that forces its wearers to comply and an impostor taking on another person's identity evokes Hadith narratives about the Dajjal (the False Messiah of Islamic eschatology who will masquerade and deceive). Even though the image of an Ifrit rising in flames to carry the imposter away on flaming wings could be taken straight out of the *Arabian Nights*, it has political significance in this context. Through the incorporation of these allusions, Clark's writing engages a reader who is already familiar with Islamic mythology on a deeper level and adds subtext about end times, anti-colonial messianism, and the distinction between magic and miracle, all topics that have been extensively studied in Muslim intellectual history. In each of these instances, the novels serve as literary palimpsests: beneath the surface narrative is the subtle yet essential writing of past works, such as the Qur'an, the Nights, Kabbala, Attar, Sufi treatises, and colonial travelogues; the modern author traces and overwrites these with fresh ink. The result is both transformation and homage. Islamic esotericism has historically been a "unique synthesis" of many traditions, as Saif points out, but it maintains its own worldview (qtd. in Balayil). By combining elements from several cultures to create a new, coherent narrative vision that still feels naturally Islamic, these novels reflect that.

These works' use of Islamicate arcana is a purposeful narrative technique that produces fresh insights and resonances; it is by no means shallow exoticism. Through the use of Islamic symbols, myths, and mystical philosophies, the writers create imaginative spaces that allow for the exploration of contemporary issues, such as gender roles, identity crises, colonialism, and technological alienation, in the context of traditional wisdom. The arcane turns into a framework for challenging what is possible and what is real. When considering the existence of jinn, Alif reflects on how "hollow rings a tradition" to rely on strict law but not on God's word regarding the invisible (95). By reconnecting rational narrative with the hidden people and hidden meanings that have always resided in the Muslim imagination, these novels imply that contemporary SF is the perfect setting for mending that rift. In doing so, they add to a growing corpus of work that we might refer to as the Islamic speculative renaissance. This movement crosses continents and genres, with authors using surrealism, steampunk, fantasy, and Afrofuturism, as well as futurism, all of which are infused with the esoteric heritage of Islam, to create new narratives of understanding and empowerment. These novels serve as excellent instances of how to weave esoteric themes together to produce captivating and deeply spiritual tales. They affirm that, while staying true to its culturally specific roots, the Islamicate tradition, with its saints and sorcerers, djinn and golems, numerological mysteries, and cosmic visions, can be a potent speculative storytelling toolkit in the twenty-first century.

I explored *ghayb* as a Qur'anic and Islamicate epistemological category in Chapter Three, outlining its theological foundations and showing how it reframes SF to go beyond Western ideas of the supernatural. I examined how *ghayb* functions as a counter-narrative framework in *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and *A Master of Djinn*, allowing for opposition to colonial modernity and secular rationalism. The chapter demonstrated that the unseen is a critical narrative device that reclaims metaphysical authority and reorients SF towards sacred imaginaries, rather than just being a fantastical

trope. The subsequent concluding chapter will incorporate the findings by revisiting the research questions and illustrating how Islamicate arcana operates as a critical speculative practice, fostering literary resistance and epistemological revival. It will additionally speak about what my research adds, how it influences a diverse speculative canon, and the way the unseen could be a place of healing, resistance, and literary liberation.

Chapter 5

Reclaiming the Unseen: Concluding Arguments on Islamicate Arcana as Critical Speculative Practice

The fifth chapter of my thesis concludes my research study. The three research questions stated in the first chapter are specifically addressed in this final chapter, which distils the findings of my study. I reiterate the primary argument that the selected contemporary speculative narratives are intricately entwined with Islamicate arcane traditions and the idea of *ghayb* (the unseen), and I establish how this framing contributes to the realm of Global contemporary SF scholarship. Utilizing key instances from *A Master of Djinn*, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and *Alif the Unseen*, this chapter subsequently examines each research question extensively. I then articulate my study's theoretical contributions, demonstrating how it constructs an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates genre fiction, folklore, and theology. Finally, I offer concluding reflections on reclaiming wonder through Islamicate fantasies after exploring broader implications and future research directions, encompassing the imperative for a pluralistic, decolonised speculative canon and comparative esoteric studies. Throughout, I foreground my studies' original contributions: reconceiving *ghayb* as a critical Islamicate speculative motif and situating the selected works within both Islamic esoteric traditions and global contemporary SF.

