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shaping futures

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Tezhib (not tehzib) — or Illumination literally means to ornament a surface with gold. It is an art form that manifests as palmettes, rosettes, and arabesques around the margins of the Quran and in important manuscripts, illuminating the mind of the reader through knowledge and beauty.

Allegorically, the art of Tezhib is represented by the tree; an attempt to understand the roots of knowledge, which branch from the mind towards the Infinite. The floral forms and motifs rest upon geometric patterns, which travel within a spectrum from finitude to infinitude.

Tezhib Undergraduate Research Journal was founded in 2018 with the vision of making a diverse set of knowledge and intellectual thought more accessible. It is a student-led journal by Habib University students, with the support of Habib University's faculty. It serves as a platform for the research produced by students from undergraduate universities across Pakistan in the fields of literature, language, philosophy, development, religious studies, and technology. It aspires to motivate students towards research and to cultivate a culture of inquiry and academic discourse.

EDITOR'S NOTE

I became the Editor-in-Chief of Tezhib in August 2025. It was not a role I expected to take on so soon but I inherited a journal with a clear purpose: to make space for student research that asks difficult questions and refuses easy answers.

The work in this volume is evidence that young scholars are paying attention. They are watching the world around them—its failures, its contradictions, its violence and trying to make sense of it. They are not content with surface explanations. They dig. They trace connections. They hold institutions accountable. They write with care and precision because they believe the work matters.

This matters because we are living through a moment when thinking itself has become suspect. Anti-intellectualism has always been present but its current form is more pervasive. It does not argue against knowledge, it simply makes it irrelevant. It drowns complexity in noise. It rewards speed over depth, certainty over curiosity and spectacle over substance. Universities are increasingly treated as pipelines to employment and research is judged by its "impact" rather than its insight. The humanities are defunded. The social sciences are dismissed and young academics are told to be practical at precisely the moment the world requires the most impractical kind of thinking.

I have seen this up close. I have watched brilliant students struggle to justify their intellectual interests to families who see education as a transaction. I have watched faculty work tirelessly to protect spaces for inquiry within institutions that increasingly view it as a luxury. I have watched the erosion of conditions that make serious thought possible and I have watched students refuse to accept it.

These papers are proof of that refusal. They are not written to impress or to perform. Instead, they are written because the authors had questions that would not let them go. They are careful, critical and sometimes uncomfortable. They do not pretend the world is simpler than it is. They remind us that the purpose of education is not to hand us answers but to teach us how to live with questions.

Across this volume, there is a shared concern with how systems fail—how institutions meant to protect you end up excluding you, how structures meant to enable instead entrap and how knowledge meant to liberate instead confines. The papers do not merely describe these failures; they trace their roots, their mechanisms and their consequences. They ask why things are the way they are and whether they have to remain that way. In doing so, they perform the essential work of scholarship: not to accept the world as given but to imagine it otherwise.

This is especially urgent now. In Pakistan, we are surrounded by crises that demand careful thinking: economic instability, political uncertainty, environmental degradation and deepening inequality. Yet the public discourse around these crises is often shallow, reductive and hostile to nuance. The space for genuine intellectual engagement shrinks while the problems that require it grow. In this context, student research is not an indulgence; it is a necessity. It represents the refusal to let complexity be flattened, to let urgency replace understanding and to let the noise win.

This is the kind of work that Tezhib exists to publish. It is the kind of work that deserves to be read, debated and built upon. It is the kind of work that keeps intellectual life alive in a world that seems determined to kill it.

I am proud of what the Tezhib team has accomplished. I am grateful to the writers who trusted us with their work. I am hopeful that this journal will continue to be a space where students can think out loud, take risks and say something worth hearing. And I believe that as long as there are students willing to ask hard questions and communities willing to listen, the life of the mind will find a way to endure.

To our faculty and student reviewers—thank you for your generosity. For reading closely, thinking carefully and giving feedback that made these papers stronger. Your belief in student work is what makes this journal possible.

To the entire Tezhib team—from core leadership to design, operations and logistics—this volume exists because of you. Thank you for your resilience, long hours and steady teamwork through every deadline and unexpected challenge.

To Dr. Coline Ferrant—thank you for being our guide behind the scenes. Your steady encouragement, incisive feedback and belief in our capability kept us grounded and motivated from start to finish.

Finally, to Prof. Basharat Issa and Ayesha Hussain of the Academic Centers—your institutional support provided the foundation we needed and your confidence in student-led work made all the difference.

Almira A. Razzak
Editor-in-Chief
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“She was the Universe”
On Nature and her Response to the Anthropocene

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Abstract

Recent research on Lake Turkana’s dramatic desiccation, driven by climate volatility, altered rainfall patterns, and intensified upstream water use, reveals that surface-level ecological disturbance can activate tectonic movements deep within the Earth. As the lake’s mass decreases, stress is redistributed along faults beneath the basin, accelerating deformation and facilitating magma movement. This phenomenon dissolves entrenched distinctions between “surface climate” and “deep geology,” demonstrating that the Anthropocene must be understood as a vertical entanglement linking atmospheric change, hydrological precarity, and lithospheric instability. In this light, the lake becomes a critical locus for rethinking human responsibility

within planetary systems where political decisions, climatic instability, and geophysical responses are inseparably braided.

This essay uses the Lake Turkana case study to conduct a philosophical anthropology of human–Earth entanglement, drawing on four major frameworks: Haraway's "staying with the trouble," Morton's ecology without nature, Malabou's plasticity and entropy, and Stiegler's philosophy of negentropy. Haraway's insistence that we must "make kin" with more-than-human assemblages provides an orientation for understanding the lake not as a passive resource but as a multispecies, multi-temporal actor whose distress invites forms of situated, ethical response. Morton's critique of the nature/culture divide further clarifies that the lake's shrinkage erases any fantasy of an external, stable "Nature". Here, we instead must confront a hyperobject entanglement in which human water practices, climate shifts, and tectonic behaviour interpenetrate.

Malabou's concepts of destructive and generative plasticity foreground how the lithosphere itself is capable of reconfiguration under altered surface loads — and how this deformation is both a symptom of Anthropocene entropy and a reminder that Earth's forms, like social and biological forms, are susceptible to transformation. Through Stiegler's lens, the lake's destabilisation signals an acceleration of entropic drift, yet also opens a space for negentropic reorientation as the cultivation of technical, political, and affective practices counter systemic tendencies toward collapse.

Here, I also work in Tsing as I situate the lake within a web of precarious, contingent assemblages as fish ecologies, pastoralist livelihoods, hydrological rhythms, geological tensions all interact amid capitalist and climatic pressures. Her “arts of noticing” help reveal the heterogenous life-worlds that become visible when the lake destabilises, and challenge any singular narrative of environmental crisis.

By situating the Lake Turkana crisis within these intersecting philosophical frameworks, the project aims to articulate a model of planetary co-constitution in which humans are neither external observers nor sovereign managers, but metabolic participants in a shared, dynamically unstable Earth system. The urgent contribution of this essay lies in its argument that geological processes must now be understood as responsive to climate politics, infrastructural decisions, and the temporalities of human technological life, and that resisting Anthropocene chaos requires the capacity to think, act, and care within planetary entanglements. In this way, the case of Lake Turkana becomes a call to reimagine responsibility as an ongoing, situated practice of living and thinking with a planet that materially responds.

‘*She was the Universe*’: On Nature and Her Response to the Anthropocene

The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expir'd before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.
- From ‘*Darkness*’ by Lord Byron

Lake Turkana in Kenya, Africa moves against historical understandings of tectonic activity as primarily as a deep-Earth process within which surface changes were rarely considered influential enough to affect fundamental geological behavior. Geological research in the Turkana Rift has found that climate-driven drops in surface water levels (approximately

100–150 meters) corresponded directly with accelerated fault activity and increased magma flux. This phenomenon, where the withdrawal of surface water load (hydrosphere) impacts the solid Earth's crust and mantle, explicitly reveals the planetary susceptibility to change, demonstrating that the Earth's crust deforms in response to changes imposed by water masses (Muirhead et al., 2025). Our occupation of the "negathropocene", a space that aims to reduce "knowledge to calculable information of algorithmic governmentality" (Stiegler, 2018, p. 32), leaves us misguided in a radically unknowable future because it closes our senses to the inherent chaos and unknowability of the world. As such, in the face of ecological collapse, we contend with frameworks of knowledge that operate on scientific epistemology, which is "limited to probabilistic generalisations" (Scranton, 2025, p. 60), leaving us blind in an increasingly incomprehensible world. This 'knowledge problem' deepens into a crisis of responsibility — as Scranton presents, our limited understanding of our world works within flawed premises of what we *think* we know about the world, and, as such, our actions within it stem from these flawed understandings of how our operations on this planet will affect it. The historical understandings of tectonic plates I mentioned earlier, for instance, is what drives geopolitical decisions such as the construction of the Gilgel Gibe III Dam in Ethiopia, which threatens Turkana Lake as it will dam the Omo river, which supplies most of the lake's waters (Moran, 2017). These decisions reveal the crisis at the heart of the Anthropocene — the need for a fundamental reconsideration of human agency, recognising that human actions have become a planetary force capable of influencing geophysical systems on immense scales.

Through Stiegler and Morton, I argue throughout this paper that the epoch of the Anthropocene, as a period, is characterised by a process of systemic crisis that produces a massive scale of planetary entropy by liquidating knowledge and organisational coherence (Stiegler, 2018, p. 51). The overwhelming nature of these changes often manifest through Morton's 'hyperobjects' — phenomena distributed across vast timescales and spaces that defy ordinary human perception (2010, 130-132 & 2018, pp. 76-77). Consequently, the traditional sovereign and subject-centric management strategies of the modern age prove insufficient, failing to grapple with the deep entanglement between human temporality and the slow, inexorable forces of the Earth system, presenting the acute failure of our knowledge systems and leading to our current crisis of responsibility. This essay argues that the Lake Turkana case study provides a crucial empirical site for demonstrating this vertical entanglement that dissolves the assumed binary between surface climate/human politics and deep geology, thereby forcing a philosophical reckoning with the definition of human responsibility. Therefore, this paper explores: How does the Lake Turkana case study — embodying a vertical entanglement that dissolves the surface/deep geology binary — demand a redefinition of negentropic human responsibility that integrates geophysical and political temporality, challenging the sovereign and subject-centric management strategies implied by Anthropocene ideology? In my attempt to answer this, I will draw on several critical theoretical frameworks from Stiegler, Morton, Malabou, Haraway, and Tsing. I will firstly analyse the scientific confirmation of the lithosphere's capacity for elastic deformation under load changes through Malabou's concept of plasticity. I will then demonstrate how this vulnerability of the planetary form signals the acceleration of planetary entropy, necessitating Stiegler's concept of negenthropy — i.e. the cultivation of knowledge and organisation to produce a localised counter-tendency against collapse (2018, p. 51). Thus, this requires abandoning the isolated, anthropocentric worldview of the past, embracing Haraway's call to "make kin" with these non-human actors in lines of inventive connection (2016, p. 2). Finally, I will employ Tsing's "arts of noticing," to shift the analytical focus from scalable, monolithic solutions (2015, p. 42) to the precariously assembled human and nonhuman lifeworlds of the Turkana Basin, foregrounding local Indigenous Knowledge systems (as inspired by Viveros de Castro's work) as a model for integrated political and geophysical response. As such, I argue for a framework that answers our crisis of responsibility in the Anthropocene through a dialogue between Stiegler's neganthropy and local Indigenous Knowledge systems, moving towards the production of order, meaning, care, and life in a world increasingly dominated by entropy.

As I discussed earlier, the contemporary crisis of the Anthropocene compels a shift in our understanding of the world, moving beyond the conventional divisions of nature and culture to acknowledge a profound human-Earth entanglement. In the Lake Turkana case study, due to drops in the water levels, there was a reduced load on the Earth's crust, leading to accelerated fault activity and increased magma flux in the East African Rift Valley (Muirhead et al., 2025). Here, the Earth's crust (lithosphere) is not inert but deforms in response to changes imposed upon it by the cryosphere, the atmosphere, and the hydrosphere (Amosu, 2014), wherein "the surficial processes and depositional environments created by the lakes, and indirectly by the climate changes, had profound effects on the geomorphology of the valley bottoms where the lakes were present … affect[ing] deeper Earth processes" (Adams et al., 1999, p. 1739). As Malabou presents, this 'plasticity' of the Earth's crust is "at once capable of receiving and giving form" (Malabou, 2022, p. 2) wherein "Earth materials exhibit a combination of elastic and viscous behaviours" (Adams et al., 1999, p. 1748), answering Malabou's call for a history of mentalities that includes "the materiality of inorganic nature" (Malabou, 2022, p. 201), i.e. the Earth itself. In the context of Lake Turkana, the Earth's crust 'receives form' because it deforms (or changes shape) in response to changes in surface loads imposed by water masses (the hydrosphere). This responsiveness of the lithosphere to external pressure (a form of load) confirms the capacity of material to be susceptible to new forms. Here, "the human [is] transformed into a geological force because of climate change" (ibid., 200) where "no system, no form and no regime of being is ever closed or self-sufficient, [remaining] constitutively open to and affected by the other systems, forms or regimes to which they are necessarily related" (ibid., 4) — here, these interconnected regimes demonstrate a dissolution of the binary between the passive deep Earth and dynamic surface processes, pointing towards a vertical entanglement. The lake's destabilisation through human processes then points to this "destructive plasticity", parallel to the destructive nature of neurological plasticity (ibid., 7), wherein the Earth's susceptibility to transformation is catastrophic to human systems. This geological responsiveness then reveals how Earth systems operate within Stiegler's 'Entropocene' wherein the resulting seismic instability constitutes a physical symptom of this entropic drift while simultaneously issuing a negentropic imperative for human responsibility to transcend paralysis and cultivate "new forms of knowledge characteristic of neganthropology" (Stiegler, 2018, p. 142) to counteract the forces that accelerate planetary decay.

Stiegler's work presents a stand against the Entropocene — "a period in which entropy is produced on a massive scale, thanks precisely to the fact that what has been liquidated and automated is knowledge, so that in fact it is no longer knowledge at all, but rather a set of closed systems, that is, entropic systems" (2018, p. 51). Here, the Entropocene is the geological epoch corresponding to the destructive processes of generalised nihilism and capitalism, which systemically increases the rate of planetary entropy (ibid., 10-11). In the Lake Turkana case, the phenomenon of accelerating fault activity and seismic risk due to surface water loss acts as a symptom of Anthropocene entropy (ibid., 25). Here, the physical processes that create this surface water loss — such as damming on the Omo river and the lack of rainfall because of changing weather patterns because of climate change — are part of the " systemic and massively toxic character of contemporary organology" wherein "transindividuation metastabilises new attentional forms that constitute horizons of expectations, wills and desires" (ibid., 34-35), creating, in the age of capitalism, this expectation of the Earth to submit to accelerated entropy across ecological, social, and psychic domains. What Stiegler warns against then, in the face of the human factor becoming a geological entity, is the belief that it is not possible to change human behaviour — he argues that the Anthropocene epoch has given rise to a "negative protention [that] is inherently performative and self-fulfilling", presenting how "non-belief is a negative performativity that brings dejection, stupefaction and neglect (of which denial is a specific and cowardly form): it is paralysis" (ibid., 34-35). As such, this denial of humanity's actions which "impose [themselves] in the biosphere as an inescapable test … is a primary functional trait of capitalism, which, becoming with digital tertiary retention thoroughly computational, constitutes a 'smart' capitalism based on a permanent and planetary totalisation itself constituting a 'soft' totalitarianism" (ibid., 201-202).

The sort of massively scaled-up response that we force out of the Earth (in this case, the Earth's crust) thus forms Morton's hyperobjects — "things that are huge and, as they say, "distributed" in time and space" (Morton, 2018, xxx), critiquing the surface and subject-centric models implied by the Anthropocene. As James Muirhead, lead researcher on the project on Lake Turkana, said: "[T]hese changes occur over geological rather than human timescales, so their effects would be subtle and largely imperceptible within a single lifetime or even across generations" (Haney, 2025), these hyperobjects "that take place over many decades or centuries (or indeed millennia), and that happen all over Earth" (Morton, 2018, xxx), a "thing so vast in both temporal and spatial terms that we can only see slices of it at a time" (ibid., 77). Here, Morton suggests that "Ecological awareness is shaking our faith in the anthropocentric idea that there is one scale to rule them all — the human one" (ibid., 22) as he presents how hyperobjects defy human understanding of the temporal scales within which the world operates. Moving back to Stiegler, such liquidation of knowledge (Stiegler, 2018, p. 51) results in the "confus[ion of] time with the measurement of time, [which] further confuses the measurement of time with just a few kinds of measurement — the kinds that are convenient for humans" (Morton, 2018, p. 23). This necessitates a *moving within* towards the geological structures we influence with the realisation that we inhabit them — "The idea that I'm outside the world, looking in, wondering which choice to make, is the ethical equivalent of the substance ontology that separates being from appearance with firewalls and fungicides" (ibid., 118) — a response to the crisis of responsibility that Stiegler also emphasises, that is actionable rather than a paralysis aided by negative protention. As such, Morton's hyperobjects emphasise scale and the necessity of integrated consciousness — we must, as Morton says, "let go of this [i.e. measurable by the human scale] idea of nature" (ibid., xxxiv), and "mak[e] kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family" (Haraway, 2016, p. 2).

Haraway's call to 'make kin' here answers both Stiegler and Morton's call for moving beyond sovereign, human-centered frameworks by providing a crucial ethical and ontological reorientation for thinking about the crisis of responsibility. For Haraway, the Anthropocene cannot be addressed through mastery or management, but demands modes of relation that recognise humans as of the world, not in it (Haraway, 2016, p. 14). Here, she emphasises the need to cultivate 'response-ability' as she quotes from Tsing about the necessity to "surviv[e] collaboratively in disturbance and contamination" (ibid., 37) and actively "learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (ibid., 1), building up to her idea of sympoiesis, i.e. "making-with" (ibid., 59). We do not exist in a vacuum, and we cannot *create* in a vacuum —

critters must “become-with each other or not at all” (ibid., 4). As such, Haraway employs the idea of holobionts, who, “in polytemporal, polyspatial knottings, hold together contingently and dynamically, engaging other holobionts in complex patternings” (ibid., 60). In the context of Lake Turkana, this relational ontology is especially salient, where hydrological, tectonic, and political forces are irreducibly entangled. We make-with the Earth (or, in this case, the Earth’s crust) as we push it into that which we did not conceive it could be — in its plasticity, it responds in ways we did not know we could control. Because of the sheer temporal scale of the hyperobjects we influence, turning to Haraway’s holobionts reflects a requirement to build the capacity to respond attentively within multispecies and multi-temporal assemblages, foregrounding care over calculation, aligning with Stiegler’s neganthropic imperative to produce knowledge and organisation that resist entropic collapse. Here, making-with and becoming-with companion species creates spaces wherein “who is/are to be in/of the world is constituted in intra-and inter-action … the partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements” (ibid., 13). These holobionts hold space for sites where planetary processes are mediated through local ecologies and Indigenous lifeworlds, remaining accountable within the unstable, vertically entangled relations that bind surface politics to deep geophysical time. This resonates with a requirement to attend to local ecologies and lifeworlds rather than imposing scalable, technocratic fixes.

Here, turning to Turkana Indigenous Knowledge (IK) provides what Viveros de Castro calls a “permanent decolonisation of thought” (Castro, 2014, p. 2), creating knowledge bases grounded in an intimate attunement to the Earth's surface signals as expressions of subsurface processes. As Huaman argues in the introduction for *Indigenous Innovations*, "Indigenous innovation put into practice is a part of this dialogue and necessarily takes into consideration not only the need to acknowledge and understand multiple epistemologies — Indigenous, other non-western, and western — but also, the need to do so in our own and other shifting ecologies, in a globalised world" (Huaman, 2015, p. 5). As such, "Indigenous innovation is a move from the margins, a response to a great collection of challenges — historical, contemporary, and unanticipated — that we share together in this world" (ibid.). In Turkana IK, elders identify underground water tables through soil coloration, plant species, animal behaviour, and land morphology, revealing a practical understanding of vertical planetary responsiveness long before its scientific confirmation — for instance, "white clear sand, grey sand, and black fertile agricultural soil observed on the riverbed or at dry river banks indicate the possibility of a water table" (Ng'asike & Swadener, 2015, pp. 118-119). Here, Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism demands that they be approached as theoretical systems capable of transforming the very categories through which nature, responsibility, and agency are understood, wherein Turkana hydrological and nomadic knowledge articulates a multinaturalist ontology in which land, water, animals, and humans participate in a shared field of relational becoming. For the Turkana, nature is predictable — "rainfall patterns are analysed by the elders, and the data derived from observations is used to advise the community on weather changes and what coping strategies the families will use to survive the climate changes" (Ng'asike & Swadener, 2015, p. 115). Their calendars are shaped around water — each Turkana year has six months, and "one year represents a dry season (Akamu), followed by another year of six months of wet season (Akiporo)" (ibid., 112), with activities, food, and livestock grazing shaped around how and when water will be available. As Ng'asike & Swadener emphasise, in line with Stiegler and Viveros de Castro, "modern political mandates in Kenya do not appear to recognise Indigenous ways of living and utilising the environment, [instead] recognis[ing] only one type of knowing and utilising nature, which is based on Western perspectives perpetuated through modern education. This dynamic has led to Turkana knowledge not being recognised as a contributing element to human survival in harsh environments or national socioeconomic discourses of development" (2015, p. 121). Here, in foregrounding these Indigenous epistemologies, the Lake Turkana case demonstrates that negentropic futures depend not on scalable technocratic solutions but on the cultivation and protection of situated, relational ways of knowing capable of holding planetary instability without denying it (Tsing, 2015, p. 38). As such, learning from these systems and applying them in the Anthropocene then answers Haraway's call to 'make kin' in the Turkana's multispecies attentiveness to land, animals, and climate.

