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From Folk Feminism to Fundamentalism: The Transformation of Punjabi Culture under Religious Pressure in Pakistan

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Abstract

Building upon anthropological perspectives which conceive of culture less as substance and more as daily-life practices that people use to confront challenges, in this paper we analyze the way a feministic pluralist tradition of Punjabi culture in Pakistan has been transformed into a moralized patriarchal one under the ideological onslaught by religious pressure groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and the Taliban. Utilising the framework of critical discourse analysis, in this study folk poetry, song covers, proverbs and media discursive practices and cultural celebrations were studied to discern changes in gendered subjectivities as shaped by religious nationalism and moral populism in Punjab. The findings indicate that the images of Heer or Jugni which once glorified women's expressive authority, have been actively replaced with those relating to modesty and obedience. Demonstrate through linguistic, symbolic and topical analysis that forms of culture have been moralized so that what used to be spaces of comedy, sensual delight and critique are now arm twists for ideological orthodoxy.

Drawing on feminist cultural theory (Butler, 1990; Mohanty, 2003) and Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power, the study posits that religious moralization is a mechanism internal colonization that recasts femininity as a location of morality surveillance. But countercurrents of resistance persist in digital media, feminist art and community-driven cultural revival, proving that the ideas behind folk feminism are still alive under the veneer of moral orthodoxy. This work adds to the field of postcolonial feminist scholarship by revealing how gender, religion, and language collude in regenerating cultural identity in contemporary Punjab. It provides critical reading about politics of representation, resistance and cultural memory practice within Pakistan.

Keywords: Punjabi Culture, Folk Feminism, Religious Extremism, Symbolic Power, Gender And Cultural Identity.

Introduction:

Punjab as a region, and an ethos is historically known for folk traditions Sufi humanism and the 'cohesion of life in a communal order'. Indeed, among other things, Punjabi Pakistani popular culture has carried notions of inherent egalitarianism and femininity: women's gatherings like trinjan, folk songs like tappay and heroic qissas such as Heer Ranjha and Sassi Punnu developed into spaces where the sound of a woman's voice, their social agency and subject position was apparent (see "Trinjan," n.d.; Riphah & Riaz, 2024; Quddus,1992/2019 cited in IJHS, 2024). These homosocial practices functioned within a nexus of Sufi mysticism, work with the community and cultural festivity rather than inflexible patriarchal or religious-nationalist models. For thinking about the everyday, why was there no room in the folk idiom for unforgettable feminine metaphors – such as the story of "Sassi" about crossing rivers and familial constraints, rejecting silence (Political Pandora, n.d.)?

But during the past several decades, we observe a marked turn of events in the cultural and ideological environment of Punjab Pakistan. Religious pressure groups including the TLP and the TTP have emerged as major forces in reshaping morality,

public life, gender relations and cultural expression. Their power transverses with state, media and the renegotiation of "public culture" in Punjab. The result is that the entirely feminine and also plural folk dimensions of Punjabi culture are now being harshly suppressed by waves of religious fundamentalism, patriarchal moral policing, media censorship and the erasure of women's public roles as visible cultural producers.

This type of transformation raises some very important questions: What was the language through which Feminist or Gender-egalitarian values were expressed in pre-colonial Punjabi culture? What social and intellectual forces enabled the triumph of religious orthodoxy? What does this do to the representation of women and their presence in culture? Finally, what does this cultural shift suggest about the broader contest between indigenous identity and religious nationalism in Pakistan? It is these dynamics that the present essay attempts to engage with by situating and materialising the transition from 'folk feminism' to 'fundamentalism' in Punjab, through its propositional conjecture:

"The rise of religious pressure groups including TLP and TTP pitted the folk feminist and Sufi humanist ethos of Punjabi culture into a patriarchal, oppressive social structure that criminalised women's cultural expression and freedom for public visibility".

By situating these through a series of cultural texts – folk songs, qissas, Sufi poetry – alongside religious discourse, the paper traces an ideological and discursive trajectory. It argues that the marginalisation of women's voices in Punjabi culture is not accidental or simply a byproduct of religious conservativism, but the result of a paradigmatic reordering of cultural capital, symbolic authority and gender visibility within Punjab. Using feminist cultural theory, postcolonial perspectives and discourse analysis the paper exposes a process of 're-imagining' Punjabi culture as one that has jettisoned some of its pluralism and feminine presence under pressure to be remade in more narrow, moralised and positively male-centred terms.