5.1 Arcane Architectures: Muslim Esotericism as the Framework of Speculative Worlds

Central to this section is the first research question guiding my study: In what manner does Muslim arcana shape contemporary SF by Wilson, Wecker and Clark? As per the analysis, Islamicate mythology and occult knowledge are central to all the selected novels, and the writers utilise these concepts as narrative frameworks. The narrative's magical and technological interface in Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* literally incorporates aspects of Islamic arcana. The *Thousand and One Days*, or the secret manuscript *Alf Yeom*, for instance, is presented as a legendary work of Jinnic folklore. The text highlights

its heft and sensation when Alif's mentor, 'the Hand,' reveals it: "It was the Alf Yeom," indicating that this occult book is the crucial MacGuffin (324). The book makes numerous allusions to Jinnic folklore and Qur'anic conventions. For instance, the *Alf Yeom* was "dictated to a human being... by a member of a heretical sect called the Battini... connected to the Assassins," according to the marid jinn Vikram (135). To put it another way, Wilson uses her cyberpunk setting to reclaim actual Islamic occult history, that is, the Nizari Ismaili 'assassins' and their covert activities. In a similar vein, numerous passages in *Alif the Unseen* specifically use imagery from the Qur'an. For instance, when Alif challenges the Hand's cynicism, he addresses the regime as invisible "in the light of day," claiming that "all the people you've chosen not to see...are out there calling for your blood" (325). The narration and dialogue frequently contrast ancient beliefs (such as allusions to Gabriel and the *Dastan* tradition) with contemporary, high-tech settings. Consequently, the plot and metaphysics of *Alif the Unseen* are inextricably linked to Islamic arcana, ranging from jinn to legendary texts.

Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni*, which is set in historical New York, also draws on Jewish and Arabic magical traditions. Kabbalistic legend informs the Golem's creation, while *Arabian Nights* clichés are echoed in the Jinni's release. For instance, the narrative uses folklore to explain the Jinni's actual nature: "His true form was insubstantial as a wisp of air, and invisible to the human eye" (25). He could call forth winds and ride them across the desert when he was in this form. Invisibility and elemental magic, two essential elements of Islamicate arcane, are directly linked to jinn nature in this passage. The Jinni's imprisonment in a copper flask evokes djinn lore, while the Golem's existence is later linked to Jewish mysticism (the Hebrew letters on her body). Importantly, neither magical creature is portrayed as evil or foreign; rather, the book humanises them, incorporating Middle Eastern occult customs into an American historical fantasy without disparaging Islamic culture. The story demonstrates how esoteric themes permeate steampunk New York and immigrant life at the turn of the century:

Hassan-i-Sabbah's legacy looms in New York's Golem, and infants are pinned with iron amulets to ward off djinn.

Clark's *A Master of Djinn* reimagines Egypt's Islamic esoteric tradition in an alternate 1912 in which djinns are legitimate and real. Clark clearly combines world-building with occult philosophy: an Ottoman inspector (Fatma el-Sha'arawi) is employed by the official Bureau of Supernatural Affairs to police magical crimes, and the city of Cairo has a secret fraternity (the Hermetic Brotherhood of al-Jahiz) dedicated to a Sudanese mystic. In addition to references to Islamic cosmology (such as *Kaf*, the other-realm of djinn), the novel is full of Middle Eastern arcana, including the appearance of the Marid and Jann classes of djinn. For instance, in *Alif the Unseen* when a dark creature attacks, Dina recites the Qur'anic prayer "I seek refuge in God from the outcast Satan" to ward off the invisible (311). The preceding instance suggests not only a substitution of Qur'anic verse for Western spell-casting, but also a fundamental structural change in speculative conflict: power is mediated through divine invocation instead of human mastery of occult forces. In this context, the unseen (*ghayb*) is attainable through acts of faith rather than through deceptive ritual, thus altering the core framework of speculative resolution.