Tsing's "arts of noticing" further call for such a situated attentiveness, wherein the Turkana Basin, as a fragile and precarious assemblage of climate, geology, pastoral livelihoods, and political marginalisation, sustains life amid capitalist ruins (2015, p. 17). Here, she foregrounds forms of situated attention that resist the erasures demanded by scalable, technocratic solutions through ontological survival practices wherein responsibility is relational rather than sovereign. Turkana IK operates within similar structures that resist scalability — their pastoral, nomadic lifestyle as well as their relationship to water and the water table around the Turkana lake relies on movement to allow the Earth to replenish itself. Their diet changes according to the dry and wet years as scarcity of water does not prompt damming and large-scale extraction from underground water sources but rather the slaughtering of fattened livestock from the previous 'wet' year to "sustain families against the drought" (Ng'asike & Swadener, 2015, p. 114). Like the mushrooms that bloom in the ruins of the forest, the Turkana relied on the decimation of grass and livestock because of locusts, which led to large pastures and rainfall — i.e. sustainable practices and ways of life, for the Turkana, *required non-scalability*. As assemblages — "open-ended gatherings" — the "divergent, layered, and conjoined projects" created with the Lake Turkana and its surroundings provide "patterns of unintentional coordination" to cultivate being in this precarious ecosystem (Tsing, 2015, pp. 22-23). Ng'asike's work with Turkana herdsmen provides key insights into how scalable agricultural practices in these areas "require[d] that project elements be oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter, banish[ing] meaningful diversity" (Tsing, 2015, p. 38) — i.e. the removal of locusts. Here, he speaks of how "today you cannot see the locust. It was destroyed by the airplane, which powered a yellow substance on the land to kill all the locusts. After that we no longer see the locust. This has also led to frequent drought, which has drastically reduced the pasture which used to bring the locust to our land" (Ng'asike & Swadener, 2015, p. 118). This 'hard work' to create scalability (Tsing, 2015, p. 38) also included the extraction of huge quantities of water from the ground, lowering the water table and adding to the scale of drought in these areas (Ng'asike & Swadener, 2015, p. 119). As Tsing emphasises, then, transformative mutualism, which is at the heart of her theory of nonscalability, presents opportunities to view precarity as a way of life.

What does this all point towards? Taken together, the Lake Turkana case demands a redefinition of negentropic human responsibility in the Anthropocene. Rather than sovereign management of an inert planet, responsibility must be understood as the cultivation of knowledge, care, and organisation capable of sustaining life within vertically entangled, plastic Earth systems. Throughout this essay, I have attempted to present, through Malabou, Stiegler, and Morton, the crisis of responsibility at the heart of the Anthropocene — the Lake Turkana case, with the anthropocentric and subject-centric frameworks taken on by political decisions in this area, presents an active ignorance of the geological impact of human activity that cannot be ignored. Through Haraway, Viveros de Castro, Ng'asike & Swadener, and Tsing, I argued that the path forward lies not in mastering planetary instability but in learning how to live responsibly within it through relational, situated practices that integrate geophysical and political temporality, drawing on Turkana Indigenous Knowledge and relying on nonscalable, precarious ways of living to sustain being in such assemblages. As such, this case suggests that the Anthropocene is not simply a crisis of climate or governance, but a solemn ending of a world we believed we understood. As Emily Dickinson writes, "That is solemn we have ended,— / … / Parting with a world / We have understood, for better / Still it be unfurled." The gravity of this ending does not lie in catastrophe alone, but in the recognition that inherited forms of knowledge, sovereignty, and mastery can no longer orient us within an Earth that is not silent beneath our feet.

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“Missing Women” in Pakistan: Cultural, Patriarchal and Institutional Exclusion

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Abstract

The concept of “missing women” in Pakistan reflects a significant challenge within the domain of political economy as it extends beyond the demographic imbalances and represents the deep-rooted structural inequality and institutional exclusion. This paper essentially draws on Amartya Sen’s capability approach, Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality and a feminist political economy lens to put forward the argument that women’s invisibility in multiple aspects; particularly demographic, economic and social, is not accidental, rather it is systematically produced through state institutions, entrenched cultural norms and discriminatory economic arrangements. The existing literature highlights son preference, sex-selective practices, female

feticide and asymmetric post-birth outcomes. Studies in Pakistani context have captured strong son preference and demographic patterns that result in the phenomenon of “missing women” (Sathar et al., 2015; Klasen & Wink, 2003; Atif et al., 2016). Evidence from demographic sources reinforce the unequal sex ratios at birth in areas of Pakistan, more often among higher-order births where previous children are all girls, indicating the presence of prenatal sex selection. Guilmoto (2015) mentioned that Pakistan accounted for approximately 310,000 female births that went missing between 2005 and 2010, meanwhile data from Pakistan Demographics and Health Survey shows that sex ratios at birth have been exceeding the biological norm of around 105 male births per 100 female births, suggesting gender-biased reproductive practices (Guilmoto, 2015; PDHS 2017–18) However, there is limited literature examining the intersection of gendered practices at micro-level with institutional and economic systems at macro-level. This study employs a secondary qualitative and interpretive approach based on literature and demographic data gained from sources including Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS 2017-18), Pakistan Bureau of Statistics report, UNICEF datasets, World Bank Gender Data and multiple peer reviewed articles. This allows synthesizing theoretical insights along with empirical data to illustrate how economic growth, modern trends and legal laws have not yet been translated into freedom for women. This paper delineates how practices such as unequal inheritance, financial exclusion, patriarchal governance, and gender biased implementation of religious, social and legal norms along with weak legal implementation of reforms leads to undervaluation and exclusion of females within economic, social and political domains. Lastly, a coherent conclusion is drawn addressing the continuous issue of "missing women" in Pakistan requiring an intersectional, policy driven and transformative solution. Therefore, this remains the way the institutionalized patriarchy will be dismantled and women's economic and legal capabilities will be strengthened.

Introduction

The enduring phenomenon of "missing women" in Pakistan acts as a metaphor for the deep-rooted inequalities in the political economy of development. “Missing women” was established by Amartya Sen (1990) to describe the millions of women who are "missing" from society due to sex-selective abortions, increased female mortality, limited employment opportunities and unequal access to healthcare and nourishment (Kabeer, 2002). Pakistan has the lowest female to male sex ratios despite increasing modernization and new gender-progressive legal reforms (Klasen & Wink, 2003). Therefore, raising a crucial political economy question: **How does institutional exclusion, patriarchal systems, and cultural norms combine to create women's demographic, social, and economic disappearance?** Since Pakistan challenges the traditional developmental presumptions that economic growth naturally leads to social progress and gender equality, it is imperative to properly comprehend this notion. Despite ranking higher in terms of GDP, Pakistan Human Development Index (HDI) remains low, with Gender Development Index (GDI) being even lower (Gender Inequality Index ranked 123 out of 148 countries), thus showing that the gains of the economic growth are comparatively in favor of men (Ministry of Planning Development & Special Initiatives Pakistan, n.d.). The current scholarship is rich in documented demographic and cultural explanations, which particularly showcases son preference, family hierarchies and the profound patriarchal norms (Das Gupta, 1987). However, there is a gap, due to ignorance of cultural aspects of institutional structures that does not incorporate an intersectional political economy perspective that describes how intersectionality shapes women's vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1991; Gill et al., 2022).

This paper aims at highlighting the unique case of Pakistan's "missing women" problem, requiring a much more critical assessment than just demographic or cultural disparities. It is the consequence of embedded institutionalized exclusion, structural economic disparities and patriarchal attitudes, which systematically limit women's autonomy, visibility and independence. Sen's capability approach, feminist political economy perspective, and intersectional analyses should be collaboratively employed to explore the "missing" women within the socioeconomic, and institutional domains, and further assess how their disappearance is a result of a multifaceted process of exclusion rather than single force. To substantiate this thesis, this paper will review the existing literature, synthesize the major theoretical frameworks and identify their gaps. Next, the methodological part will describe the qualitative approach that is central to feminist political economy. Eventually, it will delve into the analysis, leveraging intersectionality, institutionalist theories, and Sen's capacity approach along with labor markets, financial inclusion, and inheritance norms. The discussion will then assess the wider implications for gender justice and development policy. Lastly, the conclusion shall tie the whole argument together, by highlighting the limitations and prospects for future research.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of “missing women”, has been a core concern within development economics and gender studies since Amartya Sen’s argument that millions of women are absent from the global population due to systemic neglect, discriminatory social norms as well as gender biased mortality (Sen, 1990). Sen asserts that structural marginalization has led to sex selective abortion, unequal access to healthcare, nutritional discrimination that has disproportionately impacted South and East Asia. Klasen and Wink (2003), further argued that the demographic imbalance is socially produced through the institutional dynamics that tends to prioritize men, which reinforces the entrenched patriarchal hierarchies. At the micro-level Das Gupta (1987), brings in its analysis of rural Punjab, which empirically showcases that discriminatory practices as in son preference, inheritance bias and unequal access to medical and nutritional care tends to shape female survival. Collectively, these studies demonstrate how patriarchal structures operate across institutions and households to reproduce gender inequality (Das Gupta, 1987)

The focus shifts toward patriarchal norms in private and public spheres that collaboratively shape women's subordination. Isran and Isran (2012) establish that male dominant family structures uphold unequal inheritance, restrictive marriage customs and gendered division of labor. These norms tend to permeate state institutions as well. Walby (1990) institutionalized the patriarchal concept that empowers men through cultural ideologies i.e. Purdah. Shaheed (2010), formalizes this argument by establishing how it is embedded within Pakistan’s political history specially in the reign of Zia’s Islamization. The contemporary analysis done by Fizza (2023), demonstrated that these cultural norms continue to frame women’s independence as morally suspicious reinforcing the systemic exclusion.

Institutional structures entrench women's invisibility. Although Shariah and the Constitution guarantee property rights, practices like Haq Baqshwana, and coerced renunciation tends to undermine women's legal entitlements (Gul et al., 2025). Despite the progressive laws including Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011) and the Punjab Enforcement of Women's property Right Act (2020), and Government of Sindh's Child Marriages Restraint Act (2013), embedded patriarchal socio-legal systems limit their effectiveness. Sen's (1990) capability approach discusses how female's inability to translate legal rights into real freedom results in continued persistence of economic dependency and structural violence. Next, the economic exclusion is reinforced by the gendered financial barriers. Ghosh and Vinod (2017) highlight that women's education and employment do not guarantee financial inclusion due to restricted credit access. Razzaq et al. (2024) showed that only 13% of women in Pakistan hold formal bank accounts, compared to 34% of men according to Global Findex 2021 data, illustrating how employment is not always equivalent to financial empowerment.

An intersectional lens plays a crucial role in understanding how class, religion, gender interact together to produce the women 's vulnerability (Crenshaw,1991). Das Gupta & Sharma (2022), argues that practices such as female feticide, infanticide and discriminatory nutrition exist despite economic growth showcasing that patriarchal structures combats the material progress. While the minority women; Christian, scheduled caste Hindus and Ahmadis face extra barriers including poor education, low paid jobs, limited healthcare access, forced conversions (Gill et al., 2022).

While “missing women” is an issue persistent in the entirety of South Asia, it is especially obstinate in Pakistan. Bangladesh and India (Sen,1990) have significantly improved women’s employment, health access and introduced stronger laws against sex selective practices, while Pakistan still faces strong patriarchal norms, limited female employment opportunities and weak legal enforcement. The current literature highlights the demographic imbalances along with cultural biases but fails to emphasize on the link between micro practices (son preference, gendered socialization, etc.) and macro level structural discriminations (financial, legal exclusion of women). Moreover, the overlapping factors, such as ethnicity, religion, caste and class; consolidated different levels of vulnerabilities faced by women, are insufficiently explored in the context of Pakistan. Hence, pressing issues such as discriminatory marriages, forced conversions and occupational discriminations remain under-researched. Such gaps found in the existing literature make it crucial to explore the structural exclusion, embedded patriarchal norms and state level practices through a feminist political economy lens to better understand why the notion remains entrenched in Pakistan.

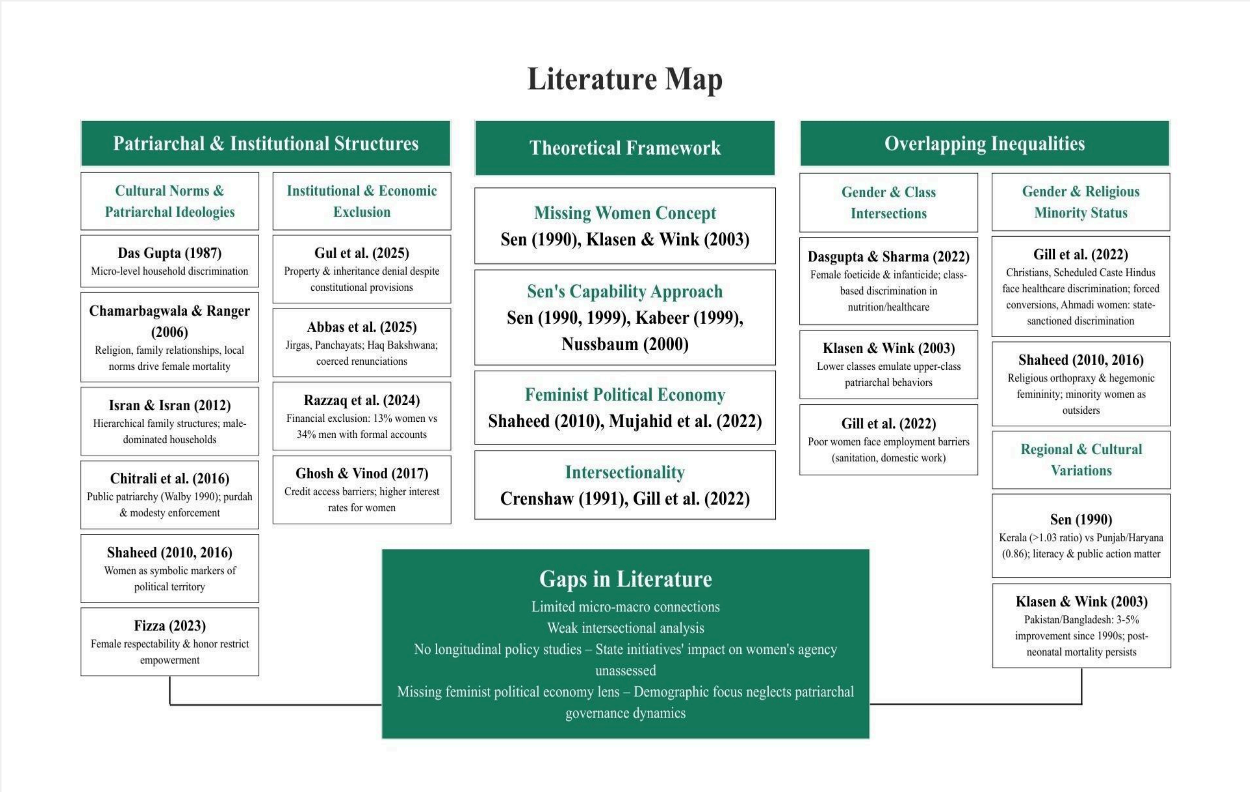

Figure 1: Visual mapping of the literature used to organize and synthesize prior research relevant to the study's framework. Source: Author's Analysis

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive research approach to examine how cultural and patriarchal norms along with institutional dynamics, sustain the persistence of “missing women” in Pakistan. Since the issue is rooted in long-term social, political and historical processes, qualitative methods allow us to capture the depth of gendered inequalities that quantitative data alone cannot fully explain. The analysis is based on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed articles, demographic reports, policy documents and theoretical texts from feminist political economy, intersectionality studies and institutional economics. These sources were selected for their contribution to debates on gender discrimination, institutional exclusion of women, female mortality and socio-cultural norms within the South Asian region.

Moving on, there were three major categories for gathering data for this study: **1.** Empirical studies documenting patterns of female mortality, sex selective behavior, financial exclusion and inheritance rejection/denial **2.** Theoretical framings such as the capability approach by Sen, feminist critiques of patriarchy and Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory **3.** Policy analyses regarding women’s property rights, legal reforms and financial inclusion in Pakistan. This range enabled a multi-level understanding of how economic, cultural and institutional forces intersect to reinforce gendered disadvantage.

For analysis, the study employs documentary analysis supported by narrative thematic review. Documentary analysis helped evaluate how policies, laws, cultural practices and institutional arrangements shape women’s freedoms and life chances, while thematic review identified recurring patterns such as patriarchal ideologies, financial marginalization, property-based exclusion and intersectional disadvantages related to class, religion and minority status. These themes helped link micro-level practices, including son preference and household neglect, with macro-level structures such as state policies and legal systems, offering a comprehensive understanding of how the phenomenon of “missing women” unfolds as a consequence of multiple reinforcing inequalities.

This theoretically analytical strategy of our study treats the notion of “missing women” as a structural and political problem that is grounded in normative, economic and institutional systems, rather than merely just a demographic issue. Hence, this methodological approach allows us to draw a nuanced, feminist political view to understand why gender inequality prevails despite the formal reforms and eras of economic development.

Analysis

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a potent political-economical viewpoint for interpreting the idea within Pakistan's dynamics by shifting the attention to deprivation related to the capability that tends to restrict the substantive freedoms. It demonstrates that even though women have legal rights, such as the ability to inherit property, access to healthcare and education, these rights are not translated into real capabilities because of ingrained patriarchal norms, mobility limitations, and unequal power dynamics (Nussbaum, 2011). Pakistan has the largest gender disparity in South Asia, with only 22% of women working (World Bank, 2024) and 54% of women literate compared to 74% of men (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Due to inequalities in nutrition and household food distribution, girls under the age of five are also 30% more likely to be underweight than boys (UNICEF, 2023). According to estimates, there are 90-100 “missing women” for every 1000 males in Pakistan, which can be attributed to lower vaccination rates, prenatal sex selection, and limited access to healthcare facilities (World Bank Gender Data, 2023). Sen's ideology shows that modernization is insufficient to address gender mortality disparities when institutional biases and patriarchal norms are deep-rooted in the state. Studies show that prenatal sex-screening is linked to a sex ratio of 110 boys per 100 girls at birth, which is concentrated in Punjab and KP, according to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2017-2018), which provides empirical evidence that the availability of inexpensive ultrasound technology has resulted in a mass number of sex-selective abortions (Javed & Arif, 2020). As expected, this tends to reflect broader South Asian patterns, such as in India, where SRBs increased to 114-120 in regions like Haryana (Bhalotra & Cochrane, 2010). The internal paradox reveals that an increase in girls' educational enrollment does not necessarily translate into increased labor market participation and decision-making power. Further, class hierarchies, caste divisions, and the capitalist role in the economy, are often overlooked by the capability approach. Capitalist economic structures can exacerbate gender discrimination by positioning women in unpaid domestic labor and care work, restricting their access to opportunities offering formal employment. Consequently, economic growth may reinforce the overall national income but without guaranteeing an improvement in women’s financial independence. It further reflects the decision-making authority within the households and shows how women’s unpaid labor persists to support the wider economy, while remaining largely absent from the economic stats and policy frameworks. It also does not fully explain the political dynamics that led to this catastrophe, and the discrepancy of women's experiences as it is not necessarily equal. Statistics show that low-income, rural women experience greater hardship, as rural Pakistani girls are 12% less likely to be fully immunized (PDHS 2017–18), with maternal mortality remaining three times higher in rural areas than in urban areas (UNFPA 2022). These insights show that women’s exclusion is not just a result of gender discrimination alone, but rather caused by class, location and unequal access to resources as well.

To further deepen the understanding of “missing women”, Hamza Alvi's theoretical approach to the post-colonial state helps bring in the political-economic nuance of the concept by emphasizing how state-level institutions systematically reinforce the patriarchal privileges that are ingrained in the society. According to Alvi (1972), the landed elites organize post-colonial states, and Pakistan, being an "overdeveloped state," has its power centralized in a military-bureaucratic oligarchy, which supports patriarchal interests. For instance, article 17 of Qanun-e-Shahadat Order (1984) limited women's agency by limiting their testimony to half that of men. Further, the introduction of moral policing and gender-segregated public spaces were among the legal measures used by the state to institutionalize the formal gender hierarchy during General Zia's Islamization regime (1977-1988). Thus, this law tends to reverberate today by impacting bureaucratic attitudes, as police officers and municipal administrators view violence against women as "private matters" and not a legal violation of their rights (HRCP, 2022). Moreover, only 3% of women typically inherit agricultural land when viewed through a modern institutional lens (OECD, 2021). This is primarily because of male-dominated inheritance tribunals and protracted bureaucratic delays that cause women to lose their property. Furthermore, policing institutions support patriarchal norms because over 70% of domestic abuse cases are usually dismissed (HRCP, 2022). This implies that bureaucrats are reluctant to question male power on a micro-level. Additionally, there are deeply ingrained religious identity politics, exemplified by the Council of Islamic Ideology, which tends to limit women's mobility and public employment domains. For instance, the Council of Islamic Ideology’s 2016 recommendations objected to women serving in judicial roles or employed in mixed gender workplaces and stated that women can not travel without a mahram (male guardian). While the CII revised its position in 2023 to permit women to travel without a mahram, this permission remains conditional upon obtaining consent from a parent or husband (Tribune, 2023). This thus gives institutional biases and embedded patriarchy in the legislative process an ideological cover and freedom. Alavi, however, overemphasizes the structural aspect and puts focus on macro-structures in his Overdeveloped State thesis, downplaying the role of civil society organizations and progressive bureaucrats who are essentially the ones calling for gender-equitable reforms like the Punjab Women's Protection Authority (2017) and the Protection Against Harassment Act (2010). It demonstrates that states are not monolithic and that they frequently have internal contradictions, which also need to be highlighted.

