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Repainting Silence: Feminist Counter-Histories in Pakistani Women's Art

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ABSTRACT

This literature review will examine how contemporary and historical Pakistani female artists construct counter-histories through visual storytelling in the face of repression and erasure. Rather than focusing solely on state law or religious decrees, as existing literature does, it highlights the deeper social structures that normalize marginalization. Hence, this paper will shift the lens to social structures that predate and produce political repression and how female artists combat them. It explores how patriarchal ideals — izzat (honor), purdah (veil), and domesticity — shape public perception and define women's visibility in art and society. Through this framework, the paper demonstrates how artists utilize their brushes as a means of countering both political power and cultural expectations, transforming personal struggles into acts of collective resistance.

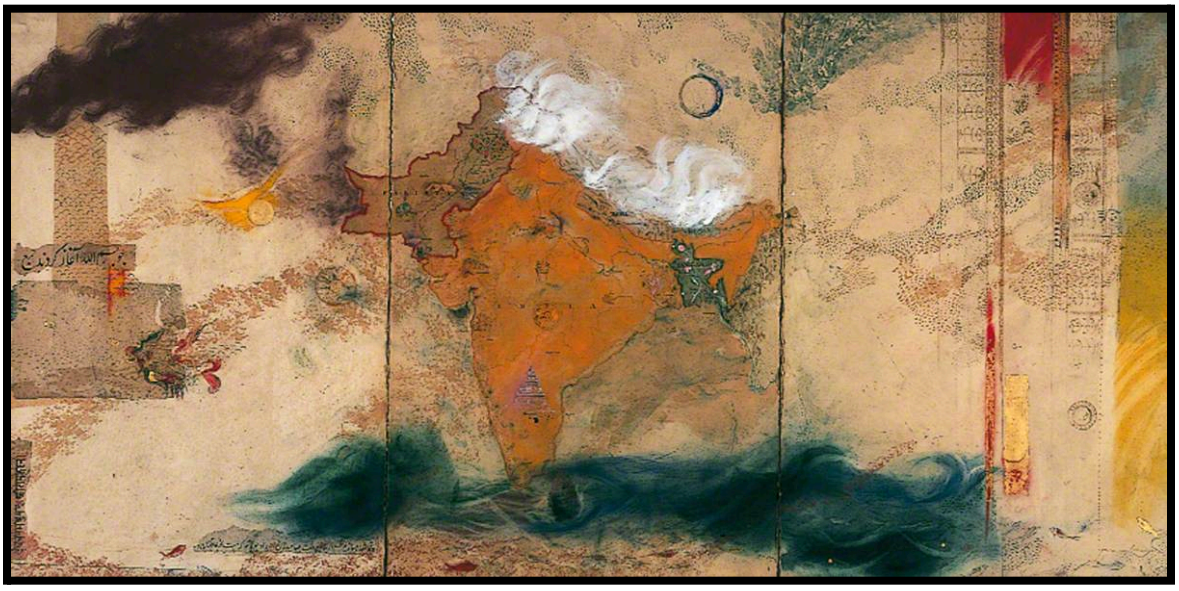

Figure 1. Salima Hashmi, Zones of Dreams (1996), mixed media triptych. The work visualizes the trauma of partition and Pakistan's fractured identity via contrasting color and cartographic distortion.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the map on which Salima Hashmi outlines the "Zones of Dreams" (Fig. 1) appears just that, a mere map. However, cloaked in rusted orange and hemmed in by an angry red border, it sits in stark contrast to a brighter, bolder India. It becomes a lament to a bleeding Pakistan, a nation shattered by the partition, hardened by militarization, and darkened by decades of tragedy. Hashmi's work captures what state-sanctioned historical narratives often omit: how Pakistan's political and cultural landscape has left it isolated, both intellectually and politically.

This opening gesture is part of a wider feminist practice that this literature review examines. It will examine how contemporary and historical Pakistani female artists construct counter-histories through visual storytelling in the face of repression and erasure. Existing literature often centers on legal or theological frameworks; this review instead foregrounds the deeper social structures that normalize marginalization. Hence, this paper will shift the lens to social structures that predate and produce political repression and how female artists combat them. It explores how core patriarchal ideals—*izzat* (honor), purdah (the veil as social boundary), and domesticity—shape public perception and define women's visibility in art and society. Through this framework, the paper demonstrates how artists utilize their brushes as a means of countering both political power and cultural expectations, transforming personal struggles into acts of collective resistance.

To ground this review in a clear and representative account of feminist counter-histories, the selection of artists and artworks here follows three guiding principles. First, each of these women holds a significant place within Pakistan's artistic landscape—whether through ongoing public engagement, international exhibitions, or established scholarly recognition. Second, the chosen works collectively showcase a wide range of visual strategies used by women to build counter-histories, including performance, mixed media, installation, miniature painting, and digital experimentation. This variety is crucial for capturing the different methods women artists use to challenge gendered, cultural, and political constraints. Finally, their shared symbolic language—facelessness, fragmentation, the veil, and the reuse of domestic tools—provides a consistent analytical thread that helps this review trace how visual motifs serve as forms of resistance. Instead of aiming for a comprehensive survey of Pakistani women artists, this review highlights key figures whose work most clearly reveals the processes of erasure, resistance, and counter-memory that structure the feminist artistic tradition in Pakistan. Understanding these artistic interventions requires situating them within Pakistan's broader political and cultural context, where persistent policing of freedom and women's visibility has shaped the conditions in which art is made.

Since its creation in 1947 through the violent Partition of British India, Pakistan's history has been shaped by cycles of political instability and contested identity formation.[1] Successive military coups and authoritarian rule overshadowed early hopes for pluralism. The dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s marked a pivotal moment, where cultural repression was institutionalized under the banner of

[1] Sadia Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoo, "Feminism in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis of Women's Paintings in Punjab," *Punjab Culture* 1, no.1 (Jan–Jun 2021): 1–20.

Islamisation. Laws curtailed women's rights and freedom of expression. (see section historical and political context for further elaboration)

Women were forced to wear the veil on state television, and censorship laws silenced dissent in both media and art. These state-led efforts fused patriarchal control with religious rhetoric, inspiring both fear and resistance, forming the backdrop for women's artistic resistance.

Art in Pakistan quickly evolved into an act of rebellion, challenging both cultural and political repression. Under General Zia, censorship laws deemed only landscape and calligraphy acceptable artistic genres, effectively silencing forms of expression that deviated from state-approved narratives. Yet nearly every recorded female Pakistani artist ignored these restrictions.[2] Before we turn towards specific artistic practices, it is significant to trace how feminist resistance has developed across Pakistan's cultural history.

Understanding this longer trajectory also complicates the idea that women's artistic resistance is purely symbolic or culturally contained. The cumulative visibility of women's art across generations suggests a gradual and significant cultural shift, despite patriarchal systems historically absorbing certain gestures of dissent without structural change. The idiom of feminist critique that contemporary artists like Salima Hashmi and Lala Rukh established—whether through miniature painting, installation, or digital media—continues to expand. Their work not only documents repression but also normalizes women's authorship, public presence, and interpretive authority within Pakistan's art world. In this sense, contemporary feminist art participates in a lineage that both reflects and shapes evolving social norms, offering insights into how cultural resistance may eventually influence political imaginaries and gendered expectations more broadly. Against this backdrop, the work of individual women artists becomes a lens for examining how these strategies of resistance take visual form.

Figures like Aisha Khalid, working within the historically male-dominated tradition of miniature painting, used the medium to subvert expectations. Khalid's work critically engages with the veil, a symbol that patriarchal forces have repeatedly weaponized during and after the Islamisation era. This collective resistance culminated in the 1983 manifesto, signed by 15 leading women artists, including Salima Hashmi, asserting their visibility and agency within society. Although institutions like the Punjab University's College of Art and Design had predominantly female departments, women continued to be seen not as artists of merit but merely as educators, further underscoring the need for their persistent assertion of presence through art. [3]

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

One of the bloodiest migrations in recorded history marked the birth of Pakistan in 1947. With survival taking precedence over expression, the rich artistic legacy of the Mughal Empire was sidelined as the empire rebuilt a fragmented society and economy.