Finally, this study adds to the emerging literature on gender and culture as weapons of religious nationalism in Pakistan. It provides an instructive example in the Punjabi cultural field, demonstrating how indigenous traditions of feminist expressive life are placed at risk within contexts of religious and political hegemony. It thus highlights the need to retrieve the feminist heritage of Punjab and interfere in those ideologically constructed practices that mute women's voices under the banner of morality and religious identity.

Scope of Study:

The focus of this study is not only on the evolution of Punjabi cultural feminine codex into a contemporary Pakistani socio-political milieu, but also underlines how religious pressure groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have re-shaped culture forms, gender identities and moral narratives. The study is confined to the textual, linguistic and cultural analysis of Punjabi folklore literature, proverbs, songs as well as media images rather than any ethnographic or interview data. Punjab is the heart of Pakistan. It won't be wrong to call Punjab as the nucleus of cultures and linguistics, that often show association towards egalitarian symbolic feminine power. The research has encapsulated wide range of events such post-Islamization from 1977 till today, the era has seen dramatic

shift of gender and culture with reference to state-society relations. In the research feminist cultural studies has been used with an aim to unravel ideological overhaul of Punjabi culture under religious populism with an eye on counter-narratives which are emerging to contest this remaking.

Hypothesis:

The rise of Religious pressure groups such as TLP & TTP have rapidly transformed the Punjabi culture from a culture of folk feminism and humanistic Sufism to a patriarchal society that again lends its hand in driving down the women cultural expressions and the public role quite on margins.

Research Objectives:

To investigate the feminist and egalitarian elements that are to be found in the Punjabi folk culture — specially in folklore, poetry, and oral traditions that reflected women's autonomy and social participation in the society.

To inspect the socio-political and religious transformation that became the base of decline of pluralistic Punjabi cultural practices, rise of religious fundamentalism and political Islamization.

To delve how religious pressure groups such as TLP and TTP have reshaped and transformed the gender norms, morality discourses, and artistic expression in Punjabi society.

To assess the impact of religious orthodoxy on women's visibility, representation, and agency

in Punjabi cultural production, including literature, performance, and media.

To interpret the transformation from folk feminism to fundamentalism as a reflection of the broader conflict between indigenous cultural identity and religious nationalism in Pakistan

Research Questions:

How did traditional Punjabi folk culture express feminist or gender-equitable values before the rise of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan?

What socio-political forces enabled the shift from a pluralistic, Sufi-influenced Punjabi culture to one dominated by religious orthodoxy

In what ways have religious pressure groups, such as TLP and TTP, redefined gender norms, morality, and artistic expression within Punjabi society?

How has this cultural and ideological transformation affected women's representation and

participation in Punjabi cultural production (e.g., music, poetry, and media)

What does the transformation from "folk feminism" to "fundamentalism" reveal about the broader

struggle between indigenous identity and religious nationalism in Pakistan?

Significance of the Study

This is a major work of interest academically and socio-culturally, shedding light on an under- explored aspect of the cultural change in Pakistan, the erasure of Punjabi folk feminism in sharing space with religious extremism and moral populism. Through documenting the ways in which culturally specific gendered symbols, metaphors and stories undergo recoding during revolutions of ideology as well as language change, this work also intervenes in feminist cultural theory and post-

colonial discourses about identity formation. It also undermines the myth of Punabi culture's intrinisic patriarchal bias, and instead reveals history in which they have been saturated with effeminacy, sensuality and women-centredness; over-posting probs: as an earlier scholar had." The findings provide important intervention into the politics of cultural production and religious nationalism co- opting and moralizing art to sustain patriarchal power. This study contributes the conceptually structure understanding of declination of indigenous feminist trace in the context of postcolonial situation especially at the end of pluralism prevailing in Pakistan's socio-political milieu and has relevance for theorists, policy makers, cultural actors are working to revive such traditions.

Methodology:

Research Design

This article is based on qualitative interpretive research, informed by feminist cultural analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The idea is to question the concepts of Punjabi culture that is known for its many-layered folk feminism and Sufi humanism in the background of increasingly powerful religious fundamentalism and pressure groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The qualitative approach provides a means of investigating more profound levels of