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Pakistan's Heuristic Her-story Via Lahore

By Afiya Shehrbano Zia¹

Dedicated to Lahore's most courageous women - Asma Jahangir and Rubina Saigol.

Abstract

Despite the reference to the 'long Partition,' the idea of Pakistan has a hurried history: the word originated in the 1930s, the Lahore Resolution of 1940 pledged to realize the Two-Nation Theory and shortly after, in 1947, Pakistan was created. Seventy-five years on, unresolved questions of national identities and the 'woman question' remain large and elusive and I propose, the palimpsest city of Lahore is deeply and symbolically representative of these irresolute matters. Regardless of the veracity of the claim that Lahore *is* Pakistan, the core struggles, victories and losses of the country's her-story can easily be recalled through the spatial, temporal and socio-political events and symbolism of Lahore. This essay attempts a heuristic reading of the city that encapsulates the feminine pantheism and feminist activism that have inspired pluralism and progress, but which are subject to alarming political reversals, if not already poised for near-defeat.

Keywords: Indo-Pak Partition 1947, Lahore, Women's movement, Piety

Lahore's Juxtapositional Aesthetics

On 14th August 2021, as Pakistan celebrated 74 years of independence from British colonial rule and its partition from India, a mob of nearly 400 men assaulted, groped and fondled the popular female Pakistani Tik Toker, Ayesha Akram, at the site of the Minar e Pakistan in Lahore. This landmark monument commemorates the historic resolution of 1940 by Muslim League visionaries who pledged to forge out a territorially independent Pakistan. A video of the act of crass misogyny soon went viral; a despairing allegorical contrast to historic footage of the future 'mother of the nation', Fatima Jinnah, at the original site with her brother and founder of Pakistan, M.A. Jinnah. The 'Madre Millat' exemplified status as a respected leader of the freedom movement for a secure homeland for the Muslims of South Asia; the video of Ayesha Akram's mob assault shows hundreds of men encircling, assaulting and tossing her in the air, passing her from one group to the next, while the remaining voyeurs film the scene on their cell phones before she is finally rescued.

A precolonial gated and walled city, Lahore² boasts of Islamic forts, mosques, royal gardens, mausoleums and saintly shrines – an architectural landscape that residents try to remain faithful to by building homes of red bricks forged by bonded and child labour in the polluting kilns of outer Lahore. It has been home to erudite art, Urdu literature and Sufi devotional poetry and

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² For literalists who may object to the heuristic focus on Lahore, let it be recorded that the purpose is not to erase the relevance or contributions of women's movements in other cities and provinces but is simply a thematic device that attempts to source Lahore-based exemplars, so as to illustrate national political issues and feminist concerns. I have lived, studied and politicked in Lahore for a decade and lived outside of it twice longer.

offered consumptive pleasures of epicurean cuisine, forbidden romance and sinful *tawaifs* (courtesans) who have supervised men's sexual awakenings.

Postcolonial Lahore remains the site of governmental intrigues that brokered and broke Empires of the past. Here, marriages have been sacrificed for political expediency and sexual liaisons rewarded by electoral mobility. The historic practice of settling personal scores for political effect continues to be remitted by memoirs and confessionary revelations by wives and mistresses of lords and leaders. Rarely, are they successful in upsetting the patriarchal political order but sometimes, they interrupt the sub-ethnic hierarchies that make up Punjab's hegemonic masculinity.

Lahore is a city of juxtapositional aesthetics and paradoxical identity politics. It was the city of the founding philosopher of Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), whose 1930 proposal for a separate federation for the Muslims of India became known as, the 'Two Nation Theory'. It is also where the rebel journalist and story writer, Sadat Hasan Munto (1912-1955), documented the violent conclusion of that theory, resulting in mass displacement, divisions, and deaths of millions on both sides of the 1947 border.

Iqbal lived near Lakshmi chowk (intersection) while Munto resided in Lakshmi mansion. The demolition of the goddess Lakshmi from buildings named for her blessing signaled Pakistan's early attempts at Islamic purification. Here, frescos of Hindu female deities immortalized in pre-partition architecture are constantly supplanted for homage to mortal Muslim patriarchs. It's a nation-wide project that lurks for completion around the dis-repaired mansion where Munto once resided. But spatial memories compel the good Muslims of Lahore to continue to refer to the sites as "Lakshmi chowk" and "Lakshmi mansion", even after the intersection has been rechristened the Maulana Zafar Ali Khan chowk and the mansion stands as a cavernous void.

Both literateurs are buried in Lahore; the grave of the Laureate Iqbal nests presciently between a mosque and a fort, while chronicler of the underclasses, Munto, is buried in Miani Sahebi's graveyard—a site which has the privilege of legal protection by a 1962 Martial Law Ordinance. But even military governmentality has not deterred the subsequent predatory capitalism that haunts the cemetery; Lahore's pious elite and middle-class proprietors regularly try to poach its land for familial tombs, or for shops to peddle goods that feed the city's collective false consciousness.

Queens: Past and Present

Lahore's queenly past dates to its regal status as part of the Dehli sultanate when the 13th century slave-turned-ruler and patron of Sufi erudition and Islamic architecture, Sultan Shams-uddin Iltumesh (1211-1236), was succeeded by his daughter and favoured heir, Razia Sultana. Despite her repudiation of feminine roles on and off the battlefield, Razia was victim to layers of gendered betrayal—the final one by the Governor of Lahore, that led to her murder and any hope of a matrilineal future. In times ahead, Muslim women had to be content with being at the receiving end of Mughal Emperors' passions, honour, and architectural veneration.