[2] Salima Hashmi, "An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan," *India International Centre Quarterly* 24, no.2/3 (1997): 230.
[3] Hashmi, "An Intelligent Rebellion,": 233.

The decade following the partition brought enormous challenges: disputes over rivers, an unfair division of assets by India, and the task of amalgamating a diverse group of people into one single nation. Establishing nationalism and absorbing nearly two million refugees was paramount. In 1949, Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan introduced the Objectives Resolution, making Islam the foremost determinant of the constitution, which fractured the secular vision, contradicting Jinnah's declaration of religious tolerance. [4]

Ayub Khan seized power in 1958, introducing the presidential system of Basic Democracies. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) offered women limited rights to divorce and curbed polygamy. However, his refusal to support Fatima Jinnah's candidacy in 1964 revealed enduring patriarchal resistance.[5] While his "Decade of Development" modernized industry, women's public mobility remained curtailed, with male guardianship shaping access to work, travel, and even passports.

Ayub Khan's regime came to an end in 1973, with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto becoming the new Prime Minister. After the 1971 war, Bhutto spearheaded the 1973 Constitution, which guaranteed gender equality[6], reserved 10 seats for women in the National Assembly, and created a Women's Development Ministry (1976). He was seen to walk the centrist path.

General Zia-ul-Haq overthrew Bhutto in 1977, imposing martial law, declaring "nizam-e-mustafa" as his guiding policy. He instituted Sharia courts, Islamic finance, and revised textbooks. Television and film faced censorship for "un-Islamic" content; many artists emigrated or silenced themselves. State propaganda urged a strict gender role. The Hudood Ordinances (1979), particularly the Zina Ordinance, blurred distinctions between rape and adultery, resulting in women victims facing lashes and imprisonment, while convictions of perpetrators were rare. Women with unexplained pregnancies were publicly lashed in addition to their incarceration, leading to increased miscarriages as a result of the trauma inflicted. During this law, no person, man or woman, was killed as death sentences were often revoked.

The Law of Evidence (1984) devalued women's testimony to be worth half that of a man in the court of law and required four male witnesses in rape cases. Enforced in the 1980s, the Press and Publication Ordinance imposed heavy censorship, particularly on the press, resulting in the arrest of many journalists. Publishers could be penalised for any "objectionable" content. The female body was heavily regulated, with all government employees, parliamentarians, news anchors, and celebrities required to wear the hijab. In schools, girls above the age of 12 were to wear chadors, the sari was condemned, and female literacy stagnated.

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[4] Mr. Jinnah's presidential address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, August 11th, 1947: **"You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State."**

[5] Naveeda and Musarat, "Women's Struggle for Legal Empowerment in Pakistan.": He claimed **'in a Muslim country, a woman cannot be head of state.'**

[6] Article 25-27 outlawing sex discrimination.

The tide shifted in 1988, when Benazir Bhutto became the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority country. Her government repealed censorship, promised welfare reforms, and created women-focused ministries. The government amended the Criminal Procedure Code in 1992, allowing police to detain women overnight only with the consent of a male relative. She positioned herself as a symbol of cultural liberalization, though her administration faced criticism for corruption.

In contrast, Nawaz Sharif's governments[7] oscillated between economic liberalism and religious conservatism. Government services and police still required a male relative for many permissions, despite the one change in 1992. The Qisas and Diyat Act (1997) even privatises honor killings, allowing perpetrators to escape justice.

Against this backdrop of volatile leadership, one alternating between modernity and conservatism, a generation of women artists began to challenge the existing narratives that sought to silence them.

CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

No analysis of Pakistani women's art is complete without grappling with the cultural constraints that have long oppressed and erased women — constraints that are deeply woven into the social fabric. Even before and beyond formal laws or religious commands, these ingrained ideals, such as izzat (honor) and expectations of domesticity, create a climate where women's presence in public life is limited. Past scholarship critiques overt political and religious repression, but cultural structures normalise marginalization. Female artists in Pakistan have effectively responded by using visual art to challenge these patriarchal conventions.

Malik and Aamir connect the development of an "aesthetic of retaliation" to the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, where artists "resisted censorship" with protest imagery to "rekindle hope."[8] Similarly, Salima Hashmi recalls the co-signing of the Women's Artists Manifesto in 1983, in which female artists explicitly rejected state repression. Much of the literature highlights this Zia era as the catalyst for feminist artistic activism, with censorship and state laws functioning as external triggers. Yet, such constraints predated and outlasted any single regime. Even today, "patriarchal notions of purdah (veil) and izzat (honor) continue to define Pakistani women's lives,"[9] dictating acceptable behavior across both public and private realms.

Sadia Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoor complicate state-centered readings by emphasizing feminism as a constellation of personal resistances shaped by lived context. [10] Their regional focus adds nuance to the national narrative. They argue religion and tradition constrain, but also supply symbols for subversion. In a comparable vein, Mary Jo Aagerstoun and Elissa Auther, writing in a global context, observe through a more structural lens: when women's bodies are policed and voices muffled, art often shifts into a more

[7] 1990–93, 1997–99.
[8] Aqsa Malik and Naela Aamir, "The Aesthetic of Retaliation and Its Contribution to Society," :115–34.
[9] Iffat Ali Aksar, "Virtual Manifestations of Patriarchy: Digital Experience of Pakistani Women,": 61.
[10] Sadia Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoo, "Feminism in Pakistan,":1–20.

encoded register.[11] This aligns with the idea that the "conditions of production" - the cultural and social ground rules - dictate the forms that women's rebellion in art will take.

Broadening this conversation, some researchers link these local patriarchal norms to larger historical and ideological structures. Advocating a decolonial feminist framework, Sadia P. Kamran acknowledges layers of oppression and misrepresentation stemming from colonial history, nationalist ideologies, and global narratives. She stresses that larger legitimate narratives of Pakistani women were notoriously cast as "miserable, second-grade citizens of the third world", a trope that reduces them to pitiful, voiceless victims.[12] Kamran presents a case that local cultural and religious systems have traditionally placed women high in status - e.g., in Islam, women are treated as followers of Fatima, and in the South Asian Hindu context, they are equated to goddesses.[13] If anything, the stage is now set for a political-ideological, decolonial feminist narrative: one in which Pakistani women are not passive victims, but inheritors of a legacy who have defined themselves through their strength and contributions, rather than through external perceptions.

Kamran positions the question of "Who am I?" for Pakistani women in a post-colonial, multi-dimensional construct. In today's Pakistan, as Kamran points out, identity is strongly politicized and exists concerning historically charged contingencies like colonialism as well as religion and socio-political upheaval. Women artists began to place their personal and collective identity at the forefront of who they are. Notably, Kamran situates identity formation amid historically charged contingencies like colonialism as well as religion and socio-political upheaval, including the Islamization policies and military rules that have punctuated Pakistan's history.

In highlighting patriarchal nationalism, she essentially states that "in Pakistan, feminism didn't [only] seek equal rights for women" in the Western limited sense, it "created political, social and intellectual awareness for all." She calls the redefining of the analysis of Pakistani artists beyond Western assumptions, explicitly contrasting this with occidental society, "where women had to fight long battles to acquire the right to vote even in the twentieth century." [14] This methodological shift is about valuing indigenous cultural factors – concepts of izzat and purdah – in interpreting how and why women artists create certain images.