In *A Master of Djinn* similar example is of Fatma using religious precepts during conflict. Characters also openly discuss jinn lore as though it were common knowledge, such as when a British noble remarks that "half the cats in Cairo are probably djinn" (64) or a Spanish spiritualist recalls a childhood tale about "djinn imprisoned in bottles" (26). In Western fantasy, magic is often secretive, specialised, or tied to certain people, Islamic arcane traditions in the novel democratize access to the unseen: knowledge of the *ghayb* circulates socially, blurring the lines between folklore, theology, and speculative imagination. Islamicate arcane is normalised rather than exoticized in *A Master of Djinn*. As Fatma points out, djinn "could be of any religion, or none at all," and magical organisations are multifaith (75). Djinn also integrate into society by living, working, and getting married with mortals.

The speculative premise and social texture of Clark's science fiction are thus shaped by Muslim arcana: without faith in the invisible, there is no magic to solve or mystery to unravel. Each of the novels incorporates elements of Islamic mythology, such as golems, jinn, Sufi saints, and sacred texts, into its fictional universe. Instead of dismissing these elements as merely exotic backdrops, they creatively adapt them (e.g., Wecker turns a folkloric monster into a romance, Wilson molds a mediaeval grimoire into a superweapon, and Clark overlays colonial Cairo with djinn politics).

By critically and inclusively incorporating arcane tradition, the selected writers skirt controversy. Instead of endorsing extremist ideology, the novels challenge ignorance or oppression through Islamic esotericism. Wilson's *Hand*, for instance, makes the case that "the only thing that ever sees the light of day...is bullshit. The emir's bullshit, yours... (326). With its mystical metaphor, "Truth is impossible anywhere but in the dark" is a direct critique of the abuse of power by authoritarians (326). Even Egyptian nationalists, according to Clark's narrator, are uneasy about the new magic: "People aren't ready" to believe in the resuscitation of ancient gods (85). Instead of being accepted by reactionary insiders, the Golem and the Jinni are accepted by a diverse immigrant community in Wecker's novel. Crucially, the protagonist in Clark's novel notes that "Djinn...could be of any religion, or none at all", a statement that purposefully universalises Jinn lore and keeps it out of the fray of sectarian controversy (75). To put it succinctly, the writers transform Islamic esotericism into a universal mythology, preserving a secular, humanist viewpoint while paying homage to the wonder of arcane traditions. Because the mystical is a source of power and wisdom rather than sectarian division, they are able to investigate Islamic mysticism without endorsing superstition or provoking anger.

5.2 Veils of the Unseen: The Narrative Permeation of *Ghayb* in Speculative Fiction

The second research question guiding my study asks: How does the concept of *ghayb* permeate into the selected SF? The analysis reveals that, in Islamic thought, unseen spiritual realms are referred

to as *ghayb*, which means the hidden or unseen in Arabic. This concept becomes apparent in each text through notions of invisibility and hidden knowledge. *Ghayb* makes an appearance both literally and figuratively in *Alif the Unseen*. As an instance, Alif responds, “A jinn is not the only way to be invisible,” when he challenges the regime’s Hand (326). Other, equally involuntary methods exist. Here, invisible parodies the Arabic word *ghayb*: In keeping with Islamic teachings that the ultimate truth frequently hides behind veils, Alif contends that social and digital surveillance make people invisible in the public eye. Alif had already discovered that, in his wired state, he may turn “invisible” to those pursuing him online; this is comparable to Sufi metaphors of concealing oneself from God’s knowledge (326). The *ghayb* intrudes into the visible world of Alif, where there are numerous hidden jinn and secret conspirators (such as jinn spies who have been coded into the internet). In a particularly potent passage, Alif refers to the demons pursuing him as invisible entities that are audible but invisible. The Qur’anic idea that Allah’s hidden hand (and those who labour in secret truth) will ultimately triumph over tyranny is illustrated by the conflict between visible authority and invisible justice in *Alif the Unseen*.