The sarcophagus for the famed Empress, Mehrun Nisa or Nur Jahan, is preserved close to Emperor Jahangir's, on the right bank of the Ravi in Shahadara precinct—the 'King's Entry' into Lahore via the Grand Trunk Road. His courtesan/royal wife, Anarkali/Nadira *begum* (title for Muslim women from the aristocracy or high social ranking) is allegorized to have been entombed in the walls of Lahore by his jealous father, Emperor Akbar, as retribution for his son's romantic indiscretion. As a historical figure, Anarkali bridges the class divide - symbolic of the commoner's aspirational love, a bazaar is named for her but as Nadira *begum*, her status is elevated by the noble

legacy of a domed mausoleum that Jahangir commissioned in her honour. Over time, this monument's romantic relevance has been re-evaluated; first, it was converted to a Protestant church and later, absorbed by Punjab's powerful bureaucracy as part of its Department of Archives. The original Mughal masonry has suffered the white paint-wash that is the pragmatic method favoured by postcolonial bureaucracies; literal broad-brush white-washing is used to treat the base of tree trunks along main avenues or, to mark pavements that don't exist or, brand ownership of historic buildings. Metaphorically, it could be said to symbolize the easy switch of the state establishment's allegiances towards military over civilian governments.

Other women at the heart of romantic controversy are also memorialized in Lahore. The Bagh Gul e Bahar Begum near Rang Mahal Chowk is the neglected garden in a dilapidated *haveli* (house of heritage). It was curated for the Muslim wife of Lahore's Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh, in the late 18th century. Symbolic of a minority's fate that can be cut to size—no matter his tyrannical governance or eclectic promise—the statue of Ranjit Singh in Lahore fort is regularly vandalized by the iconoclastic pious. At a time of #RhodesMustFall, this triggers intellectual ambivalence among Lahore's liberals because colonial statues may be easily dismantled with nationalist consensus, but the disparagement of Ranjit Singh's statue disconcerts the nostalgic Punjabi elite. Meanwhile, since urban landscape has no patience for ideological impasses, pop-cultural piety results in the construction of a statue of the legendary Islamic warrior, Ertugrul, inspired by a Turkish fictional TV serial and endorsed by the pious sportsman and celebrity Prime Minister, Imran Khan (2018-2022) (Jalil 2020). All these displacements signify the layered assemblage of competing masculinities that are valorized in the Punjabi imaginary.

Lahore is the city where the modern-day Empress, the indisputable melody queen or Malka Tarranum—the reincarnated Nur Jahan, born Allah Rakhi Wasai (1926-2000)—reigned and regaled South Asians with romantic songs that sustained cultural bonds across broken borders. Representing Lahore's political dualism—where progressives easily straddle in service of state and civil society alike—she also served her nationalist duty to rally the “*wattan kay sajeelay jawanon*”³ when the same borders were bloodily disputed. She inspired and resonated with drag artists, queer and queer-adjacent communities and even shared an uncensored onscreen kiss with another female actress in *Neend* (Shaikh 2021); she sang Faiz Ahmed Faiz's revolutionary call to arms, as well as, “*Main Heera Mandi Di Guddi*”⁴ in solidarity with the sex workers of Lahore's red-light district - embourgeoised as the ‘*Shahi Mahalla*’ or Royal Quarter in contemporary novels or gentrified anthropological treatment.

Lahore is the city where brave women dissidents of the non-funded, secular lobby and pressure group, the Women's Action Forum (WAF), took to the Mall Road in 1983 to protest against the theocratic rule of General President Zia ul Haq (1977-1988). His military despotism and Islamization campaign instituted gender apartheid by enforcing the policy of *chadar aur chardiwari* (domestication) for women. The rebellious ‘*gunaygaar aurtein*’⁵ were beaten by the police but were supported by Lahore's dissenting artists and poets. The Lok Rehas and the Ajoka theatre groups turned Punjab's streets into alternative sites for staging subversive plots and recuperating democratic ideals. Across the classes, a wave of sisters-in-arms arose - socialist women of the caliber of Tahira Mazhar Ali and Rubina Saigol have been assets to the city's left intellectual landscape; Sara Sulehri, Shaista Sonu, Mira Phailbus, and Arifa Syeda to the literary

³ “Courageous soldiers of the soil.”

⁴ ‘I, the Baby Doll of the Diamond Market.’

⁵ ‘Sinful women’.

one and, Hina Jilani and Asma Jahangir institutionalized the base of the nation's collective human rights struggle in Lahore.

Lahore remained the hub of human rights activists because of the dynamic Asma Jahangir and wise and prescient, I.A. Rehman. They led a series of Indo-Pak Peoples' peace talks and drew activists from across the country to work under the umbrella of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. They conducted fact-finding missions on the disappeared dissidents of Balochistan; carried out raids to free bonded labour from cages in Sindh; extinguished flames of religious fanaticism in the streets of Rabwa; opposed and lobbied against the death penalty; negotiated blasphemy and death-row cases; litigated for women's right to marry, divorce, and receive maintenance from Lahore's courts and; wiped off the blood of alleged blasphemers and dishonorable women from the walls of their offices. They devoted their lives to these causes and more, and some of their comrades paid with their own lives quite literally (Buncombe and Aziz 2014).

Castigated by the Military and Mullahs

Pakistan baptized itself as an Islamic Republic in a considerably delayed constitutional framework and is a nation where the military commanded dominance almost from inception and where land reforms were declared unIslamic by the judiciary.⁶ General Ayub Khan's 'benevolent' dictatorship (1958-69) had modeled its modern gender policy around the progressive Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961 and a family planning programme that popularized contraception. His militarization of the state provided West Pakistani women some bodily autonomy but rapaciously violated the sovereignty of East Pakistani women's bodies in 1971.

General Zia's stoic regime of the 1980s re-centred sex as the business of the state with the aim of policing and disciplining good Muslims into a nation of pious sober celibates. The *Zina Laws* of 1979 aimed to regulate women's sexualities and ensure a stable patriarchal Islamic gendered and sexual order (Jahangir 2002). Its repeal became the Sisyphean task that Lahore's women led and shouldered with feminists across the nation most valiantly for over 25 years. This and other struggles for women's sexual and material autonomies earned them accusations—from men of the Right but often, Left, too—of being home-wreckers, western enlightenment dupes, sexual deviants, secular elites and even, imperial feminists (see Zia 2018).

Lahore has been the centre of several conceptual and ideological debates within the women's movements. The 1990s were dominated by disputations over the strategic value of pursuing women's rights through progressive interpretations of Islam, against the argument that a secular resistance was imperative against the rising orthodoxy of the state. Both sides agreed that Islamic laws as they existed, had to be repealed to guarantee equal status and rights for women and minorities but they differed on methodologies and tactics (Zia 2009, 2018; Saigol 2016).

In the democratic interregnum of 1988-1999, the struggle for women's rights became more organized and a better funded enterprise with the proliferation of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in Pakistan. Under the neoliberal global regime, references to patriarchy, feminist politics and equal rights were superseded by neutral concepts of gender equity, good governance and economic empowerment. The consensus for adopting secular strategies rather than a faith-based orientation was challenged when some NGOs decided to bid for funds for programmes that instrumentalized Islam as a source of personal piety and empowerment for women. Arguably, this

⁶ *Qazalbash Waqf versus Chief Land Commissioner* PLD 1990 SC 99.

bifurcation of feminist interests undermined secular strategic resistance against the Islamization of state and society (Zia 2009).

Lahore NGOs were the leaders of both; engagements with Islam as a source of empowerment, as well as a governance feminism that flirted and hitched fortunes sometimes with the state, other times with neoliberal donor agencies, or liberal dictatorial regimes. At the peak of the War on Terror, one premier women's foundation even effectively became a proxy of USAID.⁷ At the same time, these NGOs also politicized an entire generation of middle-class women activists and politicians and spearheaded some of the most successful feminist campaigns.

Soon after the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and the ensuing War on Terror, General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), who had overthrown a democratic government for personal preservation, propelled Pakistan into becoming a front-line ally of the USA. He had sought and won the support of liberal forces, several NGOs, and some members of women's groups to legitimize his own regime of 'Enlightened Moderation' (Zia 2018). Lahore-based historian, Ayesha Jalal's (1991) thesis about the 'convenience of subservience' of women's groups to military rulers and religion, held some relevance in the new millennium. During his decade-long rule, the only concerted challenge by progressive forces to this military rule was offered by the Lawyers' Movement (2007-2009) and the pious radicalized women of the *Jamia Hafsa* (Afzal-Khan 2008).

By the time that the 'liberal' General Musharraf amended the *Zina Law* in 2006, the War on Terror jettisoned most secular advancements made by the women's movement and privileged Muslim women's piety over all other identities, reversing the progress for autonomous feminist rights. A corpus of post 9/11 Pakistani scholarship on women dedicated itself to explore, rescue and in some cases, reinvent the agency of veiled Muslim women, even if it signified the acceptance of discrimination (Aziz 2005; Jamal 2005; Mahmood 2005; Bano 2007, 2011; Cheema and Mustafa 2009; Iqtidar 2011; Tahir 2013; Zakaria 2017, all cited in Zia 2018). This postfeminist shift opened a new chapter in gender politics, limiting transformative feminist futures, and it came predominantly from diasporic scholars and from the Lahore University of Management Sciences – mocked by some older feminists as, the Lahore University of *Madrassa* Sciences for its conservative bent (Zia 2013). It dovetailed into the interests of the US government and donors who in the post-9/11 period, relinquished to the essentialist understanding of Muslim specificity and insisted on faith-based approaches to counter religious militancy by replacing the universalist rights-based framework with an "appropriate" faith-based one for Muslims (Zia 2011). This trend cemented the connection between neo-liberal development and Islam and entrenched capitalist development as a moral cause that is mindful of "Muslim" gender relations.

In Lahore, social and political conservatism dominates all ideologies - Islamic, Sufi, and even the fledgling liberal-left intelligentsia. It is where the modern women's movement has surged its most radical confrontation against the state but also been 'conveniently subservient' to military and religious politics. Today, women's movements lean poised towards the accommodation of a female piety that has advanced its most effective, counter-feminist riposte to progressive politics.

Piety and Propriety Turn Political

The legacies of four military dictatorships continue to affect the relationship between women's movements and the state, activism, and religion. The Al-Huda movement was a societal, not state-engineered phenomenon founded in the 1990s by Dr. Farhat Hashmi, whose inspiration

⁷ USAID/Aurat Foundation Newsletter, Issue 1, Aug 2010-Jul 2011, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnaea125.pdf.

has been the Lahore-based cleric and founder of the Jamaat e Islami, Abu Ala' Mawdudi (1903-1979), and his vision for women's education. By the time of the attacks on the New York Twin Towers in 2001, this pietist women's movement peaked in its influence and institutionalized *dawa* (proselytizing) led by and for middle and upper-middle-class urban women. The movement gathered a cult-like following and invited considerable academic interest over their subjectivities in the post-9/11 period. But this romance with women's religious leadership or agency, consistently evaded their political goals and ignored the influence and effects of this exegesis on gendered control, conformity, or rights. This was an astounding suspension of intellectual analysis at a time when the women of religious parties were in leadership positions and implementing their anti-women policies and vigilantism across the country (Brohi 2006).

Over the years, the claims by piety-empowered women have made for awkward disputations of anthropological conclusions about them. Hashmi has held that marital rape is a misnomer with regard to Muslim marriages and wives should exercise their 'docile agency' and willingly consent and submit to, not resist, the sexual demands of their husbands (*Naya Daur Media* 2019). This has been met by a stoic silence over how generations of pious women have been schooled to aspire for Islamic piety while subduing their sexual agency for the prime purpose of serving Muslim men, and as indices of the virtues of an entire society. The template has encouraged the growth of women's pietist movements—some more radical than others - but the consensus that bonds them has historically been quite obviously, anti-feminist (Ahmad 2009). It was not at all unexpected then in 2018, that the new wave of women's protests called 'Aurat Marches' (Women's Marches) led by millennials and younger feminists demanding sexual and bodily rights and autonomies, were resolutely countered by the now matured female pietist politics (*Newsweek* 2020).

Reclaiming the publics from religio-political spatial restrictions has been a constant feminist endeavour. In 2005, renowned human rights defender, Asma Jahangir, organized a marathon in Lahore to highlight violence against women. In the confrontations led by religious groups who consider mixed-gender events to be unIslamic, the shirt off Asma's back was torn but she refused to be intimidated and subsequently, held another symbolic marathon-walk. In 2016, the Punjab government held a "Women on Wheels" rally and donated motorcycles to women as part of a campaign to break down gender stereotypes, with Asma participating in the celebratory event. Her role in the expansion of public space was critical since restrictions continue from the same sources, and the pretense that these are not prompted by genuine offense to piety, or that these are simply state-sponsored censure, is delusional.

The War on Terror (2001-2014) cost Pakistan an estimated 80,000 lives, an assassinated Prime Minister, the loss of hundreds of political activists, and left a traumatized populace negotiating the terrorist aftermath in mosques, shops and neighbourhoods. The deaths of some children were devalued as 'collateral damage' in the countless operations, bombings and terrorism in the tribal areas, while others were targeted and executed in deliberate cold blood in their schools. Survivors like Nobel prize winner, Malala Yousufzai, were suspected by conspiracy theorists and bitter self-acclaimed anti-imperialists across the political spectrum (Zia 2014). Since the former PM, Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007, women lawyers and human rights activists have been under constant threat for defending the rights of women and minorities. Most recently, death threats have become regular fare for women journalists who are critical of the government or state institutions, while the organizers of the Aurat March annual events have been framed with false charges of blasphemy—an offense for which the penalty is death (Farmer 2021).

The fruits of earlier movements for labour, civil and women's rights by previous generations were already rotting in the neoliberal turn. The descent was well-illustrated in protest methods in the new millennium which have been lured off the streets, into NGOs, and finally, onto twitter and Instagram from where the revolution is now virtue-signaled.

Like India, Pakistan has trapped itself between a rapacious neoliberal era that drives the vulnerable to utmost precarity, and old-world prejudices that continue to stigmatize women's economic and sexual autonomies. Weighed under multiple burdens of unpaid home, care and reproductive work, and low-waged employment, women are also carriers of male debts, blame, entitlement, and disposability. The only returns offered to them are abstract non-material ones – respect, lust, piety, honour, beauty—the kind of 'agency' that empowers them to sacrifice more – via suicide-bombings or by offering their sons for martyrdom in service of Islam/the nation, or by channeling their own bodily agency to divine virtuous ends (*Al Jazeera* 2021, Afzal-Khan 2022).

In the post 9/11 period, Muslim women's piety received celebratory attention (Mahmood 2005) but their sexual desires and expressions were ignored. Some literalist readers insist that these are not oppositional standpoints but repeatedly, post secular scholars have privileged virtue and piety to draw attention to a limited set of bodily practices but ignored how Muslim women were treated as disembodied subjects and at the receiving end of religious violence. In this period, no authoritative theses on violence and terrorism against Pakistani women has been authored while dozens of tracts on piety flood the western markets. Challenges to "western liberalism" and "secular feminism" and evasions over how piety is the direct tool to tame socio-sexual disobedience and preserve gender stability come primarily from diasporic, or Lahore-based scholars.

Sex and Subversion

While Munto's prose was an ode to the underclasses and prostitutes, feminist Urdu novelist Ismat Chughtai too, explored the theme of women's sexualities. Her short-story *Lihaaf* (1942), which appeared in a Lahore-based literary journal, *Adab-i-Latif*, was said to have been inspired by the rumoured same-sex affair of a sexually discontent Aligarh begum and her masseuse. On the eve of Partition, in 1945, both writers faced the consequences of puritanical anxiety—a combination of Victorian judicial attitudes and modernist Islamic respectability (*ikhlaqiaat*)—when the Lahore High Court summoned them on charges for obscenity. Three quarters of a century later, this legacy continues as the LHC hears cases filed against the 'offensive' protests of women who demand bodily autonomy under the slogan of '*Mera Jisam Meri Marzi*' (My Body, My Choice).

Partition itself was a fratricidal migration - a material and metaphysical separation of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim men who memorialized the trauma by inflicting sexual punishment against each other's women. Post-partition, constructing a Pakistani identity became a matter of national survival and Muslim women remained the prime resource for this project. The prescribed behaviour for them was patented by Ashraf Ali Thanawi in his best-selling fin de siècle advice text, *Bahishti Zewar* (1904-5)—a primer for Muslim women's ethical code which was then folded into the 1937 Shariat Act.

In the first three decades of Pakistan's founding, the progressive vision of women leaders and the paternalistic military rule of General Ayub Khan, tilted towards modern women's rights (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987; Saigol 2016). After a period of seven decades however, Thanawian and Maududian piety has blossomed at societal levels and is a counter-cultural turn defended by several Lahori/Punjabi scholars and intellectuals, as well as by the redeemed pietist populist Prime

Minister, Imran Khan (2018-2022). The only real resistance to all this has been offered by individual women who challenge male sexual privilege.

In 2011, fashion model and actor, Veena Malik, was admonished by a cleric, Mufti Qavi, on a TV programme for “disgracing Pakistani” and Islam by her inappropriate dress and for being flirtatious on an Indian reality show. Malik had already stirred nationalist anxiety by modeling nude for an Indian magazine cover, with the Pakistani spy agency acronym, ‘ISI’ tattooed on her body (*The Express Tribune*, 2011). Despite considerable public support for her articulate defense, the subsequent pressure on Veena Malik directed her to the path of religio-nationalist redemption which several other celebrities/artists had followed.

The cleric in this case had a continuing role. By 2015, another subversive woman demanding sexual autonomy was social media sensation, Fouzia Azeem alias Qandeel Baloch, who rose to unconventional stardom despite her working-class status (Maher 2018). Originally from Dera Ghazi Khan, it was in Lahore that Qandeel debuted her dream to become a star—a career for which she left her rural marriage and newborn son which conventional forces had coerced her into. She represented a generational shift in the approach to women’s rights issues and acquired a celebrity pseudonym, a mobile phone and under an expanding media, became a new-generation professional—a ‘social media celebrity’ (Bari and Khan 2017). She earned the wrath of audiences because she asserted and flaunted her sexuality with defiance and abandon. In one social media post, Qandeel promised to perform a strip dance if the Islamic Republic won a cricket match against archenemy, India. By this deft pledge, she subverted the traditional notion of national honour and redefined the South Asian practice of forced naked parades of women to shame or disgrace them for alleged sexual transgressions. Pakistani puritans could not make out how to tame this woman who flaunted her body in the Islamic Republic and offered her sexuality as a national duty.

Her risqué online posts and outrageous innuendo-laden political comments landed her on a televised appearance with the same cleric, Mufti Qavi. Many believe this triggered a broader patriarchal anxiety that prompted Qandeel Baloch’s brother to murder her in 2016 as a self-professed act of honour. The murder forced a turn in the narrative around sexuality, honour crimes and gender normativity and led to an amendment in the Prevention of Honour Crime law (2016).

In contrast to Veena Malik’s choice to become the pious and patriotic voice of nationhood, Qandeel forfeited marriage, undressed, and her performances challenged religious actors and exposed their double-standard hypocrisies. Veena won salvation because she now seduces believers into piety and nationalism, while Qandeel paid with her life for asserting and encouraging female sexual independence. Such expressions of defiance are not simple individual cases of sexpositivity but they unsettle the implicit code in conservative Muslim contexts that defines women’s sexuality as a permanent potential force of *fitna* (chaos through seduction or sexual subversion/sedition of the religious order), if not tamed or controlled by marriage, law, or male guardians (Mernissi 1991).

The vulnerabilities of sexually assertive women, gay, lesbian, intersex or transgender individuals who challenge patriarchal models of sexuality and disrupt binary gender ideologies are best exemplified in Qandeel’s fate. The victory of an amended law that potentially circumvented Islamic provision of forgiveness has been short-lived, as her brother has recently been acquitted by the Supreme Court.

Chastened by Virtue and Violence

As video footage of Ayesha Akram's attempts to escape the mob assault at Minar e Pakistan circulated widely, there was some outrage from civil society but also, a myriad of misogynistic reactions and allegations that the incident was a faked performance. Over the last 75 years, women in public spaces, including on digital sites, have become conscious targets of sexual violence in Pakistan, particularly those who threaten the patriarchal gendered and sexual orders. Following each case of a survivor or victim of exceptional brutality, the commentaries around them represent persistent nationalist anxieties that continue to plague Pakistan.

One such bearer of ideological confusion has been the Lahore-based cricketer and international playboy, Imran Khan, who had been drifting in the political wilderness for 22 years, waiting for providence to appoint him Prime Minister of the country. For the Pakistan army, Imran Khan presented the appropriate alternative to the two mainstream parties as someone possessing all the qualities of the *Javanmard*—the youthful brave man who exemplifies the Sufi ideal of moral and chivalrous masculinity. By the time of the 2018 General Election, real politics was obstructing the virtual hopes of young people looking for an incorruptible leader, so the military did the heavy lifting of getting Khan's party (Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf) on to 'the same page' and into government.

The current military establishment seems fully convinced that it has catapulted beyond physical, guerilla or even proxy warfare and into a "fifth-generation" stage of combat. Understood as the battle of perceptions and information, the concept assumes responsibility for a cultural and moral defense and corrective against any narrative or philosophy that disagrees with state-defined religio-nationalism. This has changed the concept of the battlefield, the soldier, the patriot, traitor and intelligence. The main weapon of this new warfare seems to be visuals and the selfie—with patriotic veiled women and with tea-drinking captured enemy combatants (*The News* 2019).

If the battlefield is the national psyche, then new characters, iconography and rhetorical devices need to be cast. For the 'Fifth Generation' script, traditional mascots have been replaced now with celebrity-spokespeople and cultural production. Proxy war is a term that now applies to the managed Twitter handle of the redeemed actress, Veena Malik. No longer restricted to clumsy military-funded films that demonize politicians and ethnic minorities as undependable traitors, a host of wholesome themed TV dramas are sponsored by the Public Relations arm of the Intelligence Services and beamed into Pakistani homes on a regular basis. The script writers of these are mostly contemporary women authors, such as the Lahore-based, Umera Ahmed, whose work comprises of a genre of spiritual or contemporary reformist literature that falls within the broader culture of Islamic hagiography.

Ahmed is best known for her popular Urdu best-selling story *Pir e Kamil* (The Perfect Mentor, 2003-2004) and other block-buster TV drama adaptations. The recurring plot of these stories involves the trials faced by the Muslim woman protagonist, usually in the form of failures in marriages due to lapsed spiritual self-awareness. Rather than challenging the unjust male dominant societal system, she typically lives a cycle of patience and suffering, and it is religious education, pietist practice and eventually, forgiveness by those who have been unjust to the unwitting woman that earn her redemption. Male piety is linked to the rejection of unIslamic secular careers like, interest-based banking, and morality overall is linked to geopolitics. At least one of these drama production houses is headed by a feminist with an impressive record of past political dissent.

Piety-performing celebrities and patriotic influencers sustain this script with their massive followings on Twitter and not coincidentally, many of these patriotic and pious celebrities, designers, 'journalists', and even Imran Khan's religious advisor and juris consult, Tariq Jameel, are from Lahore. The consumer-citizen is entertained while discredited political leaders are expected to deliver miraculous material services with little resources and find imaginative ways to appease their constituents.

Imran Khan's party represents a middle-class aspirational affect and actual pietist sensibilities that have peaked in the form of a politics that is performative, consumerist and overlaps with the views of conservative Islamists. The climate of conservatism and censorship during his governance evoked memories of the oppressive era of General Zia's 'Islamic' dictatorship. Under Khan's governance, Ahmedis have been targeted for persecution, universities were issued directives for women students to observe the Arabic dress code of the *abaya*, and his government amended the Family Laws to include a clause in the Nikahnama (marital contract) that requires the parties to take an oath of belief in the finality of prophet-hood. Already a requirement for applications for passports, such biopolitics aim to prevent heterodox beliefs.

Khan's government conferred national awards to the Lahore-based celebrity-singer and loyal supporter, Ali Zafar, even as the latter was in litigation in a contentious case of sexual harassment of singer-artist, Meesha Shafi (*BBC News* 2018). As PM, he recommended the need to 'weed out foreign cultural influences such as those observed in the Aurat March' (*Dawn* 2020 a). Khan and his ministers indulged in sexist and religious slurs and mimicked and parodied opposition leaders. Committed to turning Pakistan into a pietist state (*Riyasat e Medina*), Khan dismissed 'khooni (blood thirsty) liberals' and despaired of feminism as a western concept that degrades motherhood. He held vulgarity and increasing obscenity responsible for the increase in sexual violence, as 'inspired by India, Hollywood and Bollywood'.

Despite this, women are vocal defenders of Khan's leadership and are genuine politicized actors, but this uncritical 'agency' is dismissed by postsecular scholars as false consciousness—an opinion they reject for Islamist and pious women. I have often categorized the hegemonic patriarchal sources of feminist causes as simply, Men, Money, Mullahs and the Military but in 2020, PM Khan summarized Pakistani Muslim male anxiety aptly in an interview, where he identified the three main causes of sex crimes to be 'sex, drugs, and rock and roll'. By its fourth turbulent year, Khan's government was simply a litany of pietist, populist and predatory politics that some found reminiscent of the darkest days of Pakistan's military dictatorships.

The hypermasculinist governance of Imran Khan with its sponsorship of Muslim gendered propriety also created an enabling environment for victim-blaming. This has legal, policy and strategic implications. In 2020, the Lahore Capital City Police Officer, Umar Sheikh blamed the Lahore motorway gang-rape victim for her choice to drive out late at night with her children (*Geo TV* 2020). In 2021, Khan invited international reproach for his comments relating women's clothes to sex crimes (*BBC News* 2020). His religious advisor, Tariq Jameel claimed that women's immodesty invited the scourge of the Covid-19 pandemic (*Dawn* 2020 b).

The marketplace of activism encourages performative protest politics. This has resulted in periodic competitive outbursts of online outrage but not taking action for justice or developing consensus around prevention and punishment in cases of violence or over sexual freedoms in an Islamic Republic. Contradictory, self-promotional opinions offer half-baked remedies without proposing changes in legal recourse or confronting religio-cultural tribalism. Several of Lahore's 'scholar-activists' are part of this performativity and invest their careers in banal "anti-state" tweets as proof of their progressive credentials. This is now considered a sign of courage—a long way

from the Asma Jahangir and WAF modes of feminist praxis. Sadly, this feeds the state's own paranoia about a 'Fifth Generation' warfare and this mutuality of purposes has plummeted political discourse rock-bottom.

Landscapes of Minorities

Another popular site of Hindu female divinity in Lahore was the Shitala Mandir nestled between two historical gateways, Shahalami and Lohari. Here the diety of Durga Devi, reputed as healer of poxes and sores, drew the afflicted of all faiths, including Muslim women. This three-story dilapidated temple was allotted to a cleric after Partition from where he ran the madrassa, Noor-ul-Quran. In 1992, nearly 30 temples in Pakistan were targeted for reprisal attacks for the felling of the Babri masjid by Hindu zealots in Ayodhya, India. The Shitala Mandir/Noor madrassa was one of these, where the students in an act of inexplicable auto-sadism and encouraged by their Qari, destroyed the temple's dilapidating tower (Khalid 2016). The Bhadra Kali Mandir in Niaz Baig, a 19th-century Hindu temple dedicated to the Goddess Kali, narrowly escaped a similar fate since it had been earlier converted into a mosque and then a school. The founder prevented mobs from attacking it by appealing to nationalist tolerance and secular pragmatism (Khalid and Warriach 2019).

Over the years, the minorities of Pakistan - religious, ethnic, sexual, secular and liberal – have been successively erased from national relevance or muted. In 2014, a survey⁸ found that only 20 Hindu temples out of 428 across the country were operational, with the remaining leased for commercial and residential purposes by the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB). Some of these temples have been Islamized into madrassas, others secularized into schools and many capitalized for profit. The Kali Bari Hindu Temple for example, has been rented out to Muslim proprietors in Dera Ismail Khan and converted – without seeming irony - into the Taj Mahal Hotel.

Over the years, the script of mono-culturalism has plunged the nation towards a series of tragic inter-faith ends via twisted plots. In 2014, not far from Lahore, in the town of Kot Radha Kishan, in the Islamic Republic, a Christian couple Shama and Shazad, were tortured for alleged blasphemy by a mob that scorched their working-class bodies in the brick kiln where they were employed. This macabre theme of pyromania extends in more farcical and perverse ways. According to the Hindu temple survey, officers of the colonial-era Frontier Constabulary with the assistance of the Evacuation Board, also occupied the *Shamshan Ghaat* (crematory) in Madina Colony of Dera Ismail Khan. This means that Hindus are unable to cremate their dead and instead, are compelled to bury them in graveyards in a gesture of forced multi-faith final resting (*The Express Tribune* 2012). The perverse logic seems to be to burn minorities alive, while denying them the right to burn their dead. The Weberian capitalist principle compensates pious Muslims for posthumous pollutant proximity to a non-Muslim in the graveyard – an offense which otherwise motivates regular exhumations of Hindu corpses and desecration of Ahmedi graves.

Not far west of Lahore, at Nankana Sahib, even non-Sikh women who are supplicating for pregnancy⁹ (more specifically, a son) are seen paying respects at the *Gurdwaras* (Sikh shrines). This cross-cultural source of patriarchal benediction does not absolve or protect such sites from ecclesiastical greed or sexual control—both aspirations deploy mob violence. In 2020, in retaliation for the reporting of the alleged kidnapping and conversion of the daughter of the

⁸ Conducted by the All Pakistan Hindu Rights Movement (PHRM), <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/95-of-all-hindu-temples-in-pakistan-have-been-destroyed-or-converted-since-1990.348047/>.

⁹ Though primarily linked to Islamic tradition, the importance of fertility in shrine worship is well documented.

Gurdwara's granthi (keeper), a mob led by the alleged Muslim abductor's family threatened to evict the Sikh community (Metrosaga 2020). The project of mono-culturalism in both, India and Pakistan, is driven by a nativism which construes religion as hosted by both nations to be ontological resources of security to the threatened Hindu/Muslim woman, respectively.

Sex, Shrines, and Stoicism

Lahore's sacred geographies are also gendered. The city has been host to the shrine of Piro—the 19th century woman Sufi poet and sexual defiant saint affiliated with the spiritual figure of Gulab Das—in Kasur district of Lahore. In keeping with the philosophy of status-humility, Piro claims the identity of a Sura Vesva (lower caste) and courtesan/prostitute (Vesva) (Kalra and Purewal 2020). After Partition, Piro's tomb went into disrepair as the sexual saint was doubly devalued—due to her Hindu affiliation in Pakistan's Punjab and caste irrelevance in Indian Punjab. The ruined shrine has recently disappeared from its site altogether, signifying the muting of defiant sexual women.

In the 1960s, as part of its modernization project, the Pakistani state nationalized many shrines, removed shrine responsibility from hereditary custodians and put them under the management of the provincial *Auqafs* (property/endowments departments). Unlike wives of Emperors, the hagiographic site of Bibi Pak Daman's shrine in Lahore is attributed to the generic 'pure and virtuous woman' - a spiritual figure that defies ideological homogeneity (Kalra and Bin Ibad 2019). When Bibi's shrine was taken over by the Punjab government in 1967, it sparked sectarian contestations between Sunnis and Shias where the latter claimed it to be the site of burial of the daughter of Caliph Ali, but it was resolved and the site continues to be a multi-purpose site for Muharram celebrations and for the annual *Urs* (pilgrimage). Today, while mere mortal women of trade unions and the Lady Health Workers routinely and doggedly stage protests for miniscule wage hikes on the roads of Lahore, Bibi's alms-earnings compete quite fiercely with her male competition nearby—the more famous and state-sponsored one of Data Ganj Bakhsh Sahib.

The political-pious nexus of the sacred geographies of shrines remains significant and thick. If Benazir Bhutto broke the glass ceiling of patriarchal politics in Pakistan, then the third and current wife of PM Imran Khan, known as Bushra Bibi or by the spiritual term, 'Pirni', has revived the relevance of women's role in mysticism and disturbed the male Sufi-political order. However, the intersectional influence of gender, devotional piety and politics can be managed by secular limitations. Benazir Bhutto's piety did not inhibit her political defiance of Islamists' opposition to women's rights, the signing of Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, or her rights-based policies and commitment to the empowerment of women.

If gender is performed through religious practices, and virtue-seeking is the expression of Muslim women's alternative agency, then Bushra Imran is not just exemplary of the female pious/political journey but during Khan's governance, has controlled the affective imaginary of Sufi politics as lead devotee of the shrine of Baba Farid Ganjshakar. Rumours circulate that the keys to the *Behishti Darwaza* (the Gate of Heaven), which is only opened once a year at the *Urs* of Baba Farid, are in the possession of the spiritual Bushra even though, the *sajda nasheen* or hereditary keeper can only ever be male. There is a sizeable monetary cost for opening this door and devotees disapprove of the Auqaf department's involvement and reportedly, there are also tensions over the role of Bushra Bibi due to her gender.

How Bushra Imran achieved her saintliness is mysterious and while she is not a spiritual inheritor (*gadhi nashin*) she offers a gendered emotional labour that has confounded Pakistan's progressive community which has defended the pietist virtue-seeking agency that Pakistani

diasporic scholar, Saba Mahmood, popularized. Several Lahore/Punjab scholars defend this supposed push-back to 'western liberal-secular feminism' (Zia 2018). Now that the piety of virtuous women has spilled over into the public (with the empowered women of the Jamia Hafsa, Minhaj ul Quran and others), the outrage of the defenders of piety is completely muted. Worse, some feminists who had reclaimed the streets in 2018 under the banner of Aurat March, have retreated after the backlash from pietist groups (Zia 2022). The Lahore chapter of the Aurat March remains defiant but political naiveté and snarky defensiveness on the part of a younger generation seems the only response to the consequences of ignored forewarnings about the inevitability of this path.

The transgressive potential of shrines has always been over-deterministic from the time of colonial anthropology yet, many Pakistani liberals celebrate shrines and piety practices as proof of pluralism and invest hope in them as the symbiosis of sacred and secular power. While shrines remain the refuge of Khwaja Siras, not all are accepting of non-heteronormativity, and many are gender segregated. One sublime example of Lahore's segues between the secular and the sacred is offered by the Pir Makki shrine near Data Sahib. Kalra and Purewal (2020) find that older devotees refer to the word 'Makki' in relation to the offering of *makai da dana* (corn kernel) at the shrine as the preferred food of the pir but purists object and insist that the name 'Makki' was not due to dietary preference but comes from the fact that the pir visited Mecca (pronounced 'Makka') before coming to Lahore. Kalra and Purewal make a case for the elusiveness of popular devotion that slips between the state's theocratic ambitions and civil society's secular disdain, but they underestimate the benefits of piety as a politically conservative resource.

It so happens that one religious functionary who was assigned Friday prayer-reading at the mosque attached to the Pir Makki shrine was Khadim Rizvi, who was dismissed from his government employment due to his support for Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of the former Governor of the Punjab, Salmaan Taseer for alleged blasphemy. This cleric of the Barelvi order gained significant popular support around the issue of blasphemy and his persecutorial campaign against the declared-heretic Ahmedi community became a convenient tool of the state to build pressure against Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, in 2017 to make way for Imran Khan.

Piety politics is the 'B' team of religious orthodoxy and women's pietist agency has been successfully and completely co-opted by the state, shattering the myth that some liberal-secular denomination and intelligentsia prevail, as falsely projected by postsecular scholars. The window of inclusivity has practically shuttered across all institutions and classes, yet many insist that it is external factors, modern anxieties, and some imagined undefined secularism that forecloses freedoms and justice in the Islamic Republic.

Paradoxes, Past and Present

Lahore's Kasur district is surrounded by brick kilns and tanneries and has hundreds of small factories producing shoes and embroideries, all of which employ children. In 2015, a porn ring was raided by the police recovering some 400 videos of sexual abuse involving at least 280 children - some reportedly forced at gunpoint. The ring has been linked with the rape and murder of 6-year-old Zainab in 2018. The paradox of piety is best illustrated by the fact that Pakistan is one of the leading consumers of online pornography (Park 2013).

Several of Lahore's artists have been acclaimed international artists, including Shazia Sikander, Salman Toor, and Rashid Rana. Rana's brilliant oeuvre includes the 'Veil' series which consists of seemingly pixelated images of women wearing the burqa but on closer look, these images are micro-mosaics of miniature stills of hard-core local pornography (Spencer 2017). This

juxtaposition aims to interrupt orientalist tropes of Muslim women but is also a commentary on the dehumanizing props of veils and pornography that objectify women in equal measure. Rana recalls how this series was not displayed in America for fear of offending Muslim sensibilities, while Hong Kong galleries objected to the pornographic content – thus confirming the political efficacy of his message.

Heterodoxy is now clearly equated with blasphemy and the role of social media has influenced the way that religious conflict can be sourced from a keyboard now. Islamist hate-preaching has cemented an effective nexus between conservative legal communities - the fact that the majority of blasphemy cases are Punjab-centric is another under-examined feature. In 2020, a video for a music album shot in Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore went viral and provoked outrage and blasphemy allegations for irreverence at a holy site (*The News* 2020). The clip shows the actor-couple contracting marriage at the mosque after which, without music or dancing, the girl takes a twirl. In response to the indignation, three groundkeepers of the mosque were fired, and the video actors had to issue online apologies. Moral offense now extends to monuments and public spaces are becoming prohibitively sacralized, too.

Throughout the Zia years, public visibility of women was eclipsed with the assistance of Dr. Israr Ahmed's prescriptions on gender apartheid broadcast from the Lahore TV studio—which was once blockaded by the women of WAF Lahore, in protest of his misogynistic preaching. In 1996, Benazir Bhutto's government attempted to reverse General Zia's theocratization by passing the Abolition of Whipping Act but within two decades, in 2014, right outside the Lahore High Courts, Farzana Parveen was stoned to death by her family for marrying of her own choice (*Dawn* 2014). In 2020, a woman was gang-raped on the Lahore motorway in front of her children and blamed by the police chief for driving out late at night. Targets of male sanctioning—from mocking, satirizing, staring, groping, harassing, stripping and parading, to rape and murder, Pakistan's women have been subjected to heightened punitive violence. The extreme expression of this manifests in mob sexual violence like the kind directed at Ayesha, the Tik Tok artist.

Performative piety can serve as an effective decoy against material-based responsibilities. Repentance can turn the lapsed subject into a virtuous one; it wins votes and has a market share, but the piety industry is not a gender-equal playing field. Many argue that Imran Khan promoted General Zia ul Haq's attempts to Saudi Arabize Pakistan except that, after 75 years, it is not the theocratic state but societal piety that is the driver towards this goal, and Lahore and greater Punjab is the stage across which such sacred games are being played out most convincingly.

Authoritarian and military regimes have always motivated Pakistan's feminists to ramp up their resistance. In light of the renegeing of civil, political, and pluralistic rights that have been outlined above, the secular Women's Action Forum has recently called an urgent meeting of all its chapters across the country to be convened in Lahore in late 2022. Increasingly, this organized method of feminist advocacy has become infrequent due to lack of resources and flagging energies of the vanguard of the more radical feminists of the 1980s. But the agenda for the planned convention reflects an interesting mix of issues that mirrors an overall generational turn in feminist politics. While economic issues, religious discrimination, and the securitized state remain firmly centered, the subject of sexual identities is itemized in a more determined manner than before. Whether the contradictions of sexual and pietist politics are candidly acknowledged and robustly debated at this meeting, and strategic methods of resistance for feminist ends devised for the current peak religio-conservative climate, remains to be seen.

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