In addition to critically assessing the phenomena of "missing woman" in Pakistan, Feminist Political Economy offers a critical lens that links it to unpaid labor, structural gender inequality as well as economic exclusion. It has been argued by Elson (1999) and Beneria (2003) that women's productive and reproductive labor tends to remain underrecognized and undervalued. It leads to underpinning in the broader economy which however is not translated in the formal statistics perpetuating systemic gender disadvantage. According to Majid and Siegmann (2021), women spend five additional hours than men per day doing housework even when also doing paid work. Yet a small contribution of women is recognized as productive and monetized. Marxist Feminist lens explains the way economic structure tends to reproduce the male dominance in society by extracting surplus labor from women while exposing limit to the access to asset, property and decision-making authority which lead to indirect impact over excessive female mortality and obstructed demographic deficit pertaining to Pakistan (Benería, 2003; Elson, 1999). Further, it has been profoundly explored through an intersectional lens that rural and poor women tend to face compounded exclusion, due to entrenched household patriarchy, limited mobility and lack of legal recourse makes the invisibility of the labor worse, and put constraint over their health, nutrition and education. Since, PDHS 2017-2018 illustrates that rural women are twice as likely to not have access to skilled birth attendants and girls from poorest regions go through stunting rates which surpasses 50%, highlighting chronic nutritional deprivation. Further, this notion has been validated due to similar patterns being noticed across South Asia, as in India, female labor force participation is around 20% which demonstrates a parallel to that of Pakistan (World Bank, 2020). In Bangladesh, rural women constitute and perform 60-70% of agricultural labor but only control 10% of land ownership, highlighting the entrenched inequality and patriarchy in allocation of resources (FAO, 2021). Hence, “missing women” is not just a demographic phenomenon but it is the result of systemic economic marginalization and gender invisibility in postcolonial South Asian economies. Nonetheless, feminist political economy under-addresses the women’s agency and grassroot coping strategies including participation in micro-finance programs and local initiatives pertaining to women empowerment through NGOs showing measurable improvement (Siddiqui, 2018). As evaluated by Kashf Foundation’s micro-finance, women borrowers had a 30-40% increase in their household incomes and 20% rise in the purchasing decision as well as improved mobility and financial autonomy (Kashf Foundation Impact Assessment, 2016). It has been noted that although underpaid labor is a crucial factor deciding on the marginalization of women, there are other factors including ethnicity, class and regional disparities, that call for an intersectional, dynamic lens to strengthen the understanding of the economic and structural foundations of gender discrimination and their contribution towards women invisibility and mortality rate.

Discussion and Implications

The analysis of the "missing women" phenomenon in Pakistan shows fundamental contradictions in structural discourse. Through Sen's capability approach, intersectionality theory, and institutionalist perspectives, we show that the demographic disappearance of women is a structural feature of Pakistan and is reproduced through the intersection of patriarchal governance, institutional exclusion, and class-based hierarchies.

Our analysis essentially challenges the assumption that economic development organically produces gender equality. Statistical evidence as provided throughout the paper across South Asia shows that rising GDP, increased literacy, and formal legal reforms have consistently failed to dismantle structural mechanisms rendering women "missing" from demographic, economic, and social domains. This reflects a conversion gap in Sen's capability approach since formal rights do not convert to actual capabilities with the state itself reinforcing patriarchal bias. Moreover, patriarchal exclusion operates as a structural violence that is simultaneously economic, social, and political. According to statistics female labor participation is 24.3% while 80.3% for males, excluding the informal or unpaid labor (World Bank, 2024). This creates "institutional invisibility", where women's economic contributions remain under-recognized. Furthermore, the intersectional dimension illuminates that minority women face compounded marginalization demonstrating how class, religion, and gender converge to amplify vulnerability (Gill et al., 2022).

Thus, our analysis reveals a paradox of modernization where technological advancement and economic growth have intensified rather than alleviated gender based mortality. Despite improvements in economic indicators and educational attainment across South Asia, sex ratio imbalances and gender disparities remain persistent, suggesting that development alone is insufficient to dismantle patriarchal structures. Studies have shown that the with the spread of prenatal sex-determination technologies, particularly ultrasound scanning, facilitated sex-selective abortions in contexts where son preference was already entrenched, has contributed more to skewed sex ratios at birth across parts of South Asia (Guilmoto, 2012). While economic pressures associated with globalization have strengthened son preference (Das Gupta & Sharma, 2022), who are often viewed as primary income providers, suggesting that capitalist modernizations have further intensified patriarchal control.

To address this persistence of “missing women”, it is essential that we move towards transformative policies that target the roots of power hierarchies. First, there should be accessible legal systems and enforceable implementation mechanisms for women's property and inheritance rights through gender-responsive monitoring bodies who have enforcement powers. Drawing from Rwanda's success, where mandatory joint land titling increased women's property ownership from 12% to 41% between 2009-2019 (Abbott et al., 2018), Pakistan could implement similar joint registration requirements for marital property. Subsequently, financial inclusion policies must recognize that women's economic exclusion is rooted in property dispossession and mobility constraints. Learning from Bangladesh's Grameen Bank model, which achieved 94% female membership through collateral-free microfinance (Kayani et al., 2021), strategies should be redesigned so women access credit without male guarantors.

Policies must adopt explicit intersectional approaches requiring disaggregated data collection and targeted healthcare interventions addressing discrimination faced by minority women. India's Conditional Cash Transfer schemes like Janani Suraksha Yojana give an example of reduced infant mortality by 3.7% by incentivized institutional deliveries (Lim et al., 2010) especially targeting poor and minority women, delivering female children. Alongside this, there should be awareness programs such as Beti Bacho Tehreeq (ISPP, 2023) in India, to raise awareness against son preference. Furthermore, Drawing from the UK's Forced Marriage Unit model, which has facilitated protection for many victims annually through multi-agency coordination (Office, 2025), Pakistan could establish legal protections against forced conversions and marriages for minority women. However, before introducing new legal frameworks, greater emphasis should be placed on the effective enforcement of existing legal protections such as imposing hefty fines for any discriminatory practices against women.

Moreover, there should be enforceable equal-pay legislation to address the wage gaps and labor market exclusion despite the rising literacy rates. Iceland's law which obligates employers to obtain a certification of equal-pay compliance, where employees receive equal pay for equal work, presents a strong model for institutionalizing wage parity (Government of Iceland, 2020). Pakistan adopting a similar framework (with mandatory pay audits, transparency, and sanctions for non-compliance) could help bridge the gap between women's educational attainment and actual labor market equality. And ultimately, only by expanding women's political power and embedding community driven accountability into state structures that effectively dismantle the state sanctioned patriarchy can Pakistan move towards gender justice

Essentializing the broader impact, our findings challenge assumptions that markets and formal rights automatically produce equality, where "missing women" persists and is actively reproduced through capitalist modernization and state formation. Pakistan's Islamization shows how religious nationalism and patriarchal governance become mutually constitutive, thus marginalizing minority women. While Sen's approach provides important insights, our analysis shows its limitations. Thus, future research must integrate capability frameworks with institutionalist theories to examine power through legal systems and customary practices. Our findings show how patriarchal capitalism and religious nationalism converge to render lives expendable, thus, addressing this requires transformative policies that challenge power structures. Only through structural transformation that recognizes intersecting gendered, class-based, and religious hierarchies can development truly serve gender justice.

Conclusion

Conclusively in this paper we established that patriarchal social norms, discriminatory practices at home, unequal access to food and medical care, and political and financial limitations all contribute to the "missing women" issue. According to a feminist political concept, unpaid labor, gender-biased economic possibilities, and insufficient protectionist measures of women's rights tend to reproduce material and institutional marginalization. It emphasized that women's constraints are not merely cultural and demographic, but are ingrained in the allocation of power and resources. This study will be further extended by investigating the effects of immediate government programs, household decision-making at the micro level, the emergence of women's empowerment initiatives at the village level, and their contribution to the development of gender norms. And further evaluate their impact whether they are subsided or long-term initiatives with effective outcomes. The lack of statistical modeling limits the scope of this study, which can be addressed in the future using longitudinal data sets and field surveys. Nonetheless, there is a crucial and urgent need for addressing the “missing women” crisis through structural reforms that expands women’s freedom, strengthen the healthcare accessibility, regulate discriminatory practices as well as challenge the patriarchal norms within state and market. There needs to be a call for intersectional and redistributive policies, through a feminist political economy view, that can transform the conditions that render millions of women as ‘missing’ in Pakistan.

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Education as a Colonial Equalizer
How Gender and Income Disparities Mediate Social Mobility

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Abstract

This report examines whether education functions as a driver of social mobility in Pakistan, or whether it reproduces existing inequality. It analyses the education-to-mobility trajectory as a five-stage pipeline: primary schooling, secondary schooling, higher education, labour-market entry, and wage returns; and reviews Pakistani and comparative evidence to assess how students move through each stage. The central finding is that the pipeline 'leaks': at every transition, gender and household income act as filters that fall disproportionately on women and the rural poor. Primary schooling is shaped by a resource gap; secondary schooling by constraints on female mobility and autonomy; higher education by both regional and gendered stratification; and the labour market by class-based gatekeeping and the systematic undervaluation of women's work. Because disadvantage accumulates across these stages rather than occurring at a single

point, the report concludes that education is a *conditional* equalizer, a necessary but insufficient condition for mobility. Policies that expand enrollment without addressing these structural leaks risk entrenching the very inequalities they aim to reduce.

Introduction

In the global development discourse, ever since the 80s, education has been seen as the great equalizer of society. A true system of meritocracy, education, propels those who are worthy to the top steps of society's ladder while sorting those who are not as excellent performers at the lower rungs of society. So regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other social indicator of identity, people can transcend their inherited socioeconomic constraints. The promise is etched in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which believes inclusive education directly relates to upward social mobility and poverty alleviation for communities. The logic is linear and simple: Perform and you shall succeed; if the state provides schools and families prioritize enrollment, social mobility will naturally follow. Yet, in Pakistan, this promise is uneven, conditional, and frequently goes unfulfilled.

While the state has attempted to provide education to the masses, via expansion of university campuses and incentivizing enrollment through conditional cash transfers under the Benazir Taleemi Wazaif program, these interventions look at education as a stand-alone and an isolated variable, separate from the structural inequalities that flow through the education system.

This report looks at the relationship between education and social mobility through an analytical lens and argues that it is not a single event but rather a cumulative pipeline, through which an individual passes through multiple life stages, from primary enrollment to entering the labor market and then finally securing wage returns. We argue that this pipeline is leaky and does not mean that all those that enter this pipeline are able to exit with the same returns, or even are able to reach the end of this pipeline. This pipeline leaks at every juncture, and is disadvantageous, particularly for women and lower-income groups. These leaks don't just exist but rather accumulate. It begins with the resource gap at the primary level, widens at the autonomy cliff (the intensification of financial pressures and restrictions on girl's autonomy as soon as they hit puberty) of secondary schooling, stratifies through field sorting in higher education, and is cemented by gatekeeping and wage suppression in the labor market.

Against the backdrop of Pakistan's abysmal literacy rate of nearly 60%, there exists a stark gap between the genders, with female literacy standing at 52% as compared to 68% of males. Couple that with the fact that 38% of children in Pakistan still remain out of school, and this narrative of progress becomes incredibly complicated and problematic (The Nation, 2025). These aggregated statistics still obscure the on-ground reality for many, where the rural poor find that the financial returns on education remain negligible, and a lot lesser than their wealthier and urban counterparts. This points towards a dangerous cycle of poverty reproduction, where the affluent are not only able to gain more by attending school but also have to give up less in the process.

Thereby, we argue that income disparities and gender gaps act as filters through this pipeline. They determine not just who enters the classroom, but who survives the transition to secondary school, who creates the ‘right’ social signals to get hired, and whose labor is valued in the economy.

Theoretical Framework

The Meritocratic Promise: Functionalism and Human Capital Theory

The dominant account of education as an equalizer rests on a functionalist theory of stratification. In the classical idea, schooling is the legitimate mechanism through which a society identifies talent and allocates individuals to positions according to their ability and achievement (Durkheim, 1956; Parsons, 1959). Davis and Moore (1945) reinforced the view: because some positions are functionally more demanding than others, unequal rewards are necessary to motivate the most capable individuals to undertake the training those positions require, and education is the institution that sorts them. Stratification, therefore, becomes not a defect but a functional and necessary feature of an efficient, just, and productive social order. Human capital theory supplements the economic articulation of the same logic. For Becker (1964) and Mincer (1974), schooling is an investment that raises an individual's productivity, and a competitive labour market rewards that productivity with proportionally higher wages. The Mincerian earnings function operationalises the promise: more schooling, more skill, thus higher pay. It is this combination of functionalist–human-capital premise that motivates Pakistan's contemporary education policy: the post-2002 massification of higher education and the conditional cash transfers of the Benazir Taleemi Wazaif, both of which treat the expansion of enrolment as a sufficient lever for upward mobility and educational development of the country. This paper takes an antithetical view of this premise.

Conflict Theory & Social Reproduction

Against the functionalist account stands the social-reproduction tradition, which argues that education sorts not by merit but by social origin, while *misrecognising* the result as merit. Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that schools reproduce the class relations of the wider economy, rewarding compliance and self-presentation that correspond to a student's class position rather than their cognitive ability. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) identify this mechanism as *cultural capital*: schools implicitly demand the linguistic codes, tastes, and dispositions, the *habitus*, of the dominant class, so that students who inherit these advantages convert them into credentials, while the system represents this inherited advantage as individual talent. Collins (1979) adds that credentials function less as proxies for productivity than as a status currency policed by occupational and academic gatekeepers. Signaling theory can be added to this framework as its market-level mechanism. Spence's (1973) insight that, under information asymmetry, employers screen candidates on observable signals also points towards the reproduction theory, showing how class advantage operates through the labour market. If the signals, such as accent, schooling brand, cultural interests, that employers read are themselves stratified by origin, then screening sorts on class while appearing to sort on ability. The experimental evidence that employers favour candidates displaying ‘highbrow’ cultural cues over identically qualified peers (Galos & Frese, 2025) shows that the signal is corrupted. Human capital theory and signaling thus describe the two channels through which the functionalist promise is supposed to operate; reproduction theory explains how both are captured by class and gender.

Intersectionality: The Compounding Effect of Class and Gender

The Social reproduction theory looks at social class as the origin that defines future trajectories, but the Pakistani case demands an intersectional lens. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argues that systems of disadvantage do not operate with an aggregate logic but combine to produce distinct social positions of subordination that single-factor-based analysis of class would overlook. A poor rural woman in Pakistan is not just disadvantaged as a woman, but also as a poor person, *plus* as a rural resident, as though each could be examined in isolation; she occupies a specific location at which patriarchal constraints on mobility, household economic precarity, and geographic exclusion act on one another and compound. This framework matters methodologically as well as argumentatively: because disadvantages interact differently at different life stages, the resource gap of early childhood is not the autonomy constraint of adolescence, and an intersectional analysis is best conducted as an accounting of *transitions* rather than of outcomes at a single point. It is this requirement that motivates the transition-by-transition structure adopted below.

Methodology

This report is a narrative review of secondary literature, structured around an analytical framework specified in advance: the life-cycle pipeline through which students move from primary schooling to the labour market. Rather than attempting a systematic or exhaustive survey, sources were selected to populate and substantiate the argument at each stage of this pipeline. The institutional and policy landscape is mapped through Safi and Yousafzai (2024) and the BISP Annual Report (2023). The analysis of access and retention draws on Pasha (2024), Sathar and Kazi (2000), and Ali (1990) to show how household income and constraints on female autonomy shape progression. Two international studies are included deliberately, Seehuus and Strømme (2024) on Norway and Galos and Frese (2025) on Germany, not as direct evidence about Pakistan, but as comparative cases that demonstrate the mechanisms of occupational segregation and class-based hiring whose operation in Pakistan is plausible. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides the theoretical lens for interpreting elite gatekeeping.

Stage 1: Primary Schooling

The first leak in this pipeline occurs in the very first stage, primary schooling. While access to education is generally measured via enrollment statistics, it does not guarantee enrollment equity, or in other words, access to enrollment and the capacity to learn after enrollment. For that, we need to assess who enrolls, what they learn, and how their development is supported before they even enter the classroom. Evidence suggests that for children from lower-income households, the ‘resource gap’ becomes the first filter, sorting them into differing trajectories based on biological, financial, and institutional disadvantages.

Nutritional Deficit

The pipeline analysis acknowledges that the first line of inequality precedes even primary schooling. According to the National Nutrition Survey (NNS), 40.2% of children under five in Pakistan are stunted (UNICEF Pakistan, 2019). This is more than just a health statistic; it is an educational one too. Stunting is strongly correlated with delayed cognitive development (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Nearly all of the low-income cohort, the capacity to perform and learn in the educational context is compromised by their poverty, even before it begins. This 'biological tax' means that even if enrollment is universal, the starting line is not.

Limits of Cash Transfer

To counter such financial barriers, the state has deployed the Benazir Taleemi Wazaif (BISP), a conditional cash transfer program for children's education. As of 2023, the program has reached astounding numbers, enrolling 5.68 million children and disbursing nearly PKR 23.48 billion to the poorest families. In fact, the policy is even gender-responsive, with girls receiving higher quarterly stipends than boys at every educational level (e.g., PKR 2,000 versus PKR 1,500 at the primary level), alongside a PKR 3,000 graduation bonus upon completing primary school.

However, while the program has brought children physically to the classrooms, program success is measured on narrow metrics such as attendance, tracked at 70%, rather than learning outcomes and the consequent life trajectory of its pupils. This creates a phenomenon of hollow access, where access without quality simply delays inequality rather than solving it. The problem is obvious - , the state pays for the child's presence in the classroom, but underfunded public schools fail to translate this opportunity into meaningful learning outcomes. For a low-income child, 'access' frequently means attending a school with multi-grade teaching (having students from multiple grade levels placed and taught the same material within the same classroom), missing furniture, or absentee teachers. Thus, BISP solves the *cost* of entry but fails to address the *quality* of the product.

Male Child Bias

Even if the financial incentive is present, household dynamics still skew access for many. Pasha (2024) found that investment in children's education was not a gender-neutral decision. In fact, it is a highly strategic one, driven by economic rationality and precarity. In low-income households, per capita income is a reliable predictor of whether the girl child of that household will progress in school.

The decision process is dictated by the opportunity cost of education. In subsistence-level families, sons are seen as an investment with high returns, i.e., future breadwinners, while daughters are seen as short term liability, who bear a marriage cost or can provide immediate domestic labour utility. Pasha's analysis confirms that as household income drops, the enrollment gap between boys and girls widens. This suggests that cash transfers, while helpful, often fail to override the deep-seated economic logic of poor households that prioritizes male education as a safer investment during times of financial stress.

The Public-Private Apartheid

Perhaps the most gaping inequality when it comes to looking at resource gaps is the difference between private and public schooling. Pasha (2024) highlights that wealthy families are largely absent from the public schooling system, preferring private schools that offer better resources and better credentials. In contrast, lower-income household students have only under-resourced public schools as an option. This divergence creates a two-tiered system where private school students accumulate cultural capital and competent literacy, while students from low-income backgrounds experience learning poverty, meaning that even if a low-income student persists, they arrive at the next stage of the pipeline significantly behind their wealthier peers.

Stage 2: Secondary Schooling

If the leak in the pipeline at primary schooling is characterized by a resource gap, then secondary schooling can be defined as an 'autonomy cliff'. This is also the stage at which the pipeline leaks the most aggressively. The data shows that dropouts at the secondary schooling level are not just a failure of academic ability or financial capacity but rather a structural wall of patriarchal restrictions on female mobility and agency.

Geographical Mobility

The difference between primary and secondary schools is that primary ones are often located within villages or neighborhoods while secondary schools are centralized in larger towns, requiring travel. For rural boys, this travel is a logistical inconvenience, which can add financial cost. For girls, this is a structural barrier.

Sathar and Kazi (2000) highlight physical mobility of women as an important part of their autonomy, pointing out that in many rural districts, women need permission to even visit local health centers, never mind attending school in a neighboring town. This turns geographical distance of schools into a gendered filter. Even if a low-income family is willing to pay for school, adjusting for the resource gap mentioned in stage 1, they're unwilling to risk their honor or social repudiation associated with a daughter travelling unaccompanied to a distant school.

These fears are also grounded in a reality where the lack of proper roads and on-foot travel can be dangerous and unsafe for women in these rural districts with high levels of gender-based violence and assault. Sathar and Kazi (2000) highlight that, “It is fairly alarming that the majority of women are afraid of their husbands and about one-third have been beeaten by husbands.” As a result, this pipeline ejects women students, not because they don’t possess the same intellect as their male counterparts, but because the infrastructure, or lack thereof, violates the cultural parameters of their autonomy.