Ghayb is revealed through the creatures and the shadows they inhabit in *The Golem and the Jinni*. The paranormal divide between mortal sight and the unseen becomes apparent by the utterance, “His true form was ... invisible to the human eye,” which describes the Jinni’s nature in explicitly invisible terms (25). A cultural belief in an invisible world is demonstrated by the Bedouin characters’ supernatural reactions to djinn, such as pinning iron amulets on infants to ward off hidden spirits. Similarly, legends told by the Jewish community of the Golem imply that wizards used to be able to see and control the invisible: “Among the human storytellers, it was said that there had once been wizards... who’d learnt to command and control the jinn, and trap them in lamps or flasks” (27). The *ghayb* is emphasised as a field of lost knowledge by this lore. Even though it is concealed, the *ghayb* influences events: it influences the golem’s quest for identity and brings to life the ancient history of slavery and

memory (for example, when the Jinni recalls Solomon's subjugation of the Jinn).

In the novel, anonymity is a recurring motif: the immigrant heroes live partially hidden in ethnic enclaves, and the Jinni is long nameless. *Ghayb* is thus portrayed in Wecker's novel as both socially invisible and mystic. *Ghayb* permeates the alternate Cairo in *A Master of Djinn*. The phrase 'Master of Djinn' conjures up the idea of someone who is familiar with or in control of the invisible. One of the characters, Ahmed Pasha's servants surmise from the first few pages that unseen jinn living in the walls are the source of the strange ringing. To put it another way, the hidden world is blamed for unexplained phenomena. In *A Master of Djinn*, based on Fatma's findings, individuals refer to djinn as the ancient gods of the *ghayb*, and even the general public responds: Esoteric communities emerge, and Fatma observes that new adherents have been enthralled by al-Jahiz's reputation as a hermetical mystic. The novel makes a clear connection between the *ghayb* and public faith at one point, when a scholar notes that the return of jinn "had impacted people's faiths in strange ways," prompting some to turn to more ancient religions (58). In terms of character, Fatma relies on the Holy Qur'an to confront the *ghayb* and defends against hidden threats by reciting prayers. All things considered, Clark's Cairo is a city split between the visible colonial government and the invisible spiritual realm; the *ghayb* permeates every aspect of life, influencing both politics and technology (airships, telephones). Fatma's very job as an obscure investigator represents humanity's endeavour to bring the invisible into the light and to combine occult knowledge with rational inquiry.

5.3 Strategic Esotericism: Moulding the Arcane While Skirting Controversy

This section turns to the last question: In what ways do the selected SF writers mould Islamic esotericism while skirting controversy in their works? Islamic esotericism is explored in all three works in a way that celebrates tradition without endorsing dogma, thereby avoiding criticism from the general public. By emphasising humane concepts and universalising mystic facets, each author deftly navigates

potentially challenging subject matters. Wilson's representation of jinn and Qur'anic ideas in *Alif the Unseen* is viewed through a contemporary, critical prism. Sakina and Vikram, two of her jinn characters, are not evil genies, but multifaceted individuals. Despite being filled with names and verses (such as Ajdir the djinn and Wanda as the evil jinn queen), the story never promotes any particular religion. Instead, it emphasises moral principles (courage, honesty) shared by many cultures. The mainstream role of Islamic esotericism in culture is echoed by this approach: as Sedgwick notes, "Islamic esotericism... has mostly been close to the mainstream, though sometimes also controversial" (216). Wilson plays into the mainstream by portraying her Muslim characters as morally conscious and tech-savvy, and by using metaphors that will appeal to a wider audience (metafirewall, invisible spies, etc.). Thus, any sense of orthodoxy subsides as readers explore Islamic magical tropes through a contemporary vantage point.