Salima Hashmi and Farida Batool document how artists across decades have defied official narratives and recorded truths that "people did not dare to speak in public under many oppressive regimes." Paintings, sculptures, and installations became a clandestine chronicle of reality. While the two authors situate the dialogue in the intersection between artists and oppressive government apparatus, they also "situate art in the cultural context" by invoking local poetry, folklore, and history to decode visual symbols. Like Hashmi and Manzoor, they recognise that artists drew upon familiar cultural idioms to make their silent

[11] Mary Jo Aagerstoun and Elissa Auther, "Considering Feminist Activist Art," NWSA Journal (2007): 7– 14.
[12] **Sadia P. Kamran, "Exploring Female Identity in and Through Art in Pakistan: Experiencing De-Colonial Feminism," Journal of International Women's Studies 22, no.3 (2021): 132.**
[13] **Kamran, "Exploring Female Identity,": 132.**
[14] **Kamran, "Exploring Female Identity,": 134.**

rebellions tangible to the public eye. By framing cultural constraint in terms of honour, seclusion, domesticity, and obedience, we espouse the persistent infrastructure of repression that cannot be justified by political events alone. Norms that have been woven into the fabric of daily life and collective morality often go unchallenged, even as legislation evolves. Hashmi notes, in a "society that is determined to keep them in the background," women artists of Pakistan must assert their voices. She references a society that is not a transient regime, but rather a long-standing patriarchal order where women's visibility and agency are deliberately curtailed in all spheres, including art. [15]

Comparatively, this reestablishes both common ground and divergence in understanding these constraints. Authors tend to agree that Pakistani women artists had to contend with forces of marginalisation and have responded through creative resistance.

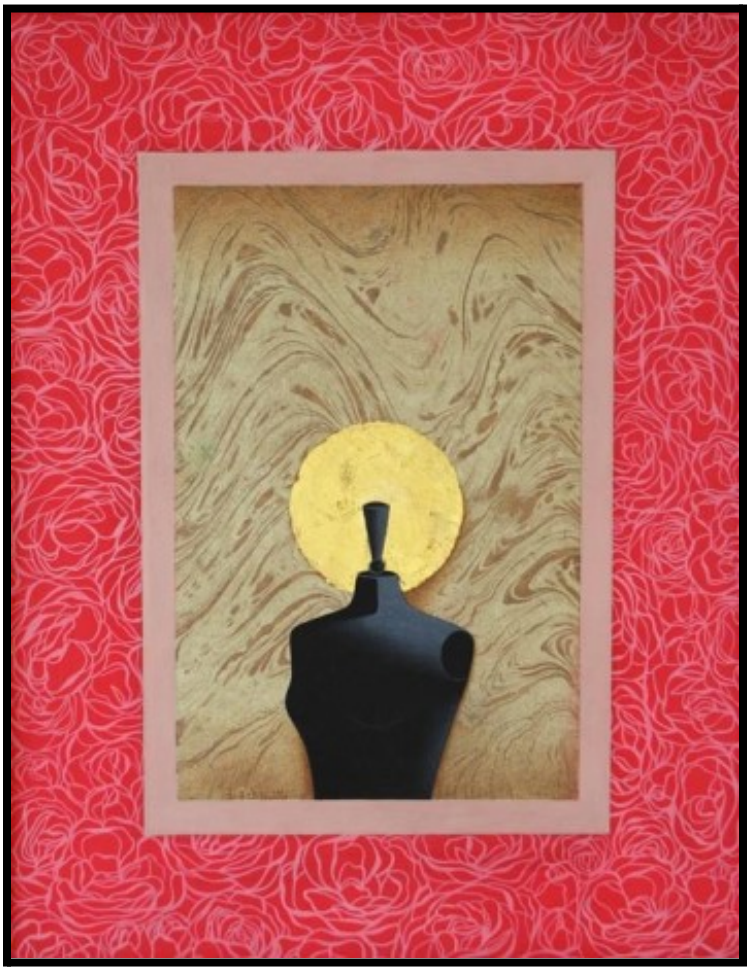


Figure 2. Portrait of a Lady (2008), Ayesha Durrani. Gouache and gold leaf on Wasli paper

On one hand, the scholarship of Malik, Aamir, and Hashmi stresses the state's responsibility, how authoritarian regimes brought to attention the urgency for women to speak through their art. The view foregrounds the censorship laws and extremist religious edicts as the triggers that pushed women's art into the realm of activism. On the other hand, Sadia Q. Hashmi, Sadia P. Kamran, and Shahida Manzoor analyse the cultural and personal dimension, how the entrenched social norms and localised experiences of womanhood influence both the form and content of women's art. Even without overt censorship, women still face minefields of expectation about propriety and honor.

The convergences between these viewpoints are found in Baloch's essay about the veil, showing that religious-cultural practices can become a site of both repression and resistance, depending on who engages with it. Art serves as a counter-narrative to dominant discourses - whether it is a state-authored

[15] Salima Hashmi and Farida Batool, "Reframing the Contexts for Pakistani Contemporary Art: Decoding Visual Worlds," : 73–92.

history or a socially enforced code of morality. Thus, patriarchal norms themselves became the canvas upon which women artists inscribed dissent.

One foundational stigma is the concept of izzat, or honor, which ties a woman's worth to sexuality and obedience. Hence, both their chastity and reputation are vigilantly guarded as a collective asset. Any perceived deviation, straying from the expectations of modesty, domesticity, and obedience, whether it be pursuing a career in the arts or depicting taboo subjects, from socially sanctioned behavior, is considered a stain on their collective honor. In extreme cases, disregard for the social order is met with violence, so-called honor killings remain a brutal reality, especially in the feudal areas of Balochistan. Social media star Qandeel Baloch is one of the few remembered victims who was killed by her brother for her outspoken behavior, which "brought the family's honor into disrepute."[16] Scholars stress that such practices stem from peripheral customs, not Islam itself. Sadia Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoor stress how feminism is "the brainchild of Islam."[17]

Pakistani female artists have persistently critiqued the subject of izzat. Namely, painter Ayesha Durrani addresses this issue using her haunting figurative works. Featuring black faceless female silhouettes targeted with bullseye marks and encompassed by blood-red roses (Fig.2), her imagery - as described by Fatima Bhutto - evokes how "at the end of the day women are the target in Pakistan."[18] More often than not, they are caught in the crosshairs of honor-related violence and the subject of male anger. Durrani's inspiration was her close friend, a young mother, who, when she sought divorce, was killed by her own family - an honor crime meant to enforce patriarchal control over a woman's life. By rendering the female form as anonymous and universal, marred by symbols of violence and domestic "cabbage roses," her art memorializes the vast array of fatalities. Durrani's use of familiar floral and domestic motifs relies on local idioms to reveal how ordinary symbols of femininity can help hide honor crimes. Although this critique may seem muted for foreign audiences who only see generic violence, for those raised within Pakistan's culture of izzat, the deliberate use of decorative roses highlights the connection to the language of honor and the deadly nature of domestic respectability.

[16] Iffat Ali Aksar, "Virtual Manifestations of Patriarchy: Digital Experience of Pakistani Women,": 62

[17] Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoo, "Feminism in Pakistan,": 18. **"When Islam opposed child infanticide, when the preaching of Islam was initially funded by the business profit of a woman, Hazrat Khadija (R.A), when Islam defended the right of women in inheritance… it was treating women as humans, as people."**

[18] Fatima Bhutto, "Operating Above the Law: Three young Pakistani women express outspoken resistance to state-sanctioned gender-based repression through brave art practices,": 57.

Figure 2. Sana Arjumand, Mukhtaran Mai (2005). From 'No Honor in Killing: Making Visible the Buried Truth.' Digital print of work in oil.

Similarly, Sana Arjumand's portrait of Mukhtaran Mai (Fig. 2) - a villager who in 2002 was gang-raped on the order of a local jirga (tribal council). The painting dignified her as the Queen of Hearts, holding Pakistan's national symbols.[19] This reimagination of Mai as a resilient heroine honors a survivor of this unjust violence while critiquing the feudal honor code that tries to silence her voice. Through an international lens, the portrait may register as a generic image of resilience; however, its full force depends on fluency in Pakistan's legal and cultural systems, where each motif functions as a pointed reversal of how the state and village elders attempted to define Mukhtaran Mai. These visual narratives construct counter-histories that shine light on hidden atrocities, challenging the honor-based culture that has no bounds when assuring that women remain invisible and obedient.