Domestic Labor vs Educational Attainment

In the next phase of adolescence, the opportunity cost of education evolves. Ali (1990) observes that in the rural informal sector in Pakistan, girls often start working before the age of 15, engaging in labor-intensive work around the house that is often directly linked to the household’s survival. This can be manual labor within the fields, home-based work, or even domestic labor. All common forms of female labor are paid very little and do not contribute to the economic independence of these women. Ali (1990) notes that, “On average, by working for twenty-six days a month for more than six hours a day, they are earning only ten rupees per day. 73 percent of them are earning rupees ten or more per day.” Nonetheless, unlike primary school children, these adolescents have tangible economic value in the household that has to be forgone if they are to pursue their educational journey.

This complicates the situation for these young girls whose autonomy is now on a balance scale with education on one side and their economic value on the other. With low-income households, the scale often tips towards the side of economics. This intersection of gender and income is why the most aggressive leakage from the pipeline happens at this stage, for rural girls in Pakistan, attending secondary school remains a significant challenge.

Sathar and Kazi (2000) argue that joint family systems further restrict the use of skills; even if the girl is educated, her labor is directed towards the collective household rather than her own career progress. Without a stipend large enough to cover the cost of labor, which BISP attempts to but fails to fully cover, families make the economically ‘rational’ choice to withdraw daughters from schools.

The State of Public Schools

In the rural context, the provision of education is mainly dependent on public expenditure. For Pakistan, these public schools are unable to provide a safe space for their students. The lack of boundary walls, functional toilets and sanitation, and female teachers acts as a deterrent for many girls, whose safety concerns become a primary driver of non-enrollment for girls in the rural context. Thereby, in the rural conservative context, these schools are not just underfunded; they are also inaccessible to girls.

This also reinforces schools as a masculine space, because fewer girls attend, the space becomes male-dominant, even if not in values, then in numbers. This, in turn, makes it less likely for female teachers to want to teach there and for families to send their young daughters.

Thereby, this autonomy cliff shows that social mobility cannot come around by simply building classrooms; rather, educational policy has to actively create gender responsive programs that take into account the safety and mobility of these young girls. Until then, the pipeline will continue to leak at the secondary school level.

Stage 3: Higher Education

For the minority of low-income students and girls who survive the resource gap and autonomy cliff and make it to higher education, they are promised that this indeed will be the ultimate equalizer. The policy logic for higher education from the state, driven by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) reforms post 2002, has been of 'massification' of higher education; based on the belief that simply increasing the number of university graduates will provide economic mobility. However, evidence suggests that instead of producing mobility or levelling the playing field, this system has created a new form of inequality, stratification.

The myth of expansion - Vertical Segregation

The 2002 higher education reforms were a landmark. It established the HEC and rolled out a number of reforms and budget allocations. The reforms were productive in some sense, as noted by Safi and Yousafzai (2024), tertiary enrollment in the country surged from nearly 2% in 2003 to 12% by 2021. However, the authors argue that this growth has been expansion-focused rather than equity-oriented.

Firstly, the expansion has shown an urban bias creates geographical and regional inequalities. Urban centers like Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, and Peshawar had high-quality campuses propping up while rural districts, particularly those of Balochistan and Sindh, remained largely underserved. This creates a type of vertical stratification where the value of the degree and credentials depend entirely on the brand name of the university that is passed onto the student. A low-income student attending a newly built, under-resourced, public university in a remote district does not receive the same signal of employability as a wealthy student attending an elite urban university. Safi and Yousafzai point out that such expansion-focused policy dilutes quality, churning out graduates suffering from learning poverty, thus possessing the credential but not the skill, nor the social network required for upward social mobility.

There's also the fact that because these universities have been concentrated in urban centres, this also builds a geographic mobility trap for women. If you're a woman from rural Sindh whose academic performance is outstanding, this does not translate to access to these high-quality universities. To access high-quality higher education, she'd have to relocate to the nearest urban center like Sukkur or Karachi. This then also has an additional cost of boarding, lodging, transport, and the complications of being an outstation student. Additionally, this carries the same permission and honour caveat as the girls face in secondary school, except at a more intensified level now. This means that women are structurally excluded from attending these high-quality universities because they are concentrated in urban centers.

Gendered Streaming & Sorting - Horizontal Segregation

Women who do make it to university face an additional invisible barrier that their male counterparts do not, ‘Horizontal Stratification’. This is when students are sorted into different fields of study based on their gender.

While Pakistani data has mostly focused on enrollment numbers, Seehus and Stromme (2024) provide an important theoretical framework for understanding why female graduates earn less. Analyzing registry data from Norway, a country with far fewer barriers for women’s access to education than in Pakistan. They found that women are systemically funneled and pushed towards ‘female-dominated fields’ such as Humanities, Education, and Care Work, while men dominate the higher-return fields like Engineering, Finance, and Technology.

Importantly, their analysis demonstrated that the labor market penalizes these choices. The women-oriented fields yield lower economic returns as compared to male-dominated fields at every level of education - graduate, post-graduate, and PhD. This questions and contests the idea that getting a degree is enough now. If the education system is streaming women towards subjects and fields that the economy devalues, while streaming men to sectors which the economy highly values, then higher education doesn’t close the gender wage gap, rather it institutionalizes it.

This becomes even more comical when you consider that women's enrollment in higher education is higher than that of men globally, and women have been outperforming men in higher education as well. Seehuus and Stromme (2024) explain that, “the largest female-dominated occupations typically require bachelor-level higher education (e.g. nurse, social worker, kindergarten teacher), whereas the largest male-dominated occupations typically require a vocational upper-secondary education (e.g. plumber, carpenter, electrician).” and yet, “women have to complete male-dominated master’s level education to surpass the level of returns men receive from male-dominated and gender-balanced upper-secondary education.” The fact that performance and attainment at the higher education level for women across fields are not translating into economic returns and upward social mobility as well as their male counterparts is because of such streaming. This is further substantiated by the same study such that, “the levels of returns are higher for men than for women for all combinations of gender typing and education level. As a result, women with bachelor-level education have lower average incomes than men with upper-secondary education at the age of 35.”

The Compounding Effect of Segregation

When we aggregate these two findings, the trap becomes quite clear. A low-income woman in Pakistan is doubly disadvantaged.

Institutionally

She is likely restricted to a local, lower-tier public university due to the 'mobility' constraints discussed for secondary school

Academically

She is culturally pressured into 'safe' or 'feminine' degrees (Arts/Education) rather than high-earning STEM fields.

Consequently, at this stage, the pipeline leaks, but also diverts and sorts. It sends privileged men on a trajectory towards high-wage corporate employment, while women and low-income students are diverted towards low-wage, saturated markets. The degree is achieved, but it is not worth the same, and thus, social mobility is not acquired.

Stage 4: The Labor Market

Once the students are able to get past higher education and attain a ‘degree’, they enter the labor market itself. The meritocratic understanding is that at this stage, your degree serves as an objective signal of competence. However, empirical evidence shows that the hiring process works as a filtering gatekeeper where invisible signs of social class, and not just academic credentials, determine employability. This gatekeeping manifests across all sectors of Pakistan’s two-tiered economy, as class cues in the urban corporate sector and as immobility in the rural informal sector.

The Urban Barrier: Class Cues

In the formal urban sector, filtering and sorting is a lot more subtle. How would employers choose between two candidates with identical degrees? (Galos and Frese, 2025) provide the theoretical basis for it via their experimental research. Their study investigated how employers use online ‘social class cues’ such as listed hobbies, cultural interests, and social media presentation to deduce if a candidate is fit for the role. The findings were groundbreaking in how they showed that candidates who signaled ‘Highbrow’ cultural capital, such as interest in theater, classical arts, or specific sports, were seen as significantly more employable than those who signaled “lowbrow” interests, even if their formal qualifications were identical.

In the Pakistani context, this highbrow signaling largely translates to fluency in English, westernized presentation, and elite school networks. A graduate from a rural public university may have the same technical knowledge as a graduate from an elite private institution but may lack excellence in the ‘hidden curriculum’ of confidence, accent, and presentation style, they are often filtered out in the interview process. The pipeline leaks because the rules shift; in the classroom, the rules were to pass the exam, but in the labor market, the rules are to ‘fit the culture’.

The Rural Barrier: The Mobility Trap

While urban graduates face an invisible barrier, rural women face physical ones. For a woman in rural Pakistan, ‘labor market entry’ is physically impossible due to the same autonomy constraints as those in secondary and higher education. Sathar and Kazi’s (2000) analysis remains applicable even here, where social norms restrict women from travelling alone to neighboring towns or cities where formal jobs exist. This creates a mismatch, where a rural woman with a degree cannot migrate to the city due to patriarchal restrictions, so her labor market remains limited to her local village.

Since these rural villages usually lack formal employment opportunities other than in agriculture or basic teaching, this means they often remain underemployed. While the urban candidate remains rejected due to a cultural fit, the rural candidate is rejected by geography. The degree, therefore, does not yield her the same economic returns as her urban counterparts.

The filtering in the labor market is therefore twofold. For the urban poor, access is blocked via class cues, and for the rural poor, access is complicated by distance and autonomy. In both cases, educational credentials fail to translate into employment because the market demands cultural capital and physical freedom, both human capital assets that the education system never provides.

Stage 5: Wage Returns

The final part of the education-mobility pipeline is economic or wage returns; is the degree translating into a wage sufficient to lift the graduate out of poverty? The commonly believed Human Capital Theory dictates that it should; higher skill should be compensated with higher wages. However, empirical evidence from both the rural informal sector and the formal labor markets shows that for women, this relationship is broken. The pipeline does not end with a burst of mobility but rather a wage ceiling that devalues the labor of women and keeps them in place.

The Informal Sector Trap: Education Without Return

Rural women in Pakistan's labor market look drastically different from everyone else. Ali (1990) provides a seminal analysis of this reality in Multan, documenting the structural devaluation of women's work.

Ali found that women in the rural informal sector often engaged in labor-intensive tasks such as embroidery, livestock care, and harvesting. These tasks are all critical for household survival yet remain economically invisible. Historically, this labor has been remunerated at rates far below the legal line, less than Rs. 10 per day in the 1990 context.

Importantly, Ali argued that education did not raise wages in this sector. For women, the informal economy pays for manual output rather than cognitive skill, thus a woman with a secondary school certificate earns the same as an illiterate woman if they are both sewing clothes or picking cotton. For the rural graduates who cannot migrate, her education becomes an 'economic orphan', an asset that has no market value in her immediate environment.

The Formal Sector Gap: The Cost of Segregation

But the situation doesn't get any better in the formal urban labor market either; the wage ceiling remains. Seehuus and Stromme (2024) show that horizontal stratification of university degrees translates into a wage penalty. Their analysis shows that not only are women paid less for the same work, but they are also sorted into industries that pay less for everyone. Because women are concentrated in care and service professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work, their aggregate returns to education are significantly lower than men's, even when they hold the same level of degree.

This creates a paradox where a woman may work harder and earn a Master's degree in education and pay for that degree too, yet earn less than a man with a Bachelor's in Engineering. The return on her education is suppressed by the labor market's tendency to value women-dominated industries less.

Conclusion

Education is frequently seen as a ladder, a metaphor that is used to imply a steady upward climb for anyone who is willing to work. However, the evidence presented in this report demonstrates that for women and low-income students in Pakistan, the education-to-mobility trajectories function less like a ladder and more like a leaky pipeline.

Through this report, we have traced the life cycle of a student, identifying each stage and the fractures in each that lead to the leaks. We looked at the resource gap in primary schooling, the autonomy cliff in secondary level, stratification in higher education, and gatekeeping and the wage ceiling in the labor market to show why education fails to provide the same premium to women and the poor as it does to men and the rich.

This critical examination answers the question of our research: *Does education lead to social mobility?* The answer is: Only conditionally.

The evidence suggests that education is a necessary condition for mobility but not sufficient. As Sathar and Kazi (2000) show, schooling without autonomy render educated women immobile and unable to take their skills to a market which values it. Similarly, as shown by Ali (1990) and Galos and Frese (2025), credentials without fair and transparent labor practices render graduate folks employable but undervalued. Currently, Pakistan's policy response focuses entirely on fixing the intake valve, i.e., pumping enrollment numbers while ignoring the massive leaks downstream.

Possible Solutions

This diagnosis not only criticizes but also provides a roadmap for repair. If we look at inequality as a structural engineering problem, few realistic solutions emerge to fix each stage in the broken pipeline.

Secondary School

To fix the leak here, the state must look at transport as an educational resource. Similar to how it subsidizes textbook, it must also subsidize mobility. Establishing safe, women only transport networks for rural secondary schools would counter the distance penalty, allowing families to prioritize and invest in female education without it contesting with rural concepts of ‘honor’ and safety.

Wage Returns

To fix the leak with the wage ceiling, policy must reach into the informal economy. For rural women, mobility will only come once their labor is recognized. This requires acknowledging domestic labor and formalizing informal work. This includes registering home- based workers and introducing piece rate labor to enforce minimum wage standards. If the economy continues to pay unskilled wages for the work of educated women, the incentive to educate daughters will remain depressed.

Labor Market

To fix the leak here, public and corporate sectors must adopt anonymized resume screenings to enforce blind hiring. By removing names, schools, and class coded hobbies from initial application employers would be forced to evaluate candidates on skill rather than the cultural fit, neutralizing the class cues identified by Galos and Frese.

Ultimately, the argument boils down to the fact that social mobility will not be achieved by simply building more classrooms or printing more degrees. It will be achieved when the pipeline is water-tight, when policies are based on a life-stage analysis, looking at these transitional states as important to ensure that policies are effective. Until a girl who enters school is supported by safety, valued for her skills, and judged on her merit, and these structural leaks are plugged and fixed, the promise of education shall remain unkept.

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Beyond Gendered Narratives:
A Legal and Socio-psychological Analysis of Rape In the Global and Pakistani Context

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Abstract

Rape is often spoken about in statistics, headlines, and courtrooms. But behind every number is a human being whose life has been permanently altered. Public discourse has traditionally framed rape primarily as a crime committed by men against women, often overlooking the experiences of other victims and the broader dynamics of sexual violence. This article moves beyond the usual gendered narrative and examines rape through legal, social, and psychological lenses, focusing both on global realities and the Pakistani context. It exposes the cracks within the criminal justice system including low reporting rates, poor investigations, victim blaming attitudes, and alarmingly low prosecution success rates that make justice feel distant and at times, unattainable.

At the same time, this paper questions whether sexual violence can truly be confined to a single gendered framework. By shedding light on the legal invisibility of male and transgender victims

and the stigma that forces them into silence, it challenges the assumption that rape is a simplistic issue confined to a single narrative. Drawing from psychological research, the discussion shifts the focus toward the perpetrator exploring how rape is driven less by uncontrollable desire and more by power, anger, entitlement, and learned behavior.

This article ultimately argues that if we are unwilling to look beyond surface explanations and confront the deeper systems that enable such crimes, our understanding, and so will our pursuit of justice, will remain incomplete.

Introduction

How often is it that we hear about a rape case? A 5-year-old girl being raped and murdered; a young girl being raped and tortured just because she refused someone's proposal. Why is it that even in this seemingly progressive society, we still hear statements like, "Yeah, she must have been wearing something revealing." Then how do you explain a woman who is covered from head to toe, not even an inch of skin showing being victim to the same fate. Consider the case in Gulistan-i-Jauhar, Karachi, where a woman walking alone in a full burqa was sexually assaulted by a man on a motorcycle. He stopped beside her, exposed himself, and groped her, then fled immediately after she screamed for help (Desk, 2023). Or when people say, "Oh, she must've lured him in"; then how do you explain, Zainab Ansari, a 7-year-old innocent girl from Kasur who was abducted, raped and murdered, her body left in a dumpster (2018). We hear in the court of justice where the defendants plead, 'She asked for it,' or victims are asked 'But did you enjoy it?' (Rinde et al., 2024). Women, from a very young age are taught modesty, but why are men not taught to lower their gaze? And to foster the same degree of self-restraint, respect for boundaries, and responsibility for their conduct? However, it doesn't even seem like a gender issue anymore; disturbing amount of cases of men being raped have surfaced, shedding light towards the fact that we may be dealing with something that goes beyond gender discrimination.

And sadly, it doesn't even end with that prolonged torture of being dominated by the assault; the victim has to go through much more after that; the judgement of the world, the guilt that maybe it was their own fault. Their whole life trajectory changes just because someone couldn't control their libido. Furthermore, even animals are not safe from these sexual predators, a recent example being the goat that was raped and killed by five people in Okara (Express Tribune, 2021), proving that it goes beyond a man getting revenge after getting rejected, to something much more disturbing.

Global Context and Statistics

We live in a world where the law is constantly evolving and justice does prevail. But we still have a long way to go. Estimates published by the WHO indicate that globally, about 1 in 3 women (30%) have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organization: WHO, 2026). According to The Washington Post, less than 1 percent of rapes lead to felony convictions. At least 89% of victims face emotional and physical consequences (Van Dam, 2018).

Furthermore, the most recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that only about 8% of women report sexual assault to the police. Of those cases, only a fraction proceeds to investigation, and even fewer result in charges being filed against the assailant (Reporter, 2025). These are global statistics. The data specific to Pakistan is just as, if not more, horrifying. A recent research article published in the Pakistan Journal of Criminal Justice (PJCJ) states that up to 70% of women suffer from physical and sexual violence by men during their lifetime. The number of incidents continues to soar, yet the conviction rate in Pakistan remains abysmally low at a mere 3%, raising serious questions about the efficacy of the Criminal Justice System (Aziz et al., 2024).

Senator Sherry Rehman highlighted the stark figures: in 2024, Islamabad recorded just seven convictions out of 176 reported rape cases. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reported one conviction from 258 cases, Sindh reported no convictions despite 243 cases, and Balochistan recorded 21 rape cases with no convictions (Ebrahim, 2026).

Legal Framework

Pakistan's rape laws originally developed from British colonial law, with Section 375 of the PPC mainly recognizing women as victims.

In 1979, the Zina Ordinance was introduced during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, which introduced strict requirements, including the controversial requirement of four male witnesses, which often made it difficult for rape victims to seek justice.

The 2006 Women's Protection Act; which eventually replaced the Zina Ordinance; significantly reformed the law by bringing rape back under the PPC, expanding the definition and separating rape from zina. Further amendments in 2016 improved the handling of rape cases, including forensic evidence and medical examinations.

In 2020 and 2021, additional reforms introduced special courts, a sex offender registry, stronger investigation procedures and harsher punishments for rape. Overall, these reforms aimed to make Pakistan's rape laws more victim-centred and improve the investigation and prosecution of sexual violence including the The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act which ultimately established special courts for the trial of rape cases.

Listed below are the current laws in force regarding Rape; except the Anti-Rape Act.

The general law stating the definition for rape is the Section 375, of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860. Followed by the punishment for the offense in Section 376.

375; Rape:-

A man is said to commit rape who has sexual intercourse with a woman under circumstances falling under any of the five following descriptions,

(i) against her will.

(ii) without her consent

(iii) with her consent, when the consent has been obtained by putting her in fear of death or of hurt,

(iv) with her consent, when the man knows that he is not married to her and that the consent is given because she believes that the man is another person to whom she is or believes herself to be married; or

(v) With or without her consent when she is under sixteen years of age.

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the sexual intercourse necessary to the offence of rape.

376. Punishment for rape;

(1) Whoever commits rape shall be punished with death or imprisonment of either description for a term which shall not be less than ten years or more, than twenty-five years and shall also be liable to fine.

(2) When rape is committed by two or more persons in furtherance of common intention of all, each of such persons shall be punished with death or imprisonment for life.".

Section 375 lives alongside Section 377 which refer to other sexual offenses under ‘unnatural offenses’ in the Penal Code.

377. Unnatural offences:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which shall not be less than two years nor more than ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation

Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.

Looking at the definition prima facie, the language seems very intentional and seems very limiting towards both the offender and the victim, this nuance will be discussed in detail in this paper.

Obstacles faced by the Legal System

From a bird's eye view, the obstacles seem very basic and easy to overcome. However, these obstacles, though they may seem basic to fix, create a hostile and intimidating environment where justice feels out of reach, and where silence too often becomes the only choice for survivors.

In Pakistan, the legal system continues to grapple with several entrenched obstacles that hinder justice for survivors of rape. Perhaps the most glaring challenge is the persistence of victim blaming attitudes in courtrooms, where survivors often find themselves subjected to questions about their character, clothing, or personal lives rather than the crime itself. This culture of skepticism not only retraumatizes survivors but also discourages others from coming forward. Moving alongside the victim blaming concern, is the matter of consent in rape cases. The way Pakistani courts have misplaced the concept of 'consent' is abhorrent. There are numerous cases where the most irrelevant factors are regarded as consent; the victim's chastity, her history of sexual intercourse especially for the unmarried woman, the ridiculous two finger test—which is now rightfully ruled out as being “medically inaccurate and humiliating” in Ayesha Malik’s landmark judgment (2021).

Another general assumption is that if the victims don't immediately go to the police, they have something to hide and that assumption must be questioned. Any hesitation to file an official first information report is often read as a sign of consent to the sexual act. The Sindh High Court decided that a paralyzed woman had consented to her aggressor’s action because she did not inform her family and the police immediately (Khan, 2022).

Although, the matter revolving around consent is not just limited to Pakistani courts and is more of a global fiasco. In Italy 1992, an 18-year-old woman was raped by her driving instructor. She reported it to the legal authorities and the perpetrator was arrested and, after the trial, convicted and sentenced. A few years later, in 1999, he appealed the case to the high court of Italy stating that the act was consensual. The ruling was overturned on the argument that ‘jeans the victim was wearing were so tight that she had to have helped in removing them’; this gave rise to the concept of implied consent. The rapist went free with no punishment for his crime.