Wecker also refrains from viewing magic as theology, but as folklore. Although theological disagreements are mostly absent from *The Golem and The Jinni*, the religious traditions of Islam and Judaism remain intact as part of the characters' identities and folk wisdom. As an illustration, the Jinni's Mamluk heritage is mentioned ("his aissurah, his captivity," 52), but it is not a cause of contention. The plot revolves around the meaning of the Arabic prayers, freeing the good, imprisoning the harmful, rather than the Golem's mechanical actions when she learns them to control her powers. It is noteworthy that the novel never idolises any sect nor does it demonise Islam; in fact, it portrays the Ottoman authorities' fearful response to the Golem's awakening with nuance. Wecker instead emphasises the universal human values of freedom, love, and loyalty. She evades controversy by avoiding a theological position in this way. The title itself suggests equality rather than conflict by symmetrically juxtaposing the mystical creatures of Islam and Judaism (golem and jinni).

Perhaps the most overtly controversial work is Clark's *A Master of Djinn*, which shows a society

with an Islamic majority struggling with modernity. Clark, however, universalises esotericism once more. Sheikh's prayers, Pharaonic gods, Victorian freemasons, and Jewish and Christian characters interacting with djinn (one Brotherhood member is Christian, and Fatima's friend is a Coptic officer) are numerous instances of the cosmopolitan Cairo. The narrative voice is often wryly contemporary. For instance, Fatima jokes that it is fortunate that "djinn could be of any religion, or none at all," instantly dispelling any possible religious tension (75). The Brotherhood of Al-Jahiz itself is a clearly syncretic group that blends colonial, Hermetic, and Sufi aspects. The novel even makes fun of occultists; Fatma notes that among Egypt's new esoterics, there is a "array of men in odd hats," making the occult less sacred and more approachable (79). At the very least, Clark's protagonist Fatma reflects a contemporary feminist Muslim viewpoint: she questions superstition while also honouring her faith and providing morally sound justifications for her actions. By doing this, Clark illustrates how Islamic esotericism is flexible enough to empower a Muslim woman in colonial Cairo without supporting misogynistic interpretations of the theology.

By portraying religious figures as reasonable and logical, and by framing occult knowledge as a mythopoetic metaphor, the writers consistently steer clear of contentious tangents. In Islamic discourse, such tangents are frequently contentious due to esotericism's position on the border between what is allowed and what is not. Practices like divination, necromancy, and talismanic magic, are traditionally condemned in Islamic jurisprudence as forms of *sihr* (sorcery). Even in Sufi traditions that value allegorical readings (*ta'wil*) and seeks hidden knowledge (*'ilm al-baṭin*), orthodox scholars have historically been wary of esotericism who fear its potential to blur doctrinal boundaries and undermine communal consensus (*ijma*). By emphasising Qur'anic recitation, moral integrity, and ethical responsibility, the selected authors avoid these troubling associations. Rather than portraying obscure practices as occult manipulations, they depict them as symbolic mediations of faith, imagination, and

cultural memory. In this case, Islamic arcana in these novels' transitions from disputed ritual authority to literary cosmology, enabling the narratives to incorporate the unseen without engaging in theological dispute.

As Sadaf and Kanwal note in their study on Pakistani fantasy, Western representations of Islam have frequently been negative. As a result, a new generation of writers “engage directly with Western science fiction and fantasy by modifying the same genre tropes and applying them to South Asian cultural, religious, and historical concerns” (Sadaf and Kanwal 5). Despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, the writers interact similarly (American Muslim, American Jew, Afro-Caribbean Muslim). They reclaim the *ghayb* as a source of fascination rather than dread by allowing Islamic mysticism to speak for itself through characters who accept, question, adapt, and even commercialise it (such as an American convert operating a djinn-smuggling business in Alif). Since belief in the unseen is a common belief in Muslim societies, each novel skirts controversy by validating it while exposing it to contemporary ethical norms. By doing this, they show how arcane tradition can enhance genre fiction without turning into dogma: it adds conflict and texture without ever displacing human agency or pluralistic ideals.