The idea of female domesticity - the belief that a woman's proper place is at home as a devoted daughter, mother, and wife - is a common constraint that limits a woman's agency in public roles. By romanticising women as selfless caregivers ("givers and sustainers of life, love and affection" in traditional lore),[20] it weaponises this ideal to paint any deviation from the ordained path of virtue as a moral failing. Long before the partition, though gaining modern political teeth during authoritarian regimes, a "good woman" was and is expected to be modest, sacrificial, and obedient. Her value is placed solely on her subservience to her family within the *char diwari* (four walls of the home).

However, the Artists Manifesto challenged the blatant cultural devolution of women. They "condemned the attitude which minimizes women's constructive role in society and attempts to restrict her rightful

[19] Bhutto, "Operating Above the Law,": 58.
[20] Sadia P. Kamran, "Women, Art & Politics in Pakistan: Rethinking Feminism through Feminist Art," :715.

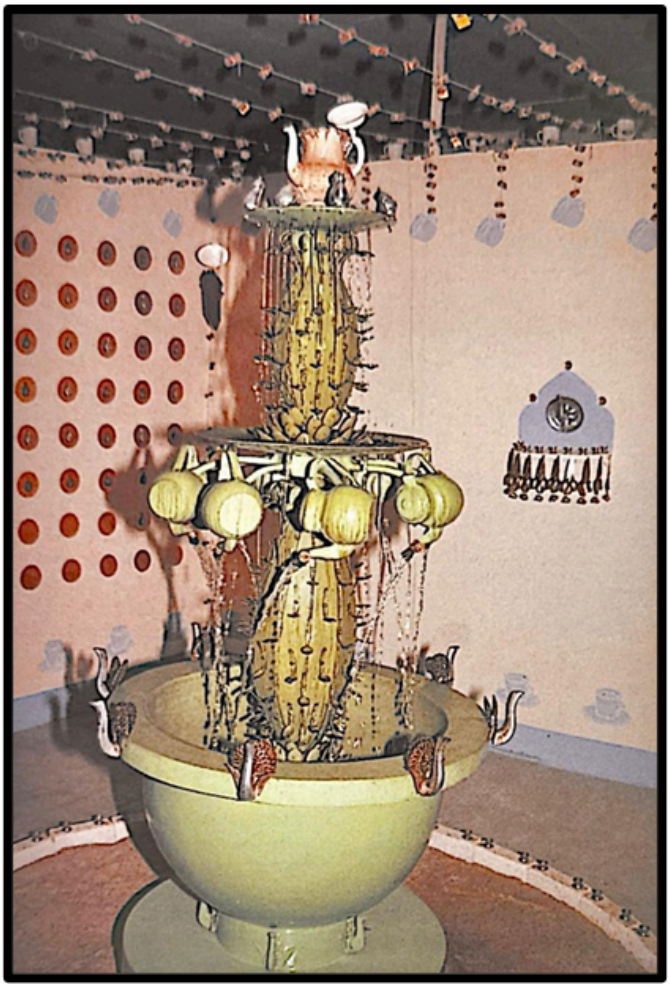
participation" as well as the mindset that twists the vulnerable role of women as life-giver into "an image of obscenity" at the first misstep made outside the prescribed norms.[21] Naiza Khan's sculptural installations transform women's attire into a provocative commentary on female control. Her series of metal fabric works from the 2000s featured objects like corsets, skirts, and belts made of steel, evoking chastity belts and body armor. This explores the "history of female domestication and oppression." Specifically, her piece "Chasticity Belt I" (Fig. 3), a cold metallic belt with a padlock and zipper, symbolizes the unspoken shackles placed on women's bodies. The sculpture feels oppressive and confining, implicitly comparing the medieval chastity belt to the forced purdah of women via the burqa, as garments often serve a similar purpose of policing female sexuality. Khan's fusion of clothing and armor carries an unmistakable charge for those familiar with the politics of purdah, making it a pointed critique of how female bodies are policed. For those outside this cultural frame, this work may appear as a general feminist statement, demonstrating how her visual language relies on local sartorial politics, even as it resonates with global debates about bodily autonomy.

By transforming an object of female repression into art, Khan opens a dialogue between the absent female body and restrictive social norms. Therefore, Khan visualizes the idea of domestic confinement, making it tangible.

Figure 3. Naiza Khan, Chastity Belt (2007). Metal and Fabric zip.

Likewise, Adeela Suleman utilizes household objects, such as teapots, pipes, and drain covers, to create artworks that ironically speak to a woman's household roles, like her piece titled *Tip-top-tea* (Fig. 4). [22] It illustrated a staple ritual in many Pakistani households, which is meant to convey the bride's domestic abilities, a performance embedded in long-standing expectations surrounding femininity and respectability.[23] Suleman utilizes sound, movement, and a myriad of materials to convey the discomfort felt by young girls under the scrutinizing eyes of potential in-laws who attempt to mold them into the traditional 'wife' mold, a pressure that resonates with the gendered social scripts surrounding marriage. The installation itself resembles a cactus, no doubt to further underscore this prickly discomfort. By bringing the private, domestic sphere into a public artist's context, she underscores how the conventions of domesticity can themselves be instruments of subjection —even as

[21] Kamran, "Women, Art & Politics," : 715.
[22] "the inescapable 'tea-party,' in which the bridal candidate wheels in the tea trolley as all eyes turn towards her."
[23] Hence, her installation **"explored the idea of 'tea' as an element of social currency… the serving of tea as a sacrament, a rite, a demonstration of perfection."**



the piece hints at how creative transformation can convert these same forms into tools of resistance.

The act of creation as a form of rebellion

From being systematically excluded from the art world to being labelled as only educators, rather than worthwhile creators, Pakistani women challenged the state's ideological boundaries. Despite their constrained circumstances and a dearth of support, these artists still created. By producing work that grappled with gender, identity, violence, and the politics of life, these women refused the roles assigned to them by patriarchal and nationalistic ideologies.[24]

This struggle echoes the border feminist critique of art history's biases. Linda Nochlin argued that the "neutral" art canon was a "white Western male viewpoint" which naturalized as universal.[25] Likewise, Pakistani art institutions marginalized women, deeming them fit only for teaching more "feminine crafts." Yet, these artists defied these biases by making art itself an act of resistance.

Traditional norms confined women to the domestic sphere, deeming public arenas of art and culture the domain of men. They were labeled as "hobbyists" or "teachers," not worthy of being called serious practitioners. In 1940, Anna Molka, a British artist from a European Jewish emigre family, took a revolutionary step that altered the future for the next generation of Pakistani artists. She founded the Fine Arts department at Punjab University to train female students. In a society that pushed both women and art into the background, this step was considered radical. The subject was seen as a mere pastime; the university's vice-chancellor initially established fine art only as a "recreational" subject for women on the assumption they would marry rather than practice.) Hence, women were meant to be artistic but not artists.[26] Recruitment was challenging: she often had to persuade families that art could be a viable career

[24] Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoo, "Feminism in Pakistan,"; 1-20
[25] Linda Nochlin, *"Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"* ARTnews (1971).
[26] Hashmi and Shahida Manzoo, "Feminism in Pakistan." :1 –20

path for women. This highlights how cultural conservatism and family disapproval kept many women from pursuing higher art education. Decades later, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization significantly limited women's mobility and self-expression, effectively marginalizing women from the arts. Simply choosing to become an artist, attending a co-educational school, painting the human form, creating freely, or displaying work publicly became acts of defiance against both societal norms and laws. Each piece helped craft counter-narratives of long-suppressed experience.

It is within this charged context that artists like Aisha Khalid emerged, redefining the language of resistance through form and tradition. Khalid's artwork tells the story of herself. It feels lived and real. Her miniatures are a direct reflection of the lack of opportunities provided to women.[27] In her article "We Sinful Women," Hashmi stresses that, after graduating, women are married off and thus have to balance the responsibilities of an artist and a wife.[28] Hence, limited access, if any, to studio spaces helps explain her turn to miniature art. The Pakistani populace viewed it as modern, with its inclusion into the curriculum at the National College of Arts in 1986; Western audiences often interpreted it as archaic. While her contemporaries, notably Rashid Rana, turned to digital media and collage, Khalid chose to subvert from within. Many women likewise favored miniature for reasons of access and economy. [29]

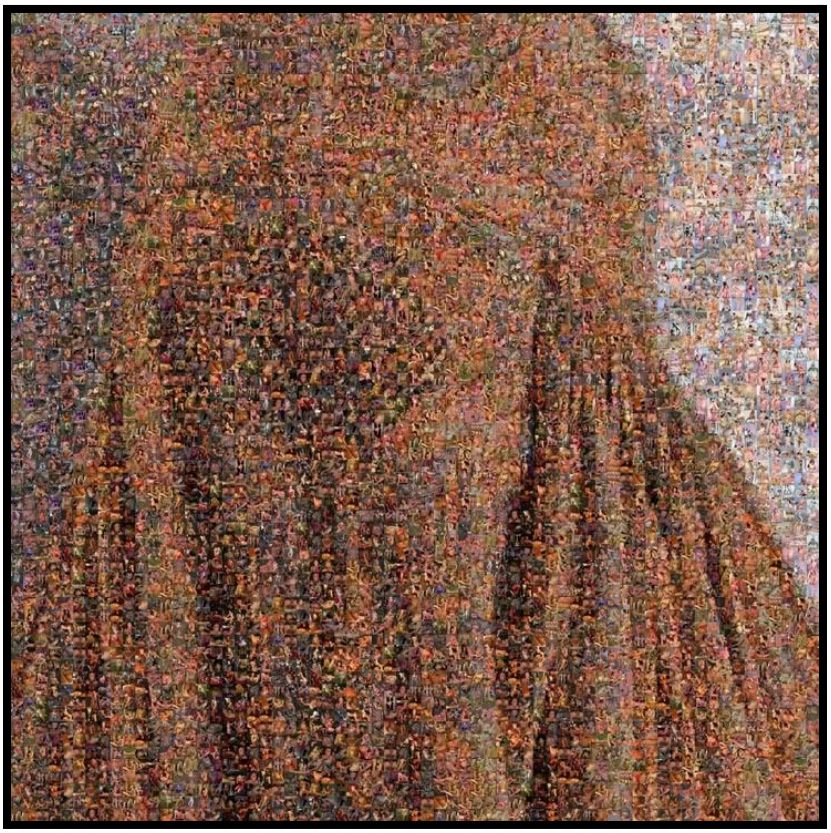
Figure 5. Aisha Khalid, Form X Pattern (2000). Gouache on wasli paper.

Based on Islamic geometry, textile customs, and personal experience, Khalid's miniature paintings conceal the female form within designs, denying the observer complete access. (Fig. 5) For example, the veil is rendered as intricate geometric and floral tapestries, often hiding a burqa-clad figure. Baloch compares Khalid's veils, which conceal and shield, highlighting the violence of visibility itself, to

[27] Baloch, "Gendered Images of Veil." 23: **"Aisha Khalid reflects her encounter with the same subjects and expresses her feelings as being a woman, not only this, but most importantly, she articulates through the images of the veil about freedom and what it means to a woman."**
[28] Baloch, "Gendered Images of Veil,": 28.
[29] Baloch, "Gendered Images of Veil,": 28: **"a small space with two pillows on the floor."**

Rana's daring photomontages, in which women wearing burqas are built from a mosaic of pornographic thumbnails *(the "Veil" series)* (Fig. 6). Rana's provocation can tip into spectacle, this juxtaposition underscores how women artists reclaim the veil's narrative: instead of a one-dimensional emblem of suppression, it becomes a site of conflict, subversion, and individual identity in their hands.[30]

Notably, Western curators eagerly promoted art addressing the veil, for internationally, this piece of cloth is seen as a symbol of repression. As Baloch notes, the global art market's fascination with "images of women behind the veil" points to a politics of display, where Eurocentric institutions eagerly promote it, seeing in it a readily legible symbol of a Muslim woman's repression. However, the veil can become a sign of strength, irony, or defiance when a woman wears it while speaking. Even when a man uses it critically, it can slide into a performance. While this does not preclude male artists from examining feminist issues, it does require them to be more conscious of their influence. Ergo, this lack of understanding offered via a male lens makes a woman's perspective all the more significant because it reflects their traumas. The "awareness of gender necessarily directs one's attention not only to the act of perception but also the perceiver and her or his position within a social and political context."[31] While Khalid and Rana have received international acclaim, Khalid's success worldwide ultimately validates that what was once historically dismissed as a mere women's craft could carry profound political and artistic weight when viewed without bias.



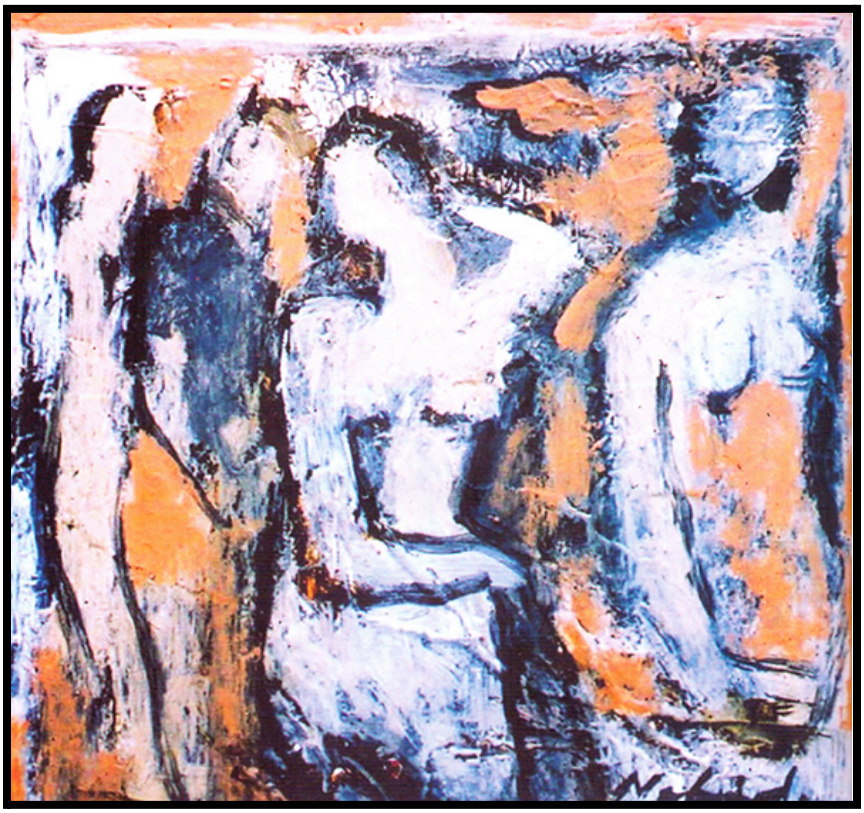
Artistic rebellion was waged by women throughout the country, on canvas, paper, and in the studio. Some mediums, like sculpting, abstract art, collages, and the nude form, were even weaponized despite being

[30] Baloch, "Gendered Images of Veil,": 26. Salima Hashmi critiques, **"The female nude, a constant subject of male Pakistani painters, as of painters everywhere else, fulfilled the accepted function of the female as an object. The sexual position of the female in these works betrays the artist's intention."**
[31] Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective,": 8.

considered inept by conservative society. Each transgressive artwork, and the labor behind it, was itself a defiance as women began to define their artistic scope.

Traditionalists deemed both the human figure and the abstract as wholly unworthy artistic expression, yet these were precisely the media embraced and preferred by Naiza Khan. Despite having two uncles deeply involved in Pakistan's art scene, she was no stranger to the struggles that came with it, especially as a woman. Her response to these harsh "chastity" laws was to create her Woman Series. Using the female body, she subverted the narrative of women as objects for men's sexual gratification; instead, she showed that the woman's body carried a multitude of meanings, asserting women's agency over their own image.[32] Raza's bold use of nudity as an empowerment is very much in line with Baloch's observations about women artists reclaiming imagery that men have long commodified. This approach also stands in contrast to Rashid Rana's photomontages of nudes, which juxtapose Eastern and Western iconography to expose a cross-cultural irony about female objectification. However, Rana's critique can feel detached from lived struggle, whereas Raza's depicts a woman's modesty and, in turn, challenges the viewer to see the female nude as a site of autonomy, pain, and power rather than a sexual fantasy.

Figure 7. Nahid Raza, Chawkandi Series (1982). Acrylic on canvas.



[32] Kristin Plys,"The Female Nude in Anti-Zia Feminist Painting."

Raza's depiction of dancing women in her Chawkandi Series (Fig. 7) directly counters the Zia-era ban on dance, a symbolic restriction of female expression. By painting women in motion, she emphasized that the body is a physical expression of the social limitations enforced by society—how women are boxed in and labeled: a mother, a sister, a wife.

In resisting these labels, the painted body becomes an argument for agency. These artists subverted what the female body historically stood for;[33] it became a symbol of female empowerment rather than the commodification of a woman. By the late 1990s, themes of gender and body had entered the mainstream Pakistani art discourse, largely due to these trailblazers who had risked outrage in earlier decades.

Perhaps the most overt example of art as rebellion came during Zia's draconian policies. His regime introduced strict censorship policies, which often led to the arrests of artists for "anti-government" themes. In this climate, women bore a double burden: the regime's laws curtailed women's agency in society, and conservative edicts pressured artists to avoid any "anti-Islamic" or indecent art. Women artists responded to this dictatorial rule with courage and solidarity. In 1983, sixteen of them assembled at Salima Hashmi's house in Lahore and drafted a manifesto asserting their rights as artists. [34]

Though never released publicly at the time- for fear of state reprisal- its very existence was an outcry against pervasive misogyny and a declaration that they could not be quelled. Fifteen artists signed this document, including renowned figures like Zubeida Javed, Lala Rukh, Salima Hashmi, Riffat Alvi, Nahid Raza, Mehr Afroze, Veeda Ahmed, Sheherezade Alam, and Rabia Zuberi. In this manifesto, they affirmed their rights to be full participants in society, equal in politics and the arts, to any creative work that would engender a "happier, more beautiful and more peaceful place." [35] Later, this event was recounted by Salima Hashmi as an "intelligent rebellion" by women determined to assert their voice in a society that was "determined to keep in the background."[36] The gathering itself, women risking safety to meet, was revolutionary.

The manifesto also galvanized a distinctly feminist sensibility in 1980s Pakistani art: in its wake, women used their paintings to express their outrage, resilience, and hope, often through metaphor and allegory to circumvent censorship. Its effects persisted beyond Zia's rule. Women artists of the late 1980s and 1990s adopted the manifesto's fearless stance in their work, producing art that more unequivocally asserted gender equality and social critique. Art historian, Aqsa Malik notes, these women and their

[33] Plys, "The Female Nude," : 641. John Berger wrote, **"A naked body has to be seen as an object to become a nude. Nudity is placed on display."**

[34] Women Artists Manifesto, 1983, "We, the Women Artists of Pakistan, having noted with concern the decline in the status and condition of the lives of Pakistani women, and having noted the effects of the anti-reason, anti-arts environments on the quality of life in our homeland… affirm the following principles to guide us in our struggle for the cultural development of our people to serve as the manifesto of the women artists of Pakistan…"

[35] Women Artists Manifesto, 1983: 3.

[36] Hashmi, "An Intelligent Rebellion,": 233.

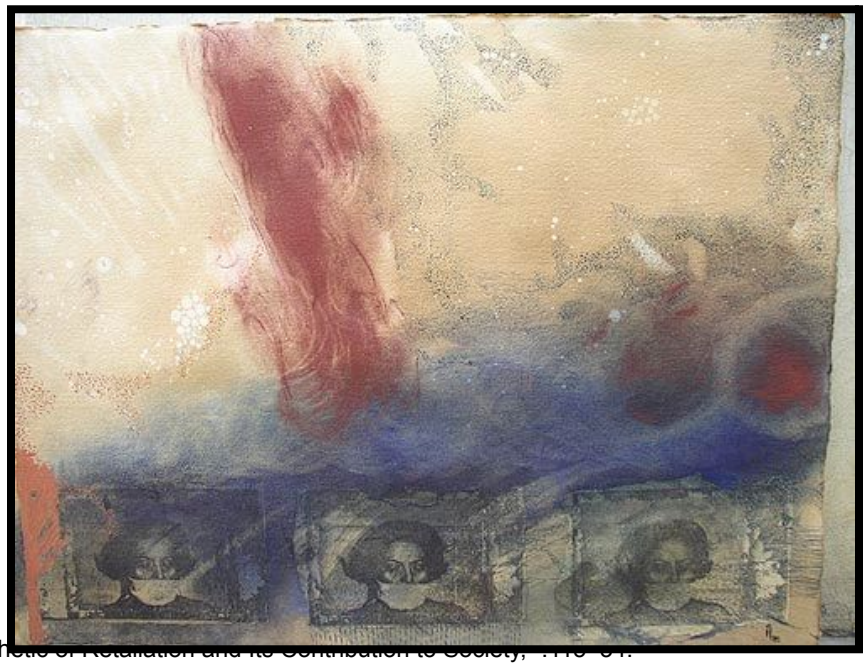
contemporaries had effectively formed an "aesthetic of retaliation" under Zia's regime- their art propagating freedom in defiance of censorship and seeking to "rekindle hope" in a society whose tolerance and liberty the regime has stolen.[37] Making art with such unapologetic feminist messaging was a radical act at the time, and many of these artists carried that fearless energy in the decades that followed.

THE ROLE OF VISUAL STORYTELLING IN CONSTRUCTING COUNTER HISTORIES

Due to the lack of institutional archives or official recognition, Pakistani artists, especially women, have used their visual art as an alternative way to record history. They turn images, materials, and metaphors into records of lives and events otherwise erased. This section explores how artists like Salima Hashmi, Adeela Suleman, and Lala Rukh intentionally challenge dominant historical narratives. Rejecting silence, they create an archive that addresses gendered violence, political repression, and the costs of forgetting. Their work asks not only what stories are told, but who has authority to tell them.[38]

A renowned Pakistani artist, academic, and activist, Salima Hashmi, has merged art with social critique. Her career consistently reflects injustice. Namely, her painting "Poem for Zainab" (1994) (Fig. 8), which exemplifies the role of visual storytelling in challenging societal silence around gender violence. The work operates as an obituary, this immortalization of Zainab's life and the tragedy of her death, forcing a harrowing tale into the public conscience.

Figure 8. Salima Hashmi, Poem for Zainab (1994). Mixed media on paper.



[37] Malik and Naela Aamir, "The Aesthetic of Retaliation and its Contribution to Society," 113–34.

[38] Salima Hashmi and Farida Batool, *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia* (2016): 73–92. These women's artworks form a **"rich repository of images (that) became the documents of the time, recording what people did not dare to speak in public under many oppressive regimes."**

This piece was created in response to a woman named Zainab, the wife of a cleric, being brutalized, hospitalized, and murdered by her husband. Hashmi said Zainab had been violated with electric heating rods, causing severe internal injuries. This occurred during Benazir's tenure – a sobering reminder that even though a woman was the Prime Minister, protection was not guaranteed for women like Zainab. As is too often the case, this act of domestic terror went unnoticed by the state and the people. By dedicating an artwork to Zainab's story, Hashmi constructs a counter-history of this tragedy, memorializing the victim's experience rather than allowing it to fade into obscurity.

Hashmi's collage-like approach, accompanied by expressive abstraction, conveys the pervasive reality of social injustice. Torn newspaper clippings, fragments of text, and the deep crimson splatters (suggestive of blood in the sea of calm as painted by the cerulean) narrate Zainab's abuse, creating a fragmented narrative that resonates differently with audiences who recognize the genre of protest collage established during the Zia era, where press fragments became a form of testimony. In documenting the experience of one woman, this fragmented narrative speaks to a pattern of gender oppression in Pakistani society. In doing so, Hashmi's art becomes a historical archive, countering the traditional approach that might refer to the broadcasting of these incidents as "shameful" as it is "just a family affair." [39]

By placing Zainab's ordeal into Pakistan's cultural memory – painting it into history – Hashmi ensures that the victim's story is acknowledged and remembered, rather than buried in silence.

Another artist who used her creativity to construct counter-narratives long disregarded in dominant perspectives was Adeela Suleman. Her installation *"Killing Fields of Karachi"* (Fig. 9), displayed at the Karachi Biennale in 2019, memorialized the 444 people killed by Rao Anwar, a Karachi police officer. He extrajudicially murdered civilians by staging fake "encounter" shootings over the years, a phenomenon extensively documented by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). 444 white tombstones were erected by Suleman, each topped with an iron flower - many of them wilted, symbolizing the lives cut short and how often society disregards their absence, drawing on a visual idiom that echoes South Asian funerary and memorial traditions.
Figure 9. Adeela Suleman, The Killing Fields of Karachi (2019). Installation at Frere Hall, Karachi

Suleman effectively documented a hidden chapter of Pakistani history: the systematic killing of citizens under the guise of law enforcement. In a society where deaths are often hidden or officially denied, regardless of the evidence, she presented an alternative archive of the victims' suffering. Importantly, the installation was accompanied by a short documentary focusing on the story of Naqeebullah Mehsud, a young aspiring model who was among Anwar's victims. As Hammad Nasar has noted, Suleman's use of serial forms mirrors the repetitive rhythms of collective mourning in South Asia, and much like Hashmi's

[39] Samina Iqbal, "Not So 'Silent': Art, Political Expression, and the Subtle Use of the Public Sphere in the Work of Pakistani Activists," South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal: 4. Hashmi notes, **"art is always political. It cannot be dissociated from the circumstances in which it is made. Even when not professing to be political, it borrows from the political."**

focus, Suleman used the story of one to speak for many. Combining visual art with oral history, they personalized the statistics, making them feel like real human beings to the public, and thus highlighting the human impact of the violence.

The official response to her work underscores its subversive power; just two hours after opening, the exhibit was shut down and partly vandalized by state agents. Officials argued the park "was given to the (Karachi) biennale for the exhibition of art," but they made a graveyard here. . . this was (is) not art, this was (is) vandalism," [40] Karachi's parks head chastised Suleman for airing "dirty laundry" instead of painting a "good picture" of the city. Critics such as Natasha Ginwala have argued that this act of censorship revealed precisely what the work sought to expose: the state's investment in suppressing narratives of extrajudicial violence. Thus, the censorship itself became part of the artwork's narrative, highlighting the denial and repression it critiqued. The piece remains in critical discourse as an alternate history that forced acknowledgment of extrajudicial killings that the state tried to erase.

If Suleman and Hashmi constructed counter-archives around individual stories, Lala Rukh's "Crimes Against Women" (Fig. 10) did so on a collective scale. Created during Zia's dictatorship, it transformed countless news clippings into a searing visual ledger of "crimes against women," drawing on the protest-print idioms that circulated within Women's Action Forum networks. Her collage documented the rampant gender-based violence of the 1980s, a reality that feminist activists of the period painstakingly archived through similar cut-and-paste documentation practices. By assembling dozens of news articles,

[40] Afaq Mirza (Karachi Parks Director), in Ayesha Tanzeem, *Voice of America News*, 28 Oct 2019.

each documenting an instance of rape, domestic abuse, "honor" killings, or other atrocities, she created a composite picture more powerful than just a single report: a damning mosaic of misogyny. The very banality of the newsprint fragments underscores how routine and *dismissed* such violence was; in official history, these events would be footnotes if recorded at all. The poster insists that the ostensibly pious 1980s were not only about "Islamic values" and public morality, but also about countless women whose lives were destroyed under the shadow of that patriarchal rule, a point immediately legible to viewers familiar with Zia-era censorship and its gendered impact.

Figure 10. Lala Rukh, Crimes Against Women (1985). Lithograph.

In effect, "Crimes Against Women," produced as an offset lithograph for the WAF protests, served a dual purpose. First, it was a documentary, preserving evidence of the cruelty against women that would have otherwise been buried in old newspapers, echoing the activist strategy of transforming ephemeral newsprint into lasting political testimony. Second, it was agitational. Plastering this poster in public or carrying it in rallies, society was forced to face the pattern of violence in the nation that was typically dismissed and downplayed as isolated incidents, mobilizing a visual language that WAF deliberately cultivated to confront state narratives. This collage stood as an iconic symbol of how visual art can bear witness to systemic oppression and ensure that the oppressed write their history.

Together, these artists and scholars demonstrate that the struggle against erasure in Pakistan is not only a reaction to political regimes but a sustained confrontation with the cultural codes of honor, domesticity, and obedience. They turn their canvases, sculptures, and installations into archives of resistance, constructing counter-histories that place women at the center of narratives from which they have long been excluded.

VISUAL MOTIFS AS A LANGUAGE OF DISSENT

Beyond individual works, recurring visual motifs appear in the oeuvre of these and other artists, serving as tools to challenge traditional narratives enforced by society. Facelessness, the veil, and fragmentation carry layered meanings in Pakistani political art. Sadia Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoor present feminism as a deeply personal mode of resistance, molded by cultural context and political history. Narrowing the scope to Punjabi women painters, they argue that visual art has long been used as a "subtly symbolic form of rebellion, rather than as an overt political instrument." [41] These motifs allow artists to navigate a conservative society while critiquing patriarchy, modesty codes, and domestic expectations without transgressing them so blatantly that they invite immediate backlash. Emphasizing that Pakistani artists often employ coded visuals, they embed resistance into culturally understandable forms. Whether an artist came from a conservative household that condemned her vocation (like Nahid Raza) or from a more liberal milieu (like Lubna Agha), her art inevitably told her personal story through metaphor and allusion.

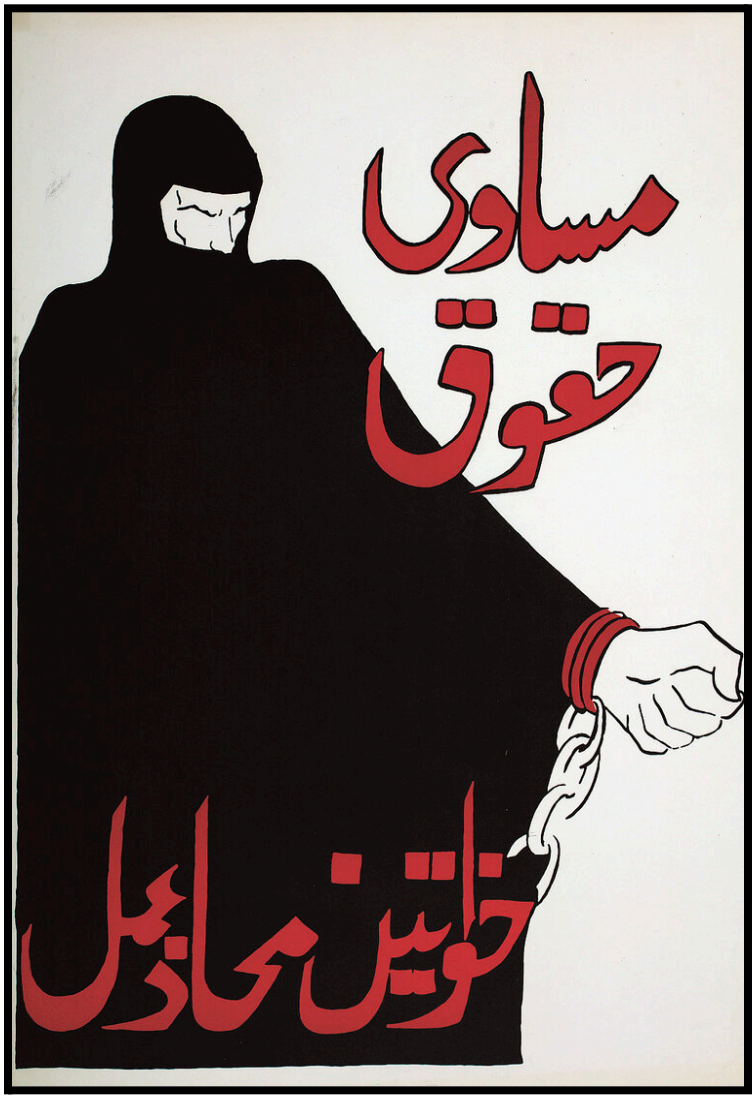


Figure 11. Lala Rukh, Masawi Huqooq (Equal Rights) (1983). Lithograph.

One prevalent motif is the depiction of female figures as faceless or veiled to symbolize the enforced invisibility of women. Yet this claim of anonymity in art functions as resistance. For example, Salima Hashmi is known for using featureless faces in her work as a feminist expression. Through her depictions of women without individualized features, she comments on how societal norms play a crucial role in erasing women. The very presence of such women in her art refuses their erasure. Critically, male artists who painted faceless women tended to invoke more universal or abstract notions of

[41] Sadia Qutub Hashmi and Shahida Manzoor, "Feminism in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis of Women's Paintings in Punjab," Punjab Culture 1, no.1 (Jan–Jun 2021): 4

suffering, whereas female artists used the motif to reclaim ownership of their own stories. Ijaz-ul-Hassan observed that even when men and women depict the same subject, the results differ; the artist's gender and social position infuse a distinct perspective into the image.[42] Hassan's artwork, despite reflecting his upbringing as the son of a courtesan who witnessed female objectification since birth, also lacks the underlying tragedy of female works, adding credence to this viewpoint. The subtle difference is in intent and context: women artists turned facelessness into a statement about how they are rendered invisible, while at the same time asserting that their absence will be noticed.

The veil (chadar) itself acts as a complex symbol, particularly when juxtaposed with varying perceptions. In the state's narrative, the veil was promoted as a marker of modesty and moral order – encapsulated by the reactionary slogan *"chadar aur char diwari"* urging women to remain behind the veil and within the four walls of their home. Pakistani artists subverted this symbolism by portraying veiled women in situations that critique their social circumstances rather than sanctifying them. Lala Rukh's 1983 poster, *"Masaawi Huqooq" (Equal Rights)* (Fig. 11), shows a shackled veiled woman, directly linking her to the restriction of women's freedom under Zia's laws. Here, the veil is turned upside down; rather than representing piety, it becomes a critique of how "Islamic" principles have been manipulated and how the regime's hypocrisy is exposed. As put by a female activist at the time, they were determined to expose the regime's hypocrisy - to show the truth of the oppressor rather than the supposed shame of the oppressed. [43] Hashmi and Rukh both used these symbols to tell a counter-story, the truth of the oppressor rather than the oppressed. This directly negated Western misreadings; the works suggested that a woman in a veil could be a revolutionary figure, not simply a victim awaiting rescue. The tension between how *insiders* and *outsiders* see the veil is a subtext running. Two symbols that were often misused to subjugate women became tools of liberation, shifting public perception.

Fragmented compositions serve as a strategy to undermine linear, authoritative narratives. By assembling photographs, newspaper clippings, distorted images, or textiles, artists create a montage of truth that challenges the official story. This method offers a broader perspective than any single image. Salima Hashmi's practice of integrating text and imagery from newspapers and parchment functions as a metaphor for activism. Using real-world evidence- the press fragments, the public records - she introduces multiple perspectives into her artwork's narrative. The result is a visual testimony that no single image could convey on its own. Art historian Iftikhar Dadi notes that these montage techniques in South Asian art often aim to "disrupt the singular flow of official history by introducing marginalized narrative in fragments."[44] In other words, fragmentation in these artworks is a political act; it mirrors the shatterings of truth under oppression. And the need to piece together a more honest picture from the shards left at the margins. This motif also reflects the emotional toll of living under repression; when reality is forcibly censored or contorted, what remains are fragments of truth that have to be re-gathered and reassembled. Artists indicate that truth is not monolithic; it must be recovered and reassembled, an approach which

[42] Baloch, "Gendered Images of Veil."
[43] Aneela Zaidi, *Women's Action Forum Archives* (unpublished statements, 1983).
[44] Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 175.

inherently challenges the neat, sanctioned narratives of traditional storytelling. Rather than accepting the grand narrative of history, so often the story told from the white, male, or colonial perspective, these artists portray history as a chorus of compelling stories, many of which had been suppressed.

Collectively, these works reveal histories that official narratives desperately try to erase. These motifs evolve into a language of dissent. Through them, these artists demonstrate that the acts of creating and recording often merge, serving as a way to preserve their version of history alongside, or even against, the state's.

CONCLUSION

The landscape of Pakistani women's visual art stands as both a reclamation of history and an act of protest. Across generations, visual art by Pakistani women has served simultaneously as a mode of critique and a mode of record. By inscribing women's experiences into canvas and public exhibitions, these artists assert their agency within systems of power, be it the censorial state or the court of social convention. Their work testifies that the personal and the political are inextricable: each brushstroke or installation both exposes injustice and preserves memory. Patriarchal norms became the very canvas on which women artists wrote their dissent, claiming space long denied them. Through such visual storytelling, Pakistani female artists continue to counter the narratives of power with narratives of their own, ensuring that women's voices and histories are neither invisible nor forgotten. As Salima Hashmi herself has argued, "in a society determined to keep them in the background, women artists must assert their presence," [45] a sentiment that encapsulates this ongoing struggle.

Finally, the complexity of studying these counterhistories within post-colonial, gendered frameworks points to avenues for further exploration. The interplay of local patriarchal norms with colonial legacies and global perceptions means that understanding these artworks requires an intersectional and culturally nuanced approach. Inquiries on how new generations of women artists continue to navigate and challenge entrenched norms (perhaps through digital media or transnational art platforms while keeping their heritage and context in view) would deepen our appreciation of how visual storytelling evolves as a tool of feminist resistance in Pakistan.

Ultimately, Pakistani women artists have inscribed counter-histories that reassert their place in public and historical memory, reminding us that the very act of creation is an enduring form of rebellion. Today, emerging Pakistani artists extend this resistance through digital media and global exhibitions, ensuring the feminist lineage of dissent remains alive across generations.

[45] Salima Hashmi, quoted in "How Salima Hashmi Fought to Make Pakistan's Art Scene Flourish," *Financial Times*, September 4, 2020.

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Appendix 1

This piece, created by me, seeks to capture the essence of activist art in Pakistan. The red in the clothing, along with the fragmentation and sculpted border, serves as an homage to the various experiences of women in my family. The frame, symbolizing the gilded cage that traps women under household obligations related to izzat (honor), was made from clay and lined with newspaper clippings about honor killings that occurred in 2025. The middle panel, painted in acrylic and then in color, highlights the moment of realization and the shattering of ideals imposed on women from a young age in Pakistan. Reinforcing this message, I added text on a dupatta, a nod to how female activist artists in Pakistan have used the veil to symbolize both freedom and repression, featuring the classic saying, "Log kya khaha gei" ("what will people say?") reflecting every step taken by a girl from birth to her death. The phrase "What do I want?" next to the window aims to illustrate the desire for freedom and escape. Together, the three panels narrate the story of entrapment and societal expectations, showing how breaking free from these shackles may fracture one's beliefs, but can also lead to happiness. It encourages hope.