This means that from this ruling onwards, victims had to prove that they did not consent to the act, because apparently them saying ‘no’ was not enough, their screams were not enough, their pleading to be let go were not enough. Apparently, the court was of the opinion that a man ‘who was holding that woman to a point that she can’t get away from his grasp’ didn’t have the physical strength to remove the jeans which were “too tight”. Enraged by this verdict, women of the Italian parliament protested by wearing jeans to work.

This case caused a global outrage. The protest gained international media attention and eventually reached Los Angeles. Motivated by the outrage, Patti Occhiuzzo Giggans, Executive Director of Peace Over Violence, believed that people everywhere should wear jeans to challenge the harmful myths surrounding rape. And ever since, on the last Wednesday of April, people wear jeans as a visible means of protest against sexual violence and victim-blaming.

The ruling stood for almost a decade before being officially reversed by the Italian Supreme Court in 2008, when it ruled that tight clothing can no longer be used as a defense to argue consent in sexual assault cases.

To this day, the concept of implied concept is relied upon in many courts, although the recent reform in the European parliament confirming, ‘only yes means yes, everything else is rape’ has struck a light of hope among the people

Another major barrier is the poor or entirely absent forensic evidence, a problem exacerbated by lack of resources, outdated technology, and limited access to proper DNA testing facilities, especially in rural or low-income areas where the majority of cases originate (Ahmed, 2023). Compounding this issue is the police’s reluctance to register First Information Reports (FIRs), often due to corruption, social pressures, or a dismissive attitude towards sexual violence (a trend particularly pronounced across South Asia). Even when cases are registered, survivors frequently withdraw from proceedings, weighed down by intense social stigma and/or direct threats from perpetrators or their families

According to an investigation conducted by The Nation, the provincial police did not bother to call the "Crime Scene Units" of the Punjab Forensic Science Agency for evidence collection in most of the rape cases including child abuse incidents reported across Punjab during the previous year (Javed, 2018).

In the same article by The Nation, it was reported that the investigators rarely visit the crime scene to collect evidence with the help of forensic experts. It further states that, police did not call crime scene units for evidence collection in 9 out of 12 child rape and murder cases reported in Kasur district since 2015. Not only that, but out of a total of 2,980 rape cases, the police quashed at least 588 FIRs.

The shortage of female judges, lawyers, and police officers makes matters worse, as survivors are left to recount their trauma in front of men who may neither understand nor empathize with their experience. Recognizing this gap, the Sindh Human Rights Policy seeks to increase the representation of women within the justice sector, including by promoting the appointment of more female judges to improve survivors' access to gender-responsive justice.

Moving along, it is quite fair to say that most rape cases in Pakistan are against women, but the cases that come to light are not an accurate representation of the crimes that have occurred in the country. Research consistently shows that sexual violence against men is heavily underreported due to stigma, social expectations surrounding masculinity, and fear of ridicule or disbelief.

For instance, a global meta-analysis published in The Lancet estimated that approximately 7.6% of boys worldwide experience sexual abuse before the age of 18, demonstrating that male victimization is far from insignificant (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011).

Although obtaining accurate statistics on male sexual violence is quite difficult, here is an Islamabad based NGO called 'Sahil' that said a total of 2,227 cases of child sexual abuse were reported to the authorities between January and June of 2023, and out of those 2,227 cases, 1020 were boys (Sahil, 2023). That's almost half, and enough to prove that this might not be a gender based crime and that something deeper and a lot more disturbing lies within.

Furthermore, data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that approximately 1 in 38 men have experienced attempted or completed rape during their lifetime, while 1 in 14 men report being forced to penetrate someone else (a form of sexual violence that is often excluded from traditional rape statistics) (S. G. et al., 2018). These numbers further reinforce the reality that male sexual victimization exists on a far larger scale than is commonly acknowledged.

Ultimately, acknowledging male and transgender victims does not take away from the reality that women remain the primary victims of sexual violence. It simply forces us to confront the fact that the problem may be broader and more complex than we are willing to admit and victims are targeted for intersectional vulnerabilities that include gender, age, social status etc.

This is not intended to diminish the fact that, the law does provide protection against rape, it does. Section 375 to 377 makes the evident, but the language used in these statutes is very limiting and contradicts the constitutional requirement that everyone is equal in the eyes of law. Furthermore legislative language is known to be very intentional with severe attention to detail and nuances leaving no doubt for its interpretation.

The language of section 375 is very directive, it states matter of factly that a ‘man’ rapes a ‘woman’, and even though females are the demographic for rape victims, male victims cannot be completely removed from the narrative. The wording of the statute deliberately excludes male and transgender individuals as potential victims and the possibility of female perpetrators and this just goes to show the societal denial shaped by patriarchal norms that men can be rape victims too. This concern was addressed by Rukhsana Siddiqi, a support officer for rape survivors at War Against Rape (WAR). She maintains that: ‘In Pakistan, it is unacceptable that someone can rape men. Men believe they are the strongest and they can hurt others, but no one can hurt them’ (Ahmad, 2019).

Similarly, The Anti Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 defines victims as ‘a woman or child who has been subjected to scheduled offences’, which further reinforces the very gender specific approach excluding many victims access to justice. Due to this male and transgender victims have no choice but to seek justice under Section 377 of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, which again is another peculiar provision. Firstly, the use of the word ‘voluntarily’ is very out of place in terms of a rape offense. Moreover, the section covers both consensual and non-consensual acts of sodomy, because of this, the severity of the rape offence are significantly undermined, not to mention the significantly disproportionate sentence of only two years.

When the law and society fail to recognize certain victims, their suffering does not disappear; it is merely pushed into silence. Sexual violence, at its core, is an abuse of power, one that can cross the boundaries of gender. Recognizing this does not weaken the fight against violence toward women; rather, it strengthens the pursuit of justice by ensuring that no victim is ignored simply because they do not fit the narrative we are most comfortable with.

Pakistani rape laws are in dire need of an amendment, the existing laws seem to be all over the place with some severe grey area which needs to be dealt with, when comparing them with international laws, it seems evident that Pakistani laws is more based on societal and patriarchal norms then the offense itself. For example, the United Kingdom's Sexual Offences Act 2003, states;

(1) A person (A) commits an offence if—

 (a) he intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person (B) with his penis,

 (b) B does not consent to the penetration, and

 (c) A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

(2) Whether a belief is reasonable is to be determined having regard to all the circumstances, including any steps A has taken to ascertain whether B consents.

Such a slight difference can make a world of difference; the use of the word 'person' makes sure no victim gets excluded and the concept of consent is also simplified to be reasonable enough in the real world to exclude odd and irrelevant circumstances misconstruing consent.

Understanding the Broader Reality of Sexual Violence

Every time an incident of rape surfaces, the spotlight immediately turns toward the victim. Their clothing, their whereabouts, their past, their choices; all dissected in painful detail, often at the expense of their already fragile mental health. Stereotypical remarks such as “What was she doing there?”, Why was she out so late”, or “What was she wearing” are disturbingly familiar. The public narrative becomes an interrogation of the survivor rather than an examination of the crime itself.

Yet the most urgent and unsettling question is rarely explored: why was the crime committed in the first place? In almost every other category of violent crime, society attempts to analyze the perpetrator’s psychology. They are asked what pushed them, what fractured within them, what circumstances shaped their violence. But when it comes to rape, the inquiry often stops short. Perhaps it is because the answers are too uncomfortable. Perhaps it is easier to reduce the act to an uncontrollable sexual urge than to confront the darker realities of entitlement, power, domination, and deeply ingrained misogyny.

People rarely ask: is the explanation truly that simple? Does the extreme complexity of the human mind suddenly collapse into nothing more than an uncontrollable libido? To suggest that rape is merely about sexual desire is to dangerously oversimplify one of the most violent expressions of power and control (Smith, Linda 2024). Sexual drive alone does not erase moral judgment, empathy, or legal boundaries. There must be a deeper root cause at the core of it. Maybe, just maybe, social conditioning, toxic constructions of masculinity, the normalization of aggression, and the dehumanization of victims, allow such acts to occur.

In a book by Nicholas Goth, Men Who Rape; The Psychology of the Offender, the same conundrum is raised, when comparing the stereotypical beliefs versus the actual mind of the offender, he stated that society regards rape as lusty male who is the victim of provocative woman, or a sexually frustrated man reacting under the pressure of his pent up needs or he is thought to be a demented sex-fiend harboring insatiable and perverted desires. What these stereotypes fail to see is that rape is not primarily motivated but sexual desire, rather, careful clinical study of offenders reveals that rape is in fact serving primarily nonsexual needs. It is the sexual expression of power and anger (Groth, N, 1979).

Groth's seminal work on sexual offenders concluded that rape is fundamentally about power, anger, and control, not sexual satisfaction. Sexual desire may be present, but it is rarely the driving force. Similarly, David Finkelhor's precondition model demonstrates that sexual violence emerges from a combination of emotional congruence, distorted arousal patterns, blocked healthy outlets, and social disinhibition (Finkelhor, D, 1984). For example, a person might be sexually attracted to someone, but attraction alone does not make them sexually violent. If that attraction is combined with a desire for power or control, unhealthy sexual attitudes, or difficulty forming normal relationships and an environment that tolerates inappropriate behavior, the risk of sexual violence can increase. In simple terms, it explains that sexual violence results from several psychological and social factors acting together rather than from a single cause. These are layered psychological processes, not momentary lapses in restraint. Yet society often clings to the comforting fiction that rape is "just about sex." Why? Because to accept the alternative is far more unsettling. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that behavior is learned through observation and reinforcement (Bandura, A, 1977). For example, it is as simple as a child seeing their parent get their way through violence, he is more likely to resort to violence when he grows up. Individuals who repeatedly observe sexual aggression being normalized, excused, or rewarded in their family, peer groups, or media may be more likely to perceive such behaviors as acceptable or without consequence. If dominance, entitlement, and aggression are normalized (however subtly) and rewarded in peer groups, media portrayals, or patriarchal social structures they do not remain abstract ideas. They shape cognition, they form scripts, they teach individuals what power looks like.

Martha Burt's research on rape myth acceptance revealed how cultural beliefs; that women "provoke" assault, that men "cannot control themselves," that "real rape" only occurs in dark alleys by strangers; function as psychological shields (Burt, 1980). These myths do more than excuse behavior; they quietly construct a moral loophole in which accountability dissolves. When such narratives are deeply embedded, they do not merely influence public reaction; they influence perpetrators themselves, normalizing conduct that should be condemned and reducing the moral weight of the harm inflicted upon victims.

Research on cognitive distortions in sexual offenders indicates that many perpetrators do not interpret their behavior as violent in the way society defines violence. Ward, Polaschek, and Beech explain that offenders often construct internal narratives that justify or neutralize their actions (Ward et al., 2006). Rather than acknowledging coercion, they frame it as persuasion. Silence is reimagined as consent. Resistance is dismissed as uncertainty or mixed signals. The harm inflicted is minimized, rationalized, or reframed altogether.

These distorted cognitive frameworks allow the offender to preserve a self-concept that is fundamentally incompatible with the identity of a “rapist.” In doing so, responsibility is psychologically displaced, and empathy is suppressed. What emerges is not an uncontrollable sexual impulse, but a learned pattern of moral disengagement. That is; one shaped by belief systems that normalize entitlement and diminish the humanity of the victim.

The uncomfortable truth is this, examining the perpetrator’s mindset forces society to examine itself. It compels us to question how perpetrators come to feel entitled to another person's body, how social and cultural narratives absolve or minimize their actions, how empathy is eroded, and how silence becomes complicity. It is far easier to scrutinize a survivor’s actions than to interrogate the cultural and psychological frameworks that enable violence.

The human mind does not lose its complexity when sexual impulse arises. If anything, it reveals it. Rape is not the collapse of morality under desire; it is the convergence of learned beliefs, distorted cognition, power dynamics, and social reinforcement. Until we are willing to turn our analytical lens toward that convergence (with the same intensity we direct toward survivors) our understanding of sexual violence will remain incomplete, and our solutions inadequate.

Conclusion

The conversation surrounding rape is often shaped by rigid narratives that attempt to simplify a crime that is anything but simple. It is frequently reduced to assumptions about sexual desire, gendered hostility, or the moral failure of a single individual. Yet the realities explored throughout this discussion suggest something far more complicated. Sexual violence cannot be fully understood through a single lens, nor can it be explained by the belief that it is merely the result of uncontrollable sexual impulse. In many cases, it emerges from a combination of power, psychological conditioning, social attitudes, and institutional failures that allow such acts to occur.

Legal systems, while evolving, often struggle to keep pace with these complexities. Laws may recognize rape as a serious criminal offense, yet gaps remain in their ability to address the full spectrum of victimization and the deeper mechanisms that enable such crimes. At the same time, deeply rooted cultural narratives continue to shape how society reacts to sexual violence. These narratives often reinforce myths that shift attention away from the perpetrator and toward the victim, making it harder to confront the true nature of the crime.

Understanding sexual violence therefore requires looking beyond the narrow explanations that are often presented. It requires acknowledging that victims do not always fit the image that society expects of them, that perpetrators are influenced by more than momentary desire, and that the systems meant to deliver justice are themselves shaped by social beliefs and biases. Only when we begin to examine sexual violence through this broader lens can meaningful progress be made, not only in strengthening legal responses, but also in challenging the attitudes and structures that allow such violations to persist.

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The Narratives of Gopi

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Abstract

Often when we look at history, we wonder why things were perceived a certain way, and why some of those ideas carry forward into the present. The representation of the female form is one of these enduring questions. Over time, artists have broken away from stereotypical portrayals of women, yet a great deal of earlier work remains debated. We still ask why the female body had to be shown a certain way, and whose interests that portrayal actually served. Artists sometimes choose to challenge these historical icons and give them their own twist.

This tension becomes especially visible when we trace back to the Rajasthani miniatures of the 16th century, which illustrated Hindu mythology through recurring scenes of Krishna and the gopis from the Bhagavata Purana. On the surface, these paintings root themselves in nature and spirituality, and yet beneath this devotional surface lies a more complicated portrayal of the gopis themselves. A set of gender dynamics comes into play that shift the gopi's symbolic weight

between transcendence and spectacle. Miniature art produced from a place of power, after all, has often served a purpose beyond mere illustration.
Centuries later, Shahzia Sikander challenges the representation of these historical icons. She contests the traditional use of the gopi figure by isolating the women from Krishna altogether, adopting the stylistic vocabulary of miniature painting while introducing disruptive figures that unsettle its earlier conventions. Through this feminist intervention, she resists the containment historically imposed on the female body within the miniature tradition, reframing the gopi as a site of critique rather than surrender.

By comparing one of the Rajasthani miniatures, The Gopis Plead with Krishna to Return Their Clothing, with Sikander's SpiNN, a digital animation, this essay examines how visual traditions reshape myth, gender, and power across time.

The Narratives of Gopi

Rajasthani miniatures of the 16th century often illustrated Hindu mythology, with recurring depictions of Krishna and the gopis from the *Bhagavata Purana*. While celebrated as models of divine love and devotion, the gopis' nude or semi-nude bodies also functioned as eroticized spectacles for Rajput male patrons, reinforcing courtly ideals of desire and power. Shahzia Sikander's *SpiNN* confronts this legacy, destabilizing the gopi's traditional role and reframing her as a site of critique rather than surrender. By comparing *The Gopis Plead with Krishna to Return*

Their Clothing with *SpiNN*, this essay examines how visual traditions reshape myth, gender, and power across time.

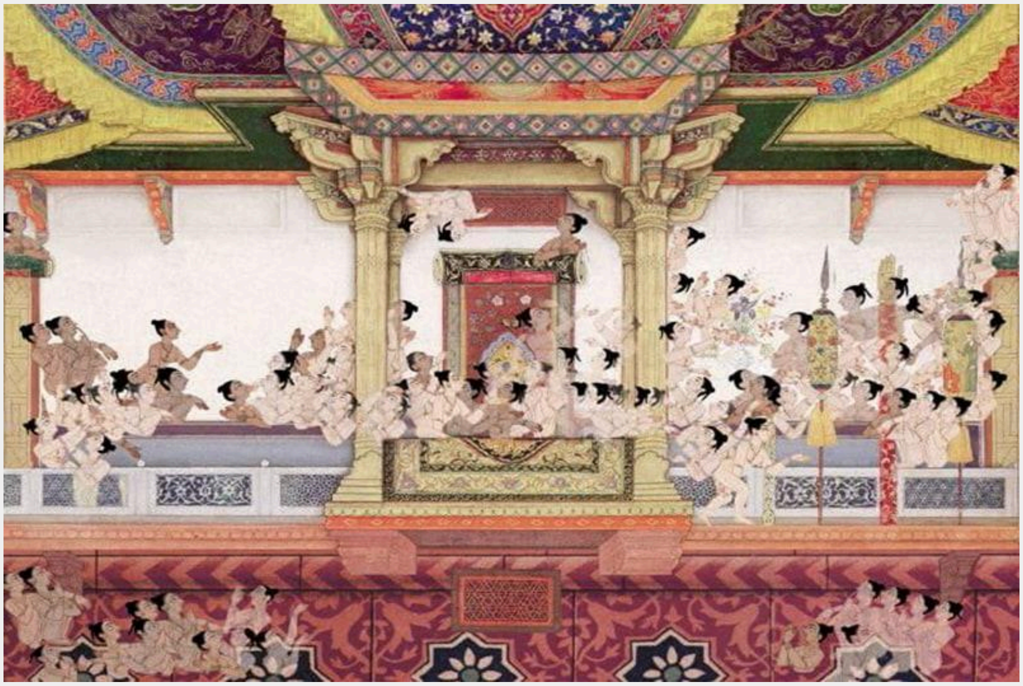
Master of the "Isarda" Bhagavata Purana, *The Gopis Plead with Krishna to Return Their Clothing,* ca. 1560–65, opaque watercolor and ink on paper, 18.7 × 25.7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In this depiction of a scene involving Krishna and the gopis, we see Krishna as a prominent blue male figure at the top right with his hand put forward in a *gyan mudra* (a hand pose with the thumb and index finger pressed together). He stands in a dance-like pose with the gopi's clothing over his shoulder. In this well-known story, he playfully scolds the gopis for bathing half-naked in the river and exposing themselves to the river god. In return they smilingly pray forgiveness for their immodesty while the others frolic amongst themselves. The vibrant use of red depicts love and passion while the blue resonates with holy presence. With the poses of the characters, repetition of the female figure, and the river running across bisecting the image, there's a playful movement across the composition. The use of foliage and river roots this scene in nature which resonates with spirituality in the context of a religion-based myth.

In the *puranas*, the gopis are used as a symbol of pure and selfless yearning and unconditional love (bhakti) for God (RKT Blog Team, 2025). While the nudity in the painting becomes a symbol of spiritual vulnerability and divine devotion, it's also eroticized when observed from the male gaze. There's a role of gender dynamics at play here with multiple partially nude women surrounding a dominant male figure at the top of the painting, building a hierarchy. The women plead while the male figure holds the power. The symbol of gopis here then fluctuates between that of transcendence and a spectacle for the male gaze.

From Caves to Miniatures: Portrayal of Woman in Early Indian Paintings, states that, "In Indian paintings of this era, women were objectified and were used as ancillary subjects to glorify the main subject of the painting which used to be a male god or king for most of the times, (Sharma et al., 2016, p. 39)" The repetition of the gopi figure in this context sets a power dynamic where the woman is associated with just serving man with her physical aspects or outward beauty and those are all the attributes she's reduced to. Her features are drawn in an unrealistic and conventional ideal with exaggerated breasts, sly smile, and a slim curvy torso. The aforementioned text states that, "the feminine charm and beauty was enhanced and represented in a refined form. The gestures of female faces are quite enchanting with their appropriate physical balance as per the Indian stereotype of beauty (Sharma et al., 2016, p. 36)." The way of painting then shows that the narrative is shaped to entertain a certain audience and support a certain convention.

Here, it is the Rajput patronage that shapes the narrative. Miniature art when coming from a place of power has always served a purpose; with Mughal miniature it was a showcase of the emperor's wealth and throne, and with Company Art it was to show the vision of the British towards the subcontinent with very vivid western influences. With Rajput kings, who often depicted themselves as god, such a painting became a way to justify their actions to society. The earlier text states that, "the kings were often compared with the Gods from the ancient time for proving their divinity and courage. As well as, they have borrowed the custom of having many women in their harem or bathing places for the satisfaction of their sexual desires and also portrayed themselves in the paintings in the form of Krishna with many women (Sharma et al., 2016, p. 38)." The power of religious myth is hence manipulated by situating the scene within its sacred narrative, yet using the painterly medium — with its compositional choices and exaggerations — to shift the gaze from spirituality to erotic desire.



Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, 2003, digital animation, vegetable dye, dry pigment, watercolor and tea on wasli paper, 20.32 cm x 28 cm, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.

Shahzia Sikander, a contemporary Pakistani-American artist, presents a different narrative and contests the traditional use of gopis by isolating them from the male figure (Krishna). She shifts the gender, religious, and power dynamics at play. *SpiNN* is a digital animation where the setting is taken from the folio *Shah-Jahan Receives His Three Eldest Sons and Asaf Khan during His Accession Ceremonies* (Bichitr, 1628). The throne is surrounded by ornamental works as a sign of wealth for whoever occupies it, which in this case are the gopis instead of a male king. They no longer have a passive role; they're in control. They're positioned unrealistically while some are even upside down. They aren't looked at as individual figures but rather a swarm, commenting on the use of these figures always in repetition, associating women with multiplicity. They look upwards as if anticipating something to happen and induce that feeling in the viewer as well. Unlike older exaggerations, their breasts are covered by their arms or other gopis, and instead of being eroticized they serve as a critical presence. In the animation, they dissolve into their hairdos that then appear bird-like in a herd that rotates over the screens with a trance-like sound. This sense of mobility resists containment within tradition and unsettles power conventions.

With the unreal and unexpected appearance (or disappearance) of Hindu mythical figures in a Mughal court, the viewer is made to confront the clash of time and narrative. In *History, Narrative, and the Female Figure (as Disruption)*, Kishwar Rizvi notes: "The animation activates the past in order to critique the present, yet the essential power of Sikander's female antagonists is one of possession. The gopis inhabit spaces seldom occupied by women, pointing to concerns that have been at the core of Sikander's practice—namely history and the female subject—and the ways in which the artist may disrupt both (Rizvi, 2022, p. 45)." Similarly, Nageen Shaikh observes that Sikander's works, which "did not completely imitate historical sources, instigated the possibility of bringing change in the 'practice of emulating' by introducing 'contemporaneity' within miniature painting's framework (Shaikh, 2021, para. 4)." By adopting the stylistic vocabulary of miniature painting while introducing these disruptive figures, Sikander challenges the conventions of earlier narratives from a contemporary lens.

Through such a feminist intervention, she not only subverts tradition but also resists the containment historically imposed on the female body within the miniature tradition.

The *Bhagavata Purana* presents the gopis as symbols of pure devotion to the divine, while Rajput miniatures reframe them as women offering themselves to a male god. In contrast, Sikander's work reimagines them as figures of ascension that challenge historical narratives. As observed in the earlier text, "paintings can be used as a medium to revisit the role of woman in society because art is always related to socio-cultural tendencies and strongly connected with the taste and demands of the individual (Sharma et al., 2016, p. 22)." Through these shifting depictions, the gopi becomes a figure embodying broader negotiations of gender, power, and tradition.

Myth has always been reshaped to serve the purpose of its narrator, and the representation of women in miniature art demonstrates how visuals could reinforce patriarchal conventions under the guise of devotion. By destabilizing these images, Sikander reminds us that the power of myth lies not in its permanence but in its capacity to be reinterpreted, contested, and reclaimed.

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Infidelity and Faith in One Body:
Ecstatic Expression and the Boundaries of Devotion in Early Sufism

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Abstract

The early Islamic mysticism was defined by a tension between orthodox jurisprudence (*shari'a*) and the radical mystical experience. This paper examines how the ecstatic expression in early Sufism navigated and dismantled the boundaries between faith(*iman*) and infidelity(*kufr*). Focusing on the teachings and sayings of Rabi'a al-Qaysiyya, Bayazid Bistami, and Mansur al-Hallaj, this study analyzes how early mystics utilized paradoxical language, ecstatic utterances(*shathiyat*) and radical self-negation(*fana'*) to articulate divine love. While legal authorities saw this as a claim of heresy, for the mystics it was the purest form of monotheism. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the utterances that these mystics made were not claims of heresy(*shirk*) but an ultimate form of oneness with God which requires annihilation of one's own self.

Introduction

The early period of Sufism, from the 8th to the 10th centuries CE, was a turbulent and creative time in Islamic thought. It was marked by a strong tension between the growing codification of religious law (*shari'a*) and the often-chaotic reality of mystical experiences (Ernst, 1985, pp. 2–3). Carl Ernst, a prominent scholar of Sufism, points out that the "freedom" found in Sufi experiences often disregards *Shari'a*, the orthodox legal framework of religious laws. This conflict involved social, linguistic, and theological aspects. Early mystics discovered that the orthodox vocabulary could not adequately express the annihilation of the self in God. As a result, they expanded the limits of devotion, creating expressions that fluctuated between affirming absolute faith (*iman*) and declarations that edged close to infidelity (*kufr*).

Rabi'a al Qaysiyya (d. 801), Bayazid Bistami (d. 874), and Mansur al Hallaj (d. 922) are notable examples of this paradox. Their statements challenge interpreters because they dismantle the divide between belief and unbelief. While the Prophet Muhammad exemplified a "sober" union, recognizing his role as a servant ('*abd*) and messenger without claiming divinity, these Sufis explored the "intoxicated" realms of spirituality. Bistami's praises of divine glory, Rabi'a's rejection of Paradise, and Hallaj's daring declaration "I am the Truth" seem to cross the boundaries of *tawhid* (monotheism) that Islamic orthodoxy sought to safeguard.

This paper explores this question: How and why does the expression of devotion in the teachings of Mansur al Hallaj, Bayazid Bistami, and Rabi'a al Qaysiyya shift between faith and infidelity?

By examining their sayings within the historical context of early Sufi asceticism and the theological concerns of the Abbasid era, this study argues that these mystics employed paradoxical language, self-negation, ecstatic self-affirmation (Schimmel, 1975, p. 27), and extreme devotion, to convey a deep faith that paradoxically resembles infidelity. Their statements not only challenge Islamic orthodoxy, but they also expose and redefine what faith could entail. They suggest that true monotheism requires destroying the worshipper's identity, a destruction that the law may misinterpret as heresy.

I. The Historical and Linguistic Context of Ecstasy

To grasp the radical nature of these figures, it is essential to place them in the shift from early Islamic asceticism (*zuhd*) to the more sophisticated metaphysics of Sufism (*tasawwuf*). In the 8th century, devout Muslims distanced themselves from the excesses of the Umayyad and Abbasid courts. They focused on fearing judgment and strictly following the Law. However, by the 9th century, there was a change toward interiority, with the aim shifting from mere obedience to *ma'rifa* (experiential knowledge) and *mahabba* (love).

This transition led to a linguistic crisis. Ahmet Karamustafa describes this time as marked by both piety and outrage, where saints unsettled religious boundaries (Karamustafa, 2007, p. 4). The main tool for this disruption was the *shath* (plural: *shathiyat*). Carl Ernst defines *shath* as an "overflow" of movement or speech due to agitation, similar to how flour spills from a mill or water from a dam. In Sufi terms, it refers to mixed utterances where the speaker's "I" merges with God's "I" (Ernst, 1985, pp. 3–5; Karamustafa, 2007, pp. 3–4).

These expressions posed a challenge because Islam is strictly monotheistic, relying on a clear separation between the Creator and the created. Using language to bridge this gap appeared as *shirk* (associating partners with God) or *hulul* (incarnation). However, Sufis claimed that their expressions were not a declaration of incarnation but a sign of *fana'* (annihilation). When a mystic experiences annihilation, they become void. If God speaks through that void, the resulting "I" belongs to God, not to the human. Thus, what may seem like infidelity in the *shath* is, from the mystic's viewpoint, the ultimate affirmation of *tawhid*. There is no self-left that can claim existence alongside God.

II. Rabi'a al Qaysiyya: The Scandal of Pure Love

Rabi'a al Qaysiyya, often called Rabi'a al 'Adawiyya, is a key figure in this tradition. While she did not use the ecstatic *shathiyat* of later mystics, she introduced a theological paradox that laid the groundwork for them. The paradox was the rejection of the economy of salvation. Karamustafa portrays her as a model of pious asceticism, yet her inward spirituality subtly threatened the transactional nature of standard worship.

1. The Idol of Paradise

Traditional Islamic theology motivates believers with promises of *Jannah* (Paradise) and threats of *Jahannam* (Hellfire). Rabi‘a, however, saw potential idolatry within this setup. Worshipping God simply to achieve Paradise means worshipping a created thing, pleasure, instead of the Creator. Her most famous prayer, recorded by biographer Farid al Din ‘Attar, expresses this radical view:

> O God, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, grudge me not Thy everlasting beauty. (Attar, 1966, p. 51; Smith, 1928/1984, p. 30)

Margaret Smith, in her important study of Rabi‘a, argues that this prayer eliminates the self-interest typical of ordinary religion (Smith, 1928/1984, pp. 98–100). To a legalist, aiming for Paradise is a command from God, and rejecting it may seem like ingratitude or disbelief (*kufr*). Rabi‘a’s paradox lies in her considering the rewards of faith as barriers to true faith. She introduces *mahabba*, love, as a force that demands complete exclusion of all otherness, including the afterlife.

2. The Fire and the Water

Another well-known story describes Rabi‘a running through the streets with a bucket of water and a torch (Attar, 1966, p. 51). When asked about her actions, she replied that she intended to put out the fires of Hell and burn down the rewards of Paradise so that people would worship God uncontaminated by motives. This performative act is a precursor to *shath*. It is shocking in both form and meaning. It suggests that the structures of divine justice, heaven and hell, obscure the face of the Beloved.

In Rabiʻa, the tension between faith and infidelity is subtle. She seems to despise what God has promised, which resembles infidelity, but she does so to secure the Promiser himself, which represents absolute faith. She establishes a principle that will guide Bistami and Hallaj: to reach the Creator, one often needs to break the conventions of the religion that points to Him.

III. Bayazid Bistami: The Mirror of Glory

If Rabiʻa negated the rewards of the self, Bayazid Bistami denied the self altogether. Living in the rural area of Bastam in northeastern Iran, he became the main representative of intoxicated, *sukr*, Sufism. His sayings are not just prayers but eruptions of consciousness that occur when the human ego is stripped away.

1. The Subhani Utterance

The most famous of Bistami's *shathiyat* is the statement, "*Subhani, ma aʻzama sha'ni*," meaning, "Glory be to Me, how great is My Majesty" (quoted in Sells, 1996, p. 225).

In standard Islamic practice, the phrase is *Subhan Allah*, Glory be to God. For a human to use this phrase constitutes auto-deification and blasphemy. However, Michael Sells argues that Bistami's bewilderment, *hayra*, serves to disorient the listener, leading to a collapse of the subject object distinction (Sells, 1996, pp. 213–214).

To interpret this as faith rather than infidelity, one must think of the metaphor of the mirror. Bistami describes the process of asceticism as polishing the heart. When the heart is perfectly polished, it reflects nothing but God. When Bistami gazes into his own soul at that moment, he sees only God. Thus, when he declares "Glory be to Me," the "Me" refers not to Bayazid the human, but to the Divine attributes mirrored in him. As Ernst notes, the speaker has disappeared, and only the Witness remains (Ernst, 1985, p. 45). The infidelity of claiming divinity is, in reality, the faith of total self-erasure.

2. The Mimetic Ascension (Mi'raj)

Bistami controversially claimed to have had a spiritual ascension, *mi'raj*, similar to that of the Prophet Muhammad. In his dream, he travels through the heavens and, upon reaching the Divine Throne, finds it empty. He realizes he is the Throne; he is both the searcher and the sought (Sells, 1996, p. 242). He states, "I shed myself as a snake sheds its skin, and I looked at myself, and behold, I was He."

This claim to a prophetic style ascension deeply offended orthodoxy, which regarded the Prophet's experience as unique and unrepeatable. However, Bistami was not claiming prophetic authority but asserting his spiritual identity. He believed that the ultimate reality of the human soul is nonexistence. Once the illusion of separation is gone, only the Oneness of God remains. This radical monotheism may appear to deny the Creator creature distinction from the outside, but from within, it is the only true affirmation of God's all-encompassing reality.

IV. Mansur al Hallaj: The Tragedy of Public Disclosure

Mansur al Hallaj represents a tragic culmination of this trajectory. While Bistami lived as a recluse, Hallaj was a public figure, a preacher, and a traveler who brought the secrets of Sufism to the markets of Baghdad. His execution in 922 CE resulted from a complex mix of political fear and theological outrage over his refusal to keep the secret of divine union private.

1. "Ana al Haqq" and the Grammar of Union

Hallaj's key statement, "Ana al Haqq," meaning, "I am the Truth," or "I am the Real," is the most well-known phrase in Sufi history. Since *Al Haqq* is a Quranic name for God, jurists interpreted it as a pharaonic claim to divinity. However, Annemarie Schimmel and Louis Massignon have shown that this was not a claim of incarnation, *hulul*, but of witnessing (Massignon, 1982, Vol. 1, pp. 126–128; Schimmel, 1975, p. 66).

Hallaj argues that God is the only true Subject. When the human ego is gone, God speaks through the human vessel. Hallaj wrote, “Is it You or I? That would be two gods in me, far be it from You to assert two ness” (Massignon, 1982, Vol. 3, p. 42). The “I” in *Ana al Haqq* is a divine “I.” For Hallaj, saying “God is the Truth,” *Huwa al Haqq*, would imply a separation, a “He” over there and an “I” over here observing Him. This duality contradicts strict monotheism. So, the only way to affirm God’s unity correctly is to let God say “I” through the mystic. Thus, the statement that led to his execution for blasphemy was, in his view, the only grammatically correct expression of monotheism.

2. The Tawasin and the Paradox of Iblis

Hallaj’s complicated relationship with faith and infidelity is most vividly illustrated in his masterpiece, the *Kitab al Tawasin*. In the *Ta Sin* of the Lamp, Hallaj provides a shocking defense of Iblis (Hallaj, 1996, pp. 270–278). In Islamic theology, Iblis was cursed for refusing God's command to bow to Adam. Hallaj, however, presents Iblis as the ultimate tragic monotheist.

In Hallaj’s view, Iblis refuses to bow to Adam not out of pride but out of absolute love for God. Iblis argues, “My refusal is a declaration of Your holiness. There is no other for me but You” (Hallaj, 1996, p. 273). Iblis chooses to be cursed and sent to Hell rather than commit the sin of bowing to a created being, Adam. Hallaj identifies with Iblis. Both are lovers cast out and labeled infidels because they follow a secret, higher loyalty to God that defies external commands.

This is the height of the paper's main argument. Hallaj suggests that true devotion sometimes means defying the formal law to honor the Lawgiver. Iblis becomes a martyr of love, donning the black robe of the curse as a badge of honor. By recuperating the figure of the Devil as a lover of God, Hallaj blurs the lines between faith and infidelity. He proposes that what appears to be the ultimate rebellion, Satan's fall, reflects ultimate fidelity. This dangerous interpretation confirmed his status as a heretic in the eyes of the law but solidified his status as a martyr among the Sufis (Schimmel, 1975, p. 195).

3. The Desire for "Infidelity"

Hallaj famously welcomed death, writing lines like, "Kill me, O my trusted friends, for in my killing is my life." He even openly wished to be labeled an infidel, *kafir*. In his *Diwan*, he states:

> I have denied the religion of God, for denial is obligatory for me, though it is hideous to Muslims. (Hallaj, as cited in Massignon, 1982, Vol. 3, p. 46)

Here, "denying the religion of God" means going beyond the finite limits of organized religion to unite with the Infinite. It may seem hideous to ordinary Muslims who depend on those limits, but it is obligatory for the mystic who has glimpsed the Reality beyond them. Hallaj views his execution as a sacrificial rite that affirms the Law by punishing his body while validating the Truth by freeing his spirit (Massignon, 1982, Vol. 3, p. 162).

V. The Dialectic of Law and Love

The conflict between these mystics and the orthodox establishment was not just a misunderstanding. It was a necessary structural feature of Islamic history. The jurists, *fuqaha*, were responsible for maintaining social order and clear revelations. They dealt in strict categories, Creator versus creature, *halal* versus *haram*, Muslim versus infidel. The Sufis, in contrast, blurred these categories.

Ernst uses the distinction between sobriety, *sahw*, and intoxication, *sukr*, to illustrate this tension (Ernst, 1985, pp. 9–10). Sober Sufism, represented by figures like Junayd of Baghdad, argued that the mystic must return from the state of union to the state of separation to uphold the law. Junayd warned Hallaj against public speaking. However, Hallaj, Bistami, and Rabi‘a embodied a compelling impulse. They represented a dialectic where infidelity becomes a necessary phase of faith.

This infidelity is what later Sufis called *kufr tariqat*, infidelity of the path, a temporary rejection of religious forms to discover the essence. It differs from *kufr haqiqi*, real disbelief. Yet, because this distinction relies on inner intentions, it remains hidden from the law. The law judges based on outward statements. Thus, Hallaj's execution was, in a tragic sense, correct according to legal standards, even if it does not constitute a crime from a spiritual perspective.

Conclusion

The expressions of devotion found in the teachings of Rabiʻa al Qaysiyya, Bayazid Bistami, and Mansur al Hallaj show how mystical experiences in early Sufism redefine the boundaries of faith. Their paradoxical language arises not from disbelief but from an intensity of belief that exceeds ordinary limits.

Rabiʻa’s pure love required rejecting Paradise, effectively negating the Quranic promise to honor the Quranic God. Bistami’s self-annihilation required the usurpation of Divine Names, effectively committing blasphemy to affirm the singularity of divine existence. Hallaj’s testimony to the Truth required accepting the infidel label, mirroring his tragic hero Iblis, to demonstrate that his love existed beyond reward or social approval.

Their movement between faith and infidelity is therefore a linguistic and spiritual strategy, an attempt to express the inexpressible, to describe a union with a God whose transcendence goes beyond language. By challenging the categories of belief, these mystics invite believers to rethink what it means to be faithful. They propose that faith is not simply agreeing with propositions or following rules but a profound and overwhelming encounter with the Real. In this encounter, the self that believes must perish, and to the world, that death often appears as a loss of faith, when in truth, it represents its completeness.

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Fuelled by Faith: How Oil Funded the Export of Wahhabism and Transformed the Gulf Migrant Experience

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interplay between oil capitalism, gulf migration, and largely the global export of a politically Islamic ideology of Wahhabism through the analytical framework of Petro-Islam and Timothy Mitchell's concept of McJihad. Based on Rentier State Theory (RST), this paper is aimed at showing how the Saudi oil economy historically generated a state-facilitated religious monopoly alongside a labor architecture defined by permanent temporariness under the traditional Kafala system. Within this mechanism, migrant workers were integrated into racialized economic hierarchies without proper access to political representation or civic belonging.

To portray these macro-level dynamics, the paper couples political economy with an autoethnographic case study tracing a Pakistani engineer's career trajectory and his family's

transnational migration from Jeddah to Dubai. The analysis shows how adopting state-sanctioned Wahhabi orthodoxy acted as a rational mechanism for accumulating social capital and navigating social exclusion in the Gulf. As oil rents funded religious institutions, media, and global networks like the Muslim World League, this petro-piety evolved into a form of portable asset, shaping identity and faith across borders, from South Asia to the wider Middle East.

Lastly, the paper evaluates these historical processes against the contemporary shifting landscape of Gulf migration, examining how recent labor reforms such as Saudi Arabia's *Nitaqat* quotas move away from the *Kafala* framework, and it entirely reconfigures the future of migrant identity and petro-piety in a post-rentier Gulf.

Introduction

For a young graduate emerging from one of Pakistan's leading mechanical engineering programs in the late 1990s, a time when such institutions were a true manifestation of competitiveness, prestige, and a guaranteed future, the world felt wide open and full of opportunities. Engineering in Pakistan was not just a discipline, it had become a proactive choice, regarded as a magical key to success. Among the countless paths available, the petroleum industry stood out with a gravitational pull on its own. For my uncle, the blend this career offered of technical endeavor, cross-country reach, and the promise of economic mobility seemed unparalleled. He began where many success stories begin: as a trainee at a multinational firm in Pakistan. The work was demanding, tiresome, and required persistence, yet it was also full of learning. Within a few years, he had moved through a series of comparatively senior roles in leading petroleum companies with each step confirming that he was exactly where he had dreamed of being.

And then came the offer which almost seemed fictitious. It was an opportunity that is a lifelong dream and once-in-a-lifetime change to change the course of one's life for any young corporate professional. It promised more than a promotion or a salary increase. It was a chance to leave home and enter the World of the Gulf's flourishing oil economy. What he did not yet know was that this move, driven by the powerful and largely invisible force of the global petroleum economy, would not just uplift his career, but reshape the social and ideological contours of his family's life.

In the process of understanding the presence of oil in everyday lives, this paper takes on the task of dissecting how the Gulf's oil economy financed and facilitated hegemony of Wahhabism creating a petro-piety that compelled migrant families to subscribe to this ideological realm, in addition to transforming the infrastructure of middle east (Hanieh, 2024). Through the lens of my uncle's migration and consequently, my aunt's religious transformation, this paper presents a case of how oil wealth mediates social mobility, religious identity, and the transnational spread of ideology, while also situating this story within the rapidly shifting landscape of Gulf migration governance, a landscape that looks markedly different today than it did when my uncle first arrived.

The Attraction of an Oil Economy: Oil, Citizenship, and Labor

To understand the economic pull that Saudi Arabia: the largest, wealthiest, and most influential of the Gulf's oil monarchies, exerted on South Asian engineers like my uncle, it is necessary to engage seriously with Rentier State Theory (RST). The RST framework originates with Mahdavy's (1970) study of Iran, which first identified how states whose revenues come overwhelmingly from external rent payments from the rest of the world for a resource, rather than from domestic production or taxation. Essentially, developing a distinctive relationship between state and society. Beblawi and Luciani (1987) extended this into a fuller theory of the Arab oil states, arguing that where rent dominates the economy, the government becomes primarily an allocator rather than a producer of wealth. In exchange for political assent, citizens come to expect distribution which is guaranteed public-sector employment, subsidies, free education, and healthcare, in exchange for political assent. Walker (2023) describes this as a social contract that almost inverts the historic Western relationship between taxation and representation: where citizens are not taxed and they are also not expected, or permitted, to demand political voice or representation of any kind.