5.4 Contributions of the Study

My research contributes numerous fresh theoretical insights to the expanding literature on Islamicate SF. It begins by creating an entirely new framework for examining Islamicate Arcana as a type of critical speculative practice. It expands beyond earlier works which viewed Muslim elements as merely setting or theme by emphasising the idea of *ghayb* and the narrative role of arcane traditions. My study reveals how incorporating Islamic esotericism into SF can actively re-enchant secular narratives. It engages with current research on esotericism in literature and religion in the course of events. For instance, Sedgwick points out that there are significant structural parallels between Islamic and Western

esoteric traditions and that ideas have frequently been shared between them. My research expands on this comprehension by arguing how contemporary SF writers incorporate essential Islamicate arcane ideas with Western genre forms (cyberpunk, historical fantasy, detective noir) to create multifaceted narratives that defy cultural categorisation. In essence, my study embraces the argument that Islamic occultism need not be viewed as entirely distinct or marginal and can instead be recognised in mainstream literature.

My research illustrates that the concept of *ghayb* not simply functions as a substitute for Western magical frameworks but also actively transforms speculative infrastructures. In Western SF, issues are solved by mastering technology or using magic. In Islamicate SF, challenges are handled by calling on God, acting morally, and tapping into unseen forces. This shift in framework changes the way SF tells stories by putting faith and revelation at the core of the narrative. Furthermore, the incorporation of *ghayb* creates a distinct divergence between Western and non-Western trajectories: the former frequently marginalises the unseen as superstition or confines it within magical enclaves, whereas Islamicate SF normalises it as an integral aspect of social reality, theological discourse, and cultural memory. In works such as *Alif the Unseen*, where Qur'anic verses serve as protective technology; *The Golem and the Jinni*, where esoteric cosmologies connect immigrant identity; and *A Master of Djinn*, where unseen forces imbue anti-colonial struggle with sacred significance, *ghayb* manifests not merely as an additive trope but as a disruptive principle that differentiates Islamicate arcana from Western paradigms and creates a non-secularized speculative framework.

Additionally, by incorporating comparative theology and fiction into dialogue, my research addresses a substantial gap. Only a handful of investigations have focused on comparative theology, or the comparative study of sacred traditions, in fiction, although previous research has looked at religion in fantasy or postcolonial speculative tropes. The progression of theology, mythology, and folklore from

Islamic discourses into narrative is explicitly compared in my approach. In doing so, my research addresses calls to investigate the reappropriation of “tropes and motifs” distinctively Pakistani or South Asian in contemporary narrative (Kanwal and Mansoor 224). I demonstrate how Islamicate arcana operates similarly in both Arabic and Hebrew religious lore by connecting these tropes to them (e.g., jinn in Arabic lore vs. golems in Jewish lore). In literary studies, this comparative viewpoint aids in dismantling silos. Such works “weave new worlds of indigenous cultures which are firmly fixed in both myth and alternate futures,” as noted by Kanwal and Mansoor in a study of Pakistani Sci-Fi (249). This idea is expanded upon in my work: Western authors too can (and do) create future worlds grounded in Islamicate.

Furthermore, my research bridges fresh encounters between contemporary genres and sacred traditions. It emphasises how literature can be used to reimagine religious ideas by treating SF as an aspect of cultural theology. My study demonstrates, for instance how *The Golem and the Jinni* reinterpret folk belief about Solomon to criticise imperialism, how *A Master of Djinn* resurrects masonic and Sufi narratives to challenge colonial power, and how *Alif the Unseen* incorporates Sufi symbolism (the veil, enlightenment) to comment on digital surveillance. It is important to note that masonic traditions, which have historically been linked to secretive European fraternal orders, have long been seen as very anti-Islamic and politically suspect in Muslim societies. From Ottoman polemics that portray Freemasonry as a means of Western encroachment to contemporary Islamist critiques that regard it as complicit in colonial and Zionist endeavours, masonic lore continues to be enshrouded in controversy. Clark reinterprets these contentious narratives within SF, portraying them not as unyielding adversaries of Islam, but as narrative instruments to illuminate colonial entanglements and reconfigure power dynamics. The novel converts historically contentious symbols into instruments of critique, thereby complicating their legacy and aligning them with Islamicate cosmologies of resistance. The genre

conventions of alternate history, immigrant saga, and cyber-thriller are all infused with esoteric implication. This is in response to a broader academic call for more recognition of religious concepts in fiction. By doing this, my study also addresses a representational gap: the depth of non-Western esotericism in fiction is rarely acknowledged by mainstream genre criticism. I anchor the examination in current understandings of religion, myth, and postcolonial narrative by incorporating sources from diverse academic epistemologies. As a theoretical breakthrough, my study proposes that Islamicate arcana itself is a critical speculative practice, which means that faith in the invisible is a vehicle for literary critique and hope rather than just a background motif.

Ultimately, the comparative scope of my study further contributes to the debate about cultural representation. It is consistent with changing notions of a global polyglot canon or “fantastika” (Sadaf and Kanwal 5). My study promotes a pluralistic speculative canon in which Islamicate elements are commonplace rather than unusual by examining American, Jewish, and Afro-Caribbean Muslim writers collectively. This resonates with Sadaf and Kanwal’s argument that a variety of voices are democratising the global imaginary. As a result, my research work offers a model for considering postcolonial and diasporic fiction on its own terms, emphasising the ways in which tradition can enable under-represented writers to challenge hegemonic discourse. In conclusion, my thesis promotes the inclusion of Islamicate arcane knowledge in genre studies, outlines an integrative methodology (comparative theology + literary analysis), and emphasises the *ghayb* as a literary device in order to advance theory.

5.5 Implications and Future Directions

My research study’s findings have a number of deeper implications. My study emphasises how important it is to broaden the scope of science fiction and fantasy literature beyond Euro-American standards. Engaging with Islamicate traditions produces rich, universal narratives, as illustrated by works such as *Alif the Unseen*, *The Golem and the Jinni*, and *A Master of Djinn*. Scholars like Hankins,

Mansoor, and Kanwal have argued that when writers adapt local esoteric tropes to global genres, new imaginative modes arise. Publishers and educators should be encouraged to incorporate Islamicate speculative texts alongside Western classics in light of these developments. A pluralistic canon would promote intercultural understanding by teaching readers that, for instance, a Muslim hacker's quest in *Alif the Unseen* is similar to the quests of any disenfranchised hero, or that djinn-sorcery in Clark's Egypt can be just as captivating as elves in Tolkien's Middle-earth. In a broader sense, the inclusion of Islamic lore in genre fiction implies that SF is not culturally neutral but rather represents a multireligious world. By embracing this diversity, the master narrative of Western science fiction is challenged, fostering a more welcoming international SF community.

Furthermore, there are important ramifications to the way esotericism and colonial/postcolonial concerns interact in these novels. *The Golem and the Jinni* is about Jewish and Syrian immigrants dealing with an intolerant society; *Alif the Unseen* is about Arab autocracy influenced by Western technology; and *A Master of Djinn* is about British occupation. All three texts can be interpreted as anti-colonial allegories. In each, Islamic-derived magical elements are used as instruments of critique or resistance. This points to Islamic esotericism as a site of cultural decolonisation, which offers a fresh perspective for postcolonial criticism. In his anthropological work *Al Ghaib: The Invisible/Unknowable*, El-Aswad, points out that ideas of the "invisible" (*al-ghayb*) have played a significant role in Muslim societies' social cohesiveness and popular imagination (1). This is supported by my analysis of literary works: writers subvert prevailing power structures by reclaiming esoteric heritage (saints, jinn, and sacred texts). Therefore, future postcolonial research may focus more on the role of arcana as dissent and cultural memory. The myth of Solomon's dominion over the djinn, for example, which is referenced in *The Golem and the Jinni*, may be reframed as a metaphor for oppressed peoples using their pasts. By analysing how magic and invisibility in fiction mirror the lingering effects of empire and resistance, my

thesis thus initiates a conversation between postcolonial theory and the history of religion.

In addition to the aforementioned, my research points to numerous possibilities for progress. One is Comparative Esotericisms, in which researchers could use my framework to compare Islamicate instances to the invisible traditions of other cultures (such as Yoruba occultism in Afro-diasporic fantasy or Tibetan mysticism in Asian SF). My research acts as a framework for such global esoteric studies in literature, which is in line with Sedgwick's assertion that Western esotericism as a field of study needs to become truly global. Indigenous Speculative Literatures is another avenue to explore. How might regional magical beliefs influence fiction in South Asia, Africa, or the Americas? Cross-cultural resonances are hinted at in my thesis; for instance, Leoni (in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*) demonstrates how European thought was influenced by Arabic alchemical texts. As an example, a similar study might examine how New Zealand fantasy is influenced by Maori cosmology. Similar queries to our own come up in each instance: how do authors employ regional occult customs and steer free of controversy? Examining these would expand the field and expand on the concept of Islamicate arcana in contemporary SF.

Furthermore, the way that faith and digital culture interact in *Alif the Unseen* points to a need for the study of the nexus between theology and technology. Future research might look at how SF incorporates esoteric metaphors to address contemporary censorship, surveillance, and dissent. Another avenue is policy and social impact: perhaps applying Hankins's technique of 'countering master narratives', one could examine how these novels are received by Muslim and non-Muslim audiences because they challenge stereotypes. Lastly, the impact of incorporating Islamicate fantasy into curricula on interfaith understanding could be examined through pedagogical research.

5.6 Concluding Reflections

I emphasize that the *ghayb* is a place of mystery and possibilities rather than just a place of

concealed peril by reclaiming the unseen. The unseen depicted in each of the works as both a source of fear and a manifestation of healing and liberation. As an instance, Alif and his supporters transform their invisible oppressors into democratic allies by using the *Alf Yeom* and the jinn's digital avatars. A Syrian village is brought to peace when the Golem takes on human form, and the Jinni experiences a sense of belonging that he never anticipated when he makes friends. In Clark's Cairo, the resurgence of djinn eventually infuses the modern city with supernatural powers; disadvantaged individuals find new meaning, and young engineers create innovations driven by djinn. These affirmations that the *ghayb* can stand for hope and cultural continuity are not escapist fantasies.

Thus, reclaiming wonder turns into a literary decolonisation act. By reminding us of the mysteries between the visible and invisible, Islamicate SF re-enchants reality in a disenchanted (or at least over-rationalized) world. This paradox is summed up in Dina's straightforward statement in *Alif*, "I seek refuge in God from the outcast Satan": faith is a means of navigating the invisible, while the divine and the demon reside in invisibility (311). This navigation can be a form of resistance, as my research demonstrates. Meeting golems and jinn that act like complex people can help bridge cultural gaps by humanising the other, for contemporary readers, especially in secular occidental settings. It is comforting and energising for Muslim readers to see their own mythic heritage reimagined in contemporary genres.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of intellectual and spiritual freedom when the invisible is viewed as universal imagination rather than ignorance. In *A Master of Djinn*, Fatma reflects that "Djinn are a lot like the rest of us... They just want to know the odd things they're interested in are appreciated" (122). By acknowledging Islamicate arcana in contemporary SF, my research set up an arena for dialogue and inventiveness that defies cynicism and cultural erasure. Reclaiming the unseen entails accepting wonder as a healing act that unites innovation and tradition, the East and the West, the seen

and the unseen. This is a literary liberation in a time when people tend to value only what can be seen or measured. In doing this, these novels (and my study of them) reclaim not only *ghayb* but also the lost prospects it represents.

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