For the purposes of this paper, three implications of RST are central, and each maps directly onto a dimension of my uncle and aunt's story. First, since oil rents allow the state to guarantee employment and welfare to its citizens largely independent of their productivity, nationals are structurally insulated from the disciplines of the labor market (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Hertog, 2010). Second, this isolation does not mean that the productive economy disappears because someone still has to run the refineries, manage the ports, and build the cities, but rather historically, this labor has disproportionately been performed and executed by non-citizens and migrants, to be precise. (Lori, 2019). Third, and as a consequence of the first two, Gulf rentier states developed patterns of migrant incorporation that is described as 'permanent temporariness' (Lori, 2019). Referring to migrants who are economically indispensable yet remain politically and socially excluded, their presence is regulated through sponsorship-based systems rather than pathways to citizenship. It was into precisely this architecture that my uncle stepped when he accepted the offer to relocate to Saudi Arabia in the early 2000s.

The Saudi oil economy was, at that moment, a magnet for engineers like him; individuals with the technical skills the kingdom required, yet who remained, by design, outside the category of citizenship. Across the Gulf, this labor market was organized through the kafala (sponsorship) system, which linked a migrant worker's legal status directly to their employer and offered no effective pathway to citizenship (Babar & Vora, 2022). This system enabled the petro-state to extend economic benefits, and, as I aspire to show, ideological influence, on migrant workers while withholding from them the full rights of belonging. It is pertinent to note, however, that the kafala model has never been monolithic or static. The UAE's Golden and Green Visa categories, introduced from 2019 onward, and Saudi Arabia's Premium Residency (Iqama Mumayazah) program, allow certain high-skilled professionals and investors to reside without a local sponsor; and in 2025, Saudi Arabia announced a sweeping reform replacing kafala altogether with a contract-based system of employment (Migration Policy Institute, 2024; Walk Free, 2025). These reforms remain selectively targeted, benefiting, high-net-worth investors and a narrow band of highly skilled professionals for the most part, and for much of his career, my uncle's residency, like that of the overwhelming majority of Gulf migrants, was governed by the traditional sponsorship framework this paper discusses (Migration Policy Institute, 2024).

My uncle entered the Saudi petroleum labor market in the early 2000s, a period in which Saudi Arabia's demand for foreign technical labor was expanding rapidly on the back of sustained high oil prices (De Bel-Air, 2015). At that time, his gradual promotion to progressively senior roles in Gulf petroleum corporations was enabled not only by his individual talent and skill set, but by the labor architecture of the rentier state as it then stood: an architecture in which technical and engineering positions were disproportionately staffed by foreign professionals from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Hertog, 2010). However, it is important not to project this picture onto the present. Since 2011, Saudi Arabia's *Nitaqat* program, and its successor, *Nitaqat Mutawar*, has imposed firm-level quotas for the employment of Saudi nationals, with the explicit goal of reducing the kingdom's reliance on foreign labor (De Bel-Air, 2015). These Saudization policies, intensified under Vision 2030, have measurably reshaped the labor market. Saudi nationals have moved into private-sector and white-collar roles in numbers unimaginable a generation ago. Even as the lowest-skilled segments of the workforce like construction, domestic work, and similar sectors, remain almost entirely dependent on migrant labor (De Bel-Air, 2015; Hertog, 2010). The economic landscape that absorbed my uncle in the early 2000s is not the economic landscape of the Gulf today. The rentier architecture this paper describes was the system as it operated at the time of his migration, and it is a system that is visibly and oddly in transition.

The Petro-Islam Machinery

The notion of Petro-Islam itself refers to the entrenched entanglement between a strong oil economy and the dissemination of a specific understanding of Islam across the Gulf. As the Saudi state grew economically strong and revenues began to flow in, owed to the discovery of oil, the nation realized a capacity it had not possessed before. It was the ability to shape religious ideology to an extent that it became mandated. As this section will discuss, the alliance between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment became the very foundation of a modern religious-industrial complex, one that capitalized on oil revenues to print millions of books, fund seminaries, build mosques, and contribute to the mission of spreading the Wahhabi version of Islam across the globe (Commins, 2006). Because of Saudi Arabia's booming oil economy, particularly from the 1970s oil boom onward, millions of people would migrate to the Gulf, and for these migrants, this religious landscape was a structural necessity rather than a polite, optional offering. My aunt's experience as someone who sought religious comfort and community was no different, as her religious awakening took birth in this oil-facilitated ideological architecture.

The Saudi religious-political ecosystem dates to 1774, when the tribal leader Muhammad Ibn Saud forged an alliance with the religious reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Commins, 2006). This alliance became so enduring because Wahhabism offered political authority through religious justification, while the Saud family brought military protection and territorial expansion to the table. This was not merely a pact of convenience; it shaped the identity of the Saudi state on a foundation of religious legitimacy exchanged for political loyalty, for generations to come in the Arabian Peninsula. One may reasonably ask how an alliance predating the discovery of oil by two centuries came to shape religious formation in the Gulf so massively. It did so because what had once been a local reformist movement confined to Najd: the central plateau of the Arabian Peninsula and the historic heartland of the Al Saud dynasty, with the arrival of oil wealth, became a globally influential ideology. Particularly, its impact sprinkled with extended reach into migrant communities, Muslim-majority countries, and even non-Muslim societies. The Saudi state's use of oil money to institutionalize Wahhabism produced a religious landscape in which the clergy held immense influence over daily life, education, and moral norms. This historical structure set out the conditions that would later dominate my aunt's introduction to religion in the Gulf.

In a country like Saudi Arabia, it seemed more so inevitable that oil revenues would become the machinery through which Wahhabism evolved into a global ideological doctrine based on the alliance highlighted earlier. But this was made possible specifically because Saudi Arabia invested billions of dollars from the 1970s onward in building mosques, religious universities, and seminaries both within the kingdom and around the world (Commins, 2006). Doing this at the state level also ensured that multiple departments could be involved, for instance, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs coordinated the production and distribution of religious texts, printed in the millions and translated into various languages. A key feature of these texts was that they conveyed a rigid and extreme interpretation of Islam rooted in the Najdi tradition, emphasizing obedience to the ruler, a particular construction of what constitutes as an “authentic” tradition, correction of daily religious practice, and a moral-behavioral code that was largely subservient to state interests (Commins, 2006). Quite significantly, the religious clergy in Saudi Arabia were trained in these very texts and took up positions in mainstream mosques and seminaries as imams and instructors, hence, curating and reproducing a distinctly Wahhabi religious atmosphere that is to be deemed as the correct interpretation of the religion that took birth in the Arabian Peninsula (Commins, 2006).

Because of this, for many migrant communities and Muslims living in the Gulf, the only offering readily available to them was a Wahhabi-centric orientation of Islam, delivered through study circles, courses, and talks. For my aunt, who was settled in Jeddah, participation in any women-only religious gathering meant exposure to a specific type of content, sponsored and facilitated by the petro-state. None of this was through any active pursuit of her own, what she could not have known was that her fulfillment of religious curiosity was occurring within a religious marketplace in which the diversity in interpretation had been largely outcompeted, defunded, and actively suppressed through state mechanisms. It was a marketplace whose establishment grounded in the Wahhabi orientation extended its authority across the entirety of the social, educational, and cultural fabric, leaving very little institutional space for alternative religious interpretations to take root (Al-Rasheed, 2007).

Historically, Saudi Arabia has been an epicenter of religion, owing to the presence of the two Holy Mosques. Given this premise, it is perhaps inevitable that religion's major function would be one of social control and the channeling of mobility, as argued by Fandy (1999).The kingdom relies far more on oil revenues than on taxation, a structure that leaves political accountability largely disconnected from the citizens. As a result, the state builds legitimacy through religious authority, presenting itself as a guardian of Islam, while in practice protecting its own ideological interests in the name of religion. This is why organized religion in the petro-state is so heavily regulated; sermons are scripted, textbooks are standardized, and the multiplicity of interpretive opinion is marginalized, all to ensure that a specific ideology penetrates the Muslim masses (Al-Rasheed, 2007). Faith, thereby, is left stranded; it becomes inorganic, a domain in which oil wealth and political power are deployed as tools of stability. For the Muslim migrant community, this created a powerful dynamic of assimilation. My aunt's enrollment in a Wahhabi institution was not a matter of personal preference, or a decision made in a vacuum, but the consequence of a structure that used its oil rents to subsidize a specific ideological orientation.

Petro-Islam is a system that holds itself together through wealth and power. An established oil economy gave the Saudi state the capacity to shape the social and religious fabric of millions of migrants. The Wahhabi seminary, more than just offering a certain belief system, developed a space of belonging for my uncle's family in a place far from home. The petro-piety my aunt fully embraced reflected the oil economy itself. It was a resource-rich project that forms the identities of those who live within its sphere of influence. The strong oil economy that paid my uncle's salary was the same economic capital that funded the books, the teachers, and the very infrastructure of the seminary where my aunt's worldview and identity were being transformed.

The Institution of Petro Piety

The rentier state managed its own citizens through a social contract of economic distribution in exchange for political conformity (Walker, 2023). Yet it managed its vast migrant population through a more subtle, yet equally powerful, mechanism. For the millions of migrants navigating the racialized labor hierarchies of the Gulf, adopting the state-sanctioned religious orthodoxy became a rational and necessary strategy for social survival, capital, and mobility. It was essentially a strategy made more compelling by a system that offered migrants economic inclusion without political belonging (Lori, 2019).

The Gulf labor market continues to be deeply structured by indicators of nationality and race, as argued by Babar and Vora (2022). For a migrant family, thorough alignment with and subscription to the dominant Wahhabi orientation was a way to accumulate social capital in an ecosystem where they were otherwise perpetually othered. This pattern is consistent with Fandy's (1999) observation that, in a polity where formal political participation is foreclosed to citizens and non-citizens alike, religious conformity becomes one of the few currencies of social standing available. With Al-Rasheed's (2007) account of how the Saudi state's establishment grounded in the Wahhabi religion extends its authority over the entire social and cultural sphere, such that alternative religious orientations confer little of the same legitimacy. As a successful engineer, my uncle's high salary afforded his family a lifestyle of luxury vastly different from that of the labor camps on the city's periphery. Yet economic capital and professional success did not, on their own, grant full belonging or respectability. It was his wife, my aunt, who navigated cultural integration and effectively cracked the code of religious life. With the leisure time facilitated by his salary, she immersed herself in the only social spaces readily available to her: the state-funded religious community centers.

As Adam Smith might put it, the "invisible hand" of oil turned out to be very powerful here (1776), though in this case, the hand was anything but invisible to the state that wielded it. The seminaries were transformative, promoting a standardized and literalist interpretation of Islam that often led the diverse and rich traditions of Islam prevalent in migrants' home countries to be regarded as innovations (Bidd'ah) or superstitions to be purged (Al-Rasheed, 2007). The Awakening movement, as Lacroix (2004) describes, emerged as an active agent in standardizing religious norms across the Arabian Peninsula. This movement left millions of migrants in considerable uncertainty, prompting them to question their preconceived ideas about religious theology and turning them toward a “purer," state-sponsored model of Islam.

This transformation was not merely a spiritual awakening. It eventually became a form of assimilation into the wider system of petro-culture. Hence, as my uncle continued to climb the corporate ladder as an oil executive, my aunt traversed the ideological path of Wahhabism to fit into the prevailing social norm. The oil economy enabled a mode of being, a petro-piety, in which religious alignment became increasingly attached to the dominant culture, allowing migrants to negotiate their place in a society where they would nonetheless remain outsiders. For many, the only avenue open was to strive to become the right kind of outsider.

Beyond the Petro-state of Saudi Arabia

In the late 2010s, when my uncle accepted a General Manager position in Dubai, relocating his family from the conservative heartland of Jeddah to the metropolis of Dubai, he was transporting more than just his professional expertise. A significant part of my aunt's luggage was her identity as a "pure" Muslim, distanced from Sufi practices and any innovations. She carried with her the rigid, textually literalist religious formation cultivated during her years in Saudi Arabia. In Dubai, my aunt sought out and immersed herself in circles similar to those she had left behind, becoming a node in a transnational network of ideology. This personal migration transcends geography and the concept of nationhood, and points toward a macro-political phenomenon: religious formation as a portable asset, an exportable commodity that reshaped the cultural and religious landscape of the Muslim world.

Peggy Levitt's (2003) work on religion and transnational migration offers a useful vocabulary for what was happening to my aunt's faith as it crossed from Jeddah to Dubai. Levitt argues that migrants do not simply carry private beliefs across borders as personal baggage. Rather, religious institutions which include congregations, study circles, seminary networks, themselves operate as transnational fields, present in sending and receiving contexts and generating forms of belonging that are not anchored to any single nation-state. The women-only study circles my aunt had frequented in Jeddah were never a purely Saudi phenomenon to be left behind; they were nodes in precisely such a transnational field, one she could subsequently re-enter the moment she arrived in Dubai. Her religious transformation, produced under conditions of oil-financed institutional monopoly in one Gulf state, proved readily transferable to another. In this sense, religious affiliation functioned as a kind of mobility regime in its own right: a credential of belonging that travelled with her independently of, and more durably than, her legal status under any visa or sponsorship category.

To understand how this ideology traveled from the seminary classrooms of Saudi Arabia to the wider Muslim world, it is necessary to analyze the mechanisms of what Timothy Mitchell (2011) terms McJihad, an intimate relationship between oil capitalism and conservative Islamic movements. The spread of Wahhabism across the Muslim world is often misunderstood as a purely theological expansion. A critical analysis reveals it to be a political project fueled by the specific urgencies of the oil economy. Mitchell (2011) deconstructs the popular binary of Jihad vs. McWorld, which suggests a clash between traditional religious forces and global capitalism.

He argues instead for the existence of McJihad: a system in which the West's dependence on Middle Eastern oil required the maintenance of conservative, authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia (Mitchell, 2011). Western powers strategically and enthusiastically supported the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance in their own self-interest, securing oil supplies and the kind of scarcity that enables high profits. The oil revenues generated through this partnership were then used to export Wahhabism as a counter-ideology to anti-imperialist and secular movements in the region (Mitchell, 2011). More importantly, any religious movement as well that did not subscribe to the Wahhabi-supremacist doctrine.

The mechanism of this export was financial, yet its impact was ideological. The oil boom allowed the Saudi state to project soft power through the establishment of massive transnational organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), as Commins (2006) highlights. Funded by petrodollars, these institutions came to rival traditional centers of Islamic learning such as Cairo's Al-Azhar and India's Deoband, offering fully funded scholarships, building mosques and seminaries, and distributing textbooks that promoted the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (Commins, 2006). For migrant families, and for millions of Muslims in countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Indonesia, this meant that the most well-funded, accessible, and apparently progressive form of religious education and training was intricately linked to Saudi state ideology.

The epitome of this ideology-export strategy was the Soviet-Afghan War, a moment in which the interests of US foreign policy and the Saudi religious complex converged. Mitchell (2011) documents how the United States and Saudi Arabia funneled billions of dollars to the Mujahideen to fight the Soviets, a flow of funding corroborated in detail by Coll's (2004) account of the period (Mitchell, 2011; Coll, 2004). This was both a military operation and an opportunity to spread an ideology. Saudi oil wealth funded the proliferation of seminaries across Pakistan; religious schools that nurtured a generation of refugees and fighters in a militarized, politicized strain of Wahhabism (Mitchell, 2011; Coll, 2004). This jihad ran on the hardware of the global oil economy. It created a transnational class of activists and a network of institutions that outlived the war, embedding this specific interpretation of Islam into the fabric of societies far from the Gulf. This contributed to the emergence of the Ahle-Hadith movement in Pakistan, which inherited the core doctrine of the Wahhabi movement and established seminaries and mosques that would carry the cause forward among laypeople and masses (Khan, 2000).

The Awakening (Sahwa) movement, as described by Lacroix (2004), played a significant role in the dissemination of this ideology. While it initially emerged as a domestic movement blending Muslim Brotherhood activism with Wahhabi doctrine, it capitalized on the modern infrastructure of the petro-state which constitutes schools, universities, and mass media, to propagate its message to the masses (Lacroix, 2004). Migrants serving as the labor force of the oil economy became the inadvertent flag-bearers of this ideology. Given how my aunt carried her understanding of religion to the bustling city of Dubai, she was not alone in this. Numerous

Egyptian teachers as well as Pakistani engineers and doctors returned to their home countries as Muslims who, in their own estimation "knew better" about religion. They returned not only with the economic capital to build houses and businesses, but also with the social capital of a religious formation that emphasized modernity, progress, and piety, an identity subsidized by the barrel (Fandy, 1999).

The spread of Wahhabism cannot be divorced from the material reality of oil. The politics of oil is foundationally a political economy of McJihad, in which the stability of global energy markets was purchased through the empowerment and legitimacy of religious conservatism. We were not merely consumers of oil wealth; we became the consumers of the ideology it produced. In moving from Saudi Arabia to the UAE, and then across the Muslim world, by staying true to those rigid structures of belief, my aunt's trajectory shows the persuasive power of oil as an anchor for ideological production. A production that created a transnational Wahhabi orientation that mirrors, and travels through the same institutional channels as, the transnational flow of capital itself (Levitt, 2003).

Conclusion

In a world that is largely tailored by faith and religiosity, this paper fills an important gap in addressing the inextricable relationship between wealth, power, and ideology. In our efforts to understand the world around us, we often overlook key foundations that are so pervasive in our lives yet remain largely absent from the bigger picture. For this paper, the political economy of oil is precisely such a foundation, one so pervasive that it facilitated the export of a state-sponsored ideology and religious orientation to the Gulf and the wider Muslim world.

Drawing on Rentier State Theory, particularly its account of how oil rents transform citizens into rentiers isolated from the disciplines of production (Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi & Luciani, 1987), this paper recasts migrant labor as economically indispensable yet politically and socially excluded (Lori, 2019). It argues that both citizens and migrants are bound into a social contract in which material distribution substitutes for political voice (Walker, 2023). By further engaging the framework of the petro-Islam machinery and the political analysis of McJihad (Mitchell, 2011), the paper sketches how the abundance of oil enabled the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam to expand far beyond its origins in the impoverished Najd region. Rather than remaining geographically confined and eventually fading into obscurity, it emerged as a transnational religious and ideological orientation that has influenced millions of Muslims worldwide. It uses my uncle's corporate success as a small but eye-opening anecdote of how a flourishing oil economy can institutionalize a belief system that subsequently enters a family, in this case, by way of his wife.

The ecosystem of the Gulf had little to do with collecting tax from its citizens. Instead, it relied on a religious and social contract that demanded political obedience and ideological submission (Walker, 2023). This was in exchange for economic benefits and infrastructural development. The booming oil economy enabled the petro-state to monopolize the religious fabric of society, leveraging this position by establishing mainstream learning centers that served as outlets for the outreach of the Wahhabi mission (Fandy, 1999). What this meant for migrants like my aunt was that, in an environment where one craves faith and belonging, the only authentic and accessible offering available was Wahhabi orthodoxy. As this paper has shown, choosing a Wahhabi institution was not a preference she consciously made. Rather, given how thoroughly her formation in this ideology had taken hold, there was little hesitation in her embrace of it, to the point of becoming a promoter and flag-bearer of the ideology herself.

A radical social transformation generated by the politics of oil does not lie in what is visible, whether the skyscrapers of the Gulf or its remarkable infrastructure. But situates itself in the invisible: in the formation of human identity and belief. Babar and Vora (2022) remind us that the migrant experience in the Gulf is structured by racialized labor hierarchies, and the adoption of petro-piety can be read as a defense mechanism for navigating a society whose terms of belonging are set by ideology. This paper has also argued that the commercialization of crude oil has also driven the emergence and export of a specific religious ideology. The transnational flow of wealth generated a transnational flow of ideology, substantiating the legacy of oil as both an economic tool and a powerful anchor with the capacity to shape contemporary Muslim identity.

Yet this is not a static story. As the rentier social contract itself comes under strain, with Saudization policies reshaping Gulf labor markets and the 2025 abolition of Kafala beginning to alter the terms on which migrants like my uncle are incorporated, the question of what becomes of petro-piety in a post-rentier Gulf remains an open and pressing one for future seekers of investigating the Gulf.

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Reading Art for Art's Sake
Western Modernism and its Discontents in the South Asian Art World

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Abstract

This essay traces how the idea of "art for art's sake" shifted as it moved from late nineteenth and early twentieth century European debates into the artistic worlds of colonial and postcolonial South Asia. It argues that the concept was never universal, but emerged from specific European conditions described by thinkers such as Gautier, Bürger, and Greenberg. When this vocabulary entered British art education in India, it arrived without the institutions that had originally sustained it. As writers like Guha-Thakurta and Mitter show, academic training in colonial schools turned autonomy into an administrative rule that privileged European methods and framed local practices as secondary.

The essay examines how the Bengal School reframed artistic independence through cultural memory (Guha-Thakurta, 1992), how the Progressive Artists' Group and the Lahore Art

Circle redirected modernism toward new national contexts (Iqbal, 2016), and how early Pakistani modernists complicated inherited ideas of autonomy through abstraction and individual experimentation. Zubeida Agha's work, read alongside Dadi's analysis, becomes a key example of how artists forged independent visual languages within limited and uneven institutions. By placing these trajectories together, this essay shows that South Asian modernism did not simply receive European autonomy, it reshaped it, and what emerges is a history in which artists questioned and redefined the concept, creating forms of artistic independence that reflected their own cultural and political worlds.

By the late nineteenth century, certain European critics, like Théophile Gautier, began to describe art as something that should stand apart from social use, moral instruction, or political purpose (Gautier, 1926, xv). The phrase “art for art’s sake” (*l’art pour l’art*) emerged from this moment, gaining authority within circles shaped by Victorian Aestheticism[1] and the cultural confidence of Europe’s educated classes (Gautier, 1926, xv). Although this phrase now appears widely familiar, its apparent naturalness is a much longer story. Partha Mitter notes that the belief in “absolute aesthetic values” became so firmly embedded in both British and Indian criticism that its foreign origins often passed without acknowledgement (Mitter, 1994, p. 12). He observes that this belief survived long after colonial rule, shaping a climate in which artists and critics continued to work under what he describes as the comforting sense that there exist “universal rules of art” even when those rules were inherited rather than indigenous (Mitter, 1994, p. 12). What appears universal, in other words, often reflects a history of institutional reinforcements rather than a shared aesthetic instinct (Mitter, 1994, pp. 12–13). This tension between what appears natural and what has been historically produced is central to understanding how *l’art pour l’art* gained its authority before travelling far beyond the contexts that originally shaped it.

Within Europe, the idea of artistic autonomy also developed through particular historical formations rather than through any inherent quality in art. Peter Bürger notes that it was only in bourgeois modernity that art was reorganised into spaces such as museums and galleries, which altered how artworks were encountered and understood (Bürger, 1984, pp.35–36, 57). Bürger’s

[1] For instance, Oscar Wilde’s preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* famously declares that “all art is quite useless”, a statement now emblematic of Victorian Aestheticism’s defence of artistic autonomy (Gagnier, 1986, pp. 6–7;. Wilde, 1890, p. 62)

account shows that autonomy emerged through concrete cultural and institutional conditions. Recognising this is necessary for tracing how the concept later travelled to the subcontinent, where it appeared not as a neutral aesthetic ideal but as one already marked by Europe's own history.

These questions about origin, authority, and circulation guide the argument of this essay; it asks how an aesthetic ideal produced within specific European historical and institutional conditions came to function as a seemingly universal category in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. Rather than assuming that "art for art's sake" moved across regions with a fixed meaning, the essay treats the phrase as one shaped by the conditions through which it travelled. The argument developed here is that *l'art pour l'art* emerged in Europe through historically specific developments, including the rise of bourgeois taste and the institutional separation of art from practical life (ibid). These same developments shaped the vocabulary that travelled through colonial education and early twentieth-century criticism in India (Dadi, 2010, p. 18). When this vocabulary entered South Asia, however, it did not simply replicate European trajectories. It encountered different aesthetic histories, pressures of Empire, and competing claims about the purpose of art. As a result, South Asian artists and critics did not merely adopt the European ideal of autonomy; they reworked it in relation to their own questions about national identity, cultural inheritance, and the role of art under colonial rule (Dadi, 2010, pp. 18–20).

To explore this, the essay traces the movements of European notions of autonomy into colonial art schools, early exhibition cultures, and the shifting public spheres of India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It examines how this vocabulary shaped cultural expectations and how it was challenged and reinterpreted by figures such as the Bengal School, Gaganendranath Tagore, the Progressive Artists' Group, and early Pakistani modernists like Zubeida Agha (Dadi, 2010; Guha-Thakurta, 1992). By following these trajectories, the essay argues that modernism in South Asia did not develop through imitation. It took shape through acts of negotiation and resistance that produced an understanding of autonomy that differed sharply from the European versions that first circulated under colonial rule. The aim is to show that "art for art's sake", far from being neutral, became a site where histories of empire and cultural aspiration converged, and where artists in India and Pakistan redefined what autonomy could mean within their own worlds.

The European idea of artistic autonomy is important for this essay because it shows that the concept reached colonial India already shaped by particular historical and institutional forces. Peter Bürger argues that autonomy is a "category of bourgeois society", produced when art became separated from the "praxis of life" as certain European classes gained the leisure to cultivate aesthetic experience detached from practical labour (Bürger, 1984, pp. 35–36). This makes autonomy a historical formation rather than a universal aesthetic truth. Bürger stresses that this separation was later treated as if it were intrinsic to art, a misreading he describes as a "hypostatization" that turns a historical process into an "essence" (Bürger, 1984, p. 46). This transformation matters here because it enabled autonomy to travel outside Europe as a seemingly neutral ideal, even though it originated within specific social conditions (Mitter, 1994, p. 12).

Bürger's discussion of Walter Benjamin further clarifies this trajectory. He notes that Benjamin distinguishes between a "period of sacral art" and a "period of autonomous art," with autonomy emerging when art "detaches itself from ritual" within bourgeois society (Bürger, 1984, p. 36). Bürger argues that this shift reorganised art's social role and encouraged new assumptions about how it should be received. He also observes that aestheticism later produced "something like a resacralization," though now art "generates a ritual" of its own rather than serving religious practice (Bürger, 1984, p. 36). These observations help show that the modern idea of autonomy developed through specific European transformations and not through any inherent quality in art.

This history takes a different turn in mid-twentieth-century criticism. In "Modernist Painting", Clement Greenberg describes modernism as a mode of self-criticism in which each art form refines the qualities proper to its medium, identifying "flatness" as painting's defining feature (Greenberg, 1965, p. 3). His framing presents a historically specific view of modernist progress as if it expressed an essential direction for art. When this language circulates outside its original setting, it encourages the belief that modernism everywhere should follow the same developmental logic.

Together, Bürger and Greenberg show how artistic autonomy gained authority through both historical formation and aesthetic doctrine. Bürger demonstrates that autonomy emerged from European social arrangements; Greenberg turns autonomy into a measure of artistic seriousness. This combination made autonomy appear both historically-grounded and artistically necessary; a dual authority that later shaped how the concept was introduced in colonial art schools.

Benjamin Buchloh's account of postwar artistic practice adds an institutional dimension that helps frame the discussion that follows. He argues that Conceptual artists revealed how museum and gallery spaces actively shape the meaning of art rather than providing neutral conditions for viewing. As he writes, "materials and procedures, surfaces and textures, locations and placement … have always already been inscribed within the history and conventions of institutional power" (Buchloh, 1990, p. 136). Buchloh's point strengthens Bürger's argument by showing that even when art appears independent, this independence relies on institutional structures that organise its reception. This is important to note because when autonomy entered colonial India through British art schools, it arrived without the European institutions that had produced and sustained it (Mitter, 1994, p. 34). The concept travelled with the authority of Europe but without its contexts, shaping the conditions under which artists in India and later Pakistan adapted or resisted the ideal.

The arrival of European artistic autonomy in colonial India took place within institutions that differed sharply from the bourgeois environments in which the idea first developed. Unlike the gradual emergence of autonomous art in Europe, where changes in exhibition spaces, and cultural economies shaped new modes of reception, autonomy entered India through the bureaucratic channels of British art education (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p. 45). Tapati Guha-Thakurta's study of the Government School of Art in Calcutta shows that the school introduced European academic norms as part of an administrative project rather than a cultural debate (67). She writes that by the 1870s the institution had begun to "standardise" artistic instruction in ways that privileged European notions of skill, especially life drawing and modelling (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p. 47). This standardisation mattered because it framed artistic value from above, including, patronage culture of Bengali elites for artists, which increasingly began privileging westernisation, for instance (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, pp. 43–47). Students therefore encountered autonomy not as a historically conditioned European debate but as an implicit expectation embedded within the curriculum and the overall zeitgeist of 1850s India (Ibid).

The structure of the Calcutta school made this hierarchy unmistakable. Guha-Thakurta shows that by the late nineteenth century the curriculum centred on "life-drawing, modelling, lithography and wood-engraving," all broken down into a "detailed stage-by-stage programme" modelled on British Academic practice (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p. 61). Although the school introduced new courses in Indian ornamental design, she stresses that "the standards of artistic perfection… remained Western and Academic," and that the school's pride rested on whether student work could "stand comparison with… an art-school in England" (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p. 67). In this structure, Indian pictorial or artisanal traditions appeared only within the lower-status domain of "decorative arts," while "accurate object drawing," shading, and the conventions of naturalistic representation were repeatedly promoted in contemporary journals as the universal science of art (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, pp. 66–67; 216). This hierarchy did not require explicit prohibitions against indigenous technique—the curriculum itself channelled students toward European norms and defined artistic seriousness according to Academic draftsmanship. Within such a system, autonomy circulated not as a separation from social life but as an imported benchmark of artistic refinement aligned with colonial authority.

Print culture played an important role in shaping how Indian artists first encountered European aesthetic values. Guha-Thakurta shows that by the late nineteenth century Calcutta was flooded with European and European-influenced lithographs, chromolithographs, and illustrated books, many of them produced by the Calcutta Art Studio and by presses in Tiretty Bazaar (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, pp. 101–102). These images circulated widely through mediums such as, children's magazines and commercial presses, carrying into Bengali households new visual conventions drawn from academic art—especially shading, perspective, and the modelling of figures (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, pp. 86–89). Because these reproductions arrived stripped of their original European institutional settings, they were often read as exemplars of artistic refinement rather than as products of a particular cultural history. Their prestige therefore derived less from the historical processes Bürger describes and more from the authority European images held within the colonial order. The result was that autonomy, when mediated through print, became equated with European professionalism and naturalism, altering its meaning long before Indian artists encountered modernist debates directly.

Print culture also shaped how Indian artists encountered European modernism. Trouilloud shows that early twentieth-century Calcutta absorbed modernist ideas through indirect and uneven channels, e.g., artists saw European movements largely through reproductions, press commentary, and fragmentary reports rather than through direct contact with works (Trouilloud, 2017, pp. 99–100). This mediated exposure contributed to the tendency of colonial critics to measure Indian artists against European figures whose work they knew only partially. Trouilloud notes, for example, that Jamini Roy's style—developed through engagements with Kalighat painting, Bengal folk idioms, and the "naïve art" of Sunayani Devi—was repeatedly compared to Picasso or Gauguin because of perceived "structural affinities," even though these similarities arose from independent and locally grounded experiments rather than imitation (Trouilloud, 2017, pp. 104–105). Partha Mitter interprets Roy's position within what he calls a "globally imagined community," a form of "virtual cosmopolis" made possible by print culture and the circulation of images, which produced elective affinities between artists in colonised and metropolitan centres (Trouilloud, 2017, p. 105; citing Mitter). Yet, as Trouilloud emphasises through Mitter, these affinities did not erase contextual difference, *i.e.*, while European modernists turned to the "primitive" as an escape from industrial modernity, Roy's recourse to folk forms constituted a cultural resistance to colonial authority and a reassertion of local identity (Trouilloud, 2017, p. 105). These comparisons reveal how European critical language often misread Indian modernists by imposing external standards, turning autonomy into a tool of evaluation rather than a means of understanding artistic intent.

The institutional geography of colonial India reshaped the meaning of autonomy long before artists began debating modernism. Rather than encountering the historically-produced form of autonomy that Bürger reconstructs, Indian artists received the concept in its already hypostatized form: as an abstract criterion of artistic refinement presented through the authority of British pedagogy (Bürger, 1984, p. 46). Partha Mitter's account of the Mayo School of Art shows that colonial administrators defined "fine art" through categories inherited from European academies and positioned Indian artisanal practices within a subordinate craft sphere (Mitter, 1994, pp. 34–35). Lockwood Kipling valued Indian crafts, yet his belief that they required British supervision reveals how distinctions between art and craft were policed through cultural hierarchy (Mitter, 1994, p. 42). Within the colonial art schools, autonomy no longer resembled the historically produced category that Bürger describes. As such, Indian students encountered it not as the outcome of European social change but as a rule embedded in British teaching. Because academic naturalism, life-drawing, and perspective were presented as the foundations of "serious" art, autonomy became tied to these imported techniques rather than to local ways of making. This meant that European methods were treated as signs of artistic advancement, while Indian pictorial practices were classified as craft or tradition. In this context, autonomy functioned less as an aesthetic principle than as a measure of alignment with colonial cultural authority.

The institutional and cultural pressures of colonial Bengal shaped how artists reimagined the meaning of autonomy at the turn of the twentieth century. Guha-Thakurta shows that the Bengal School emerged at a moment when academic naturalism had come to signify colonial authority within Calcutta's art world (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, *Making* 203). Abanindranath

Tagore did not reject artistic independence; rather, he challenged the assumption that artistic distinction required European techniques or the academic separation of art from cultural life. His reinterpretation of Mughal and Rajput visual languages introduced a different foundation for autonomy—one grounded in introspection. Guha-Thakurta describes his position clearly:

> "One of the main lessons the artist drew from his study of tradition was a notion of the spiritual and imaginative nature of art. His definition of "art" and "artist" dipped heavily into the mystic terminology of *dhyana* (meditation) and *sadhana* (austere dedication), interpreting art as a religion in itself" (202).

For Tagore, artistic distinction arose from forms of attention and feeling that academic realism, as taught in colonial schools, could not cultivate. This reframing turned autonomy into a claim about cultural self-possession rather than formal detachment. His wash technique (valued for its tonal subtlety and atmospheric nuance) was read by contemporaries as evidence that Indian art could articulate its own modernity without reproducing European models (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p. 249). In this sense, the School redefined autonomy as the freedom to draw from inherited visual languages in order to challenge colonial taste.

The shifts introduced by the Bengal School altered the terms on which later artists approached modernism. By grounding artistic independence in cultural memory rather than academic technique, the School made autonomy available as a claim that did not depend on European validation. This set the stage for the next generation, who worked in different institutional and political contexts and responded to modernism through new questions about nationalism, urban life, and the formation of a postcolonial artistic identity. It is within these conditions that the Progressive Artists' Group, the Lahore Art School, and early Pakistani modernists developed their own approaches, extending and transforming the debates that the Bengal School had begun.

The debates that followed the Bengal School were shaped by newly formed artistic publics in the 1940s and 1950s, where questions of autonomy were tied to emerging national identities rather than to colonial institutions. The Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) emerged in Bombay in 1947 at a moment when artists were grappling with how to align their work with the expanding field of international modernism. As Samina Iqbal notes, many artists of the 1930s and 1940s—including Amrita Sher-Gil and Gaganendranath Tagore—were already seeking to enter the "international discourse on modern art", a concern that intensified after Partition (Iqbal, 2016, p. 87). PAG took this orientation further. Formed on the evening of 14 August 1947, the group declared its aim of positioning Indian art within a "secular… international art scene" (Iqbal, 2016, pp. 44, 88). This stance required a decisive break from the Bengal School, whose revivalist nationalism had become, for PAG, an artistic constraint. The Lahore Art Circle history describes how PAG explicitly reacted against both "European realist academic training" and the nationalist Bengal School art movement, arguing for a modernism "free of the constraints of form and subject" (Iqbal, 2016, pp. 155–156). This rejection of revivalist symbolism formed the conceptual ground on which PAG established its commitment to experimentation and formal freedom.

This reorientation prepared the ground for the experiments that followed in Lahore. Although the Lahore Art Circle (LAC) formed in a different political environment after Partition, its concerns grew from the same institutional transformations. As Iqbal explains, the new state's cultural infrastructure was uneven, and artists often lacked formal exhibition spaces and support from the state (Iqbal, 2016, p. 263). This absence, however, did not weaken artistic ambition. Instead, it compelled artists to negotiate questions of autonomy in relation to the shifting role of art within a newly defined national space. Iqbal notes that early exhibitions organised by LAC members sought to assert a modernist vocabulary distinct from the colonial naturalism still present in state-run institutions (Iqbal, 2016, p. 287). This modernism was not derivative of European models, it was shaped by artists' attempts to imagine what an independent cultural life might look like in Pakistan while working within a fragile institutional milieu.

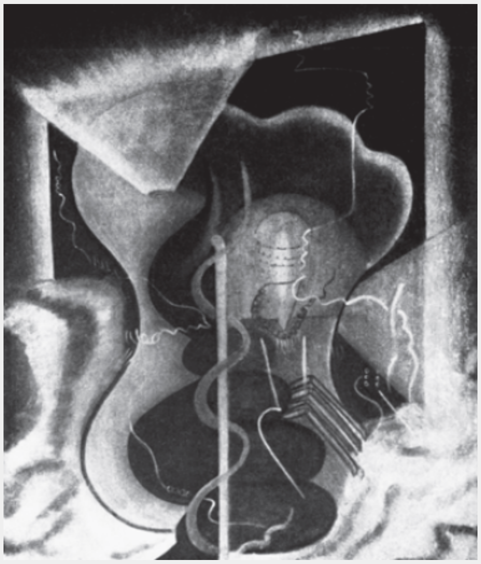
Within this environment, debates about autonomy took on a new significance. LAC artists often positioned experimentation as a way of claiming intellectual independence rather than as a strict formal programme. Figures such as Shakir Ali emphasised personal interpretation and abstraction as the basis for a modern artistic practice, countering expectations that Pakistani artists must draw on recognisably "Islamic" motifs to express national identity (Iqbal, 2016, pp. 268–269). These discussions reveal that autonomy in the post-Partition context was not defined through medium-specificity but through artists' efforts to navigate the demands placed on them by state institutions and public expectation. The LAC's exhibitions thus became spaces where autonomy was negotiated rather than assumed, shaped by the tension between the desire for modernist individuality and the pressures of cultural representation.

Zubeida Agha emerged at a moment when Pakistan's artistic field was still shaped by the legacies of colonial training and the unsettled infrastructures of the new state (Iqbal, 2016, p. 14). Her formation reflects this environment directly. As Dadi explains, her early exposure to art came through lessons arranged by her brother, Agha Abdul Hamid, who supported her training with B. C. Sanyal in Lahore, a studio that functioned as a meeting point for progressive writers and intellectuals (Dadi, 2010, pp. 112–113). This early context, outside the rigid structures of colonial art schools but still marked by their influence, shaped the independence of her later practice. Her admiration for Amrita Sher-Gil also provided an important model for how a South Asian artist might claim modernism through personal experiment rather than through academic naturalism (Dadi, 2010, p. 113).

Agha developed an "abstract, ornamental, painterly" vocabulary from the outset, one that she pursued consistently without aligning herself with the dominant artistic circles of the time (Dadi, 2010, p. 113). Her modernism grew through sustained engagement with classical philosophy, Western music, mysticism, and the visual rhythms of urban life (Dadi, 2010, p. 113). This intellectual formation shaped Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* (1949), a work that translates the affective force of symphonic composition into nonobjective forms. Dadi describes how its "tumescent shapes and exploding forms" stage a visual equivalent of musical dynamism—an experiment in abstraction conceived outside the demands of nationalist imagery or academic realism (Dadi, 2010, p. 64).

Figure 1:

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony



Note. Zubeida Agha, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, 1949, oil or tempera, 66 x 51 cm. From *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (p. 115), by I. Dadi, 2010, University of North Carolina Press.

Agha’s later trajectory also reveals how she negotiated autonomy within Pakistan’s institutional development. Although she remained detached from art school circuits, she played a central role in building artistic infrastructure. As director of the Rawalpindi Art Gallery for sixteen years, she worked with limited resources to mount exhibitions, promote artists, and help shape early plans for a national art collection (Dadi, 2010, p. 65). Critics frequently tried to categorise her through orientalist assumptions, describing her as “Eastern” or attributing her work to a mysterious Eastern sensibility, even when her compositions bore little relation to conventional Islamic design (Dadi, 2010, p. 116). Agha herself resisted these interpretations, and her articulation of abstraction as “about nothing… just an abstraction” underscores her refusal to ground her work in representational or symbolic expectations (Dadi, 2010, p. 119).

Together, the trajectories of the PAG, the Lahore Art Circle, and Zubeida Agha show that post-1947 modernism in South Asia did not simply adopt or reject European autonomy but reworked it under new institutional and political pressures. PAG challenged both academic naturalism and revivalist nationalism by insisting that artistic independence required experimentation rather than adherence to inherited visual codes (Iqbal, 2016, pp. 155–156). The Lahore Art Circle extended this modernist orientation in Pakistan by challenging the colonial binaries that continued to frame Eastern and Western art as opposites (Iqbal, 2016, p. 250). Agha’s practice sharpened these debates. While her training and influences included European modernism, her commitment to abstraction, her refusal of representational demands, and her institutional labour as curator and organiser reveal a modernism shaped neither by imitation nor by nationalist revival, but by an insistence on determining the terms of artistic meaning within a fragile new cultural field (Dadi, 2010, pp. 113–119). Across these cases, autonomy became a strategy through which artists negotiated uneven institutions as well as the pressures of defining a postcolonial artistic identity. These trajectories also challenge accounts of modernism that position Europe as the sole centre of artistic innovation. As Mitter argues, centre-periphery models of art history often cast modernisms outside Europe as derivative while overlooking the fact that artists in different parts of the world developed their own responses to modernism under different historical conditions (Mitter, 2008, pp. 540–541). The PAG, the Lahore Art Circle, and Agha demonstrate precisely such a process, reworking modernist ideas within the specific cultural and institutional conditions of postcolonial South Asia.

The debates traced in this essay show that "art for art's sake" never entered South Asia as a settled ideal. It arrived shaped by European histories that were neither shared nor neutral, and its authority depended on institutions that did not exist in the colony. Once in India and later Pakistan, the idea was questioned and repurposed as artists confronted the demands of nationalism, the weight of colonial pedagogy, and the realities of uneven cultural infrastructures. From the Bengal School's effort to redefine artistic distinction through cultural memory, to the Progressive Artists' Group and Lahore Art Circle's attempts to claim modernism on their own terms, to Zubeida Agha's insistence on abstraction as a form of autonomy within a newly formed state, each case demonstrates that artistic independence in South Asia emerged through negotiation rather than inheritance. Instead of confirming European notions of autonomy, these artists exposed their limits. What developed was a different understanding of artistic freedom—one worked out through local histories, institutional pressures, and individual experiment. In this sense, the movement of *l'art pour l'art* across South Asia reveals less about the universality of the European idea and more about the capacity of artists to remake its meaning within their own worlds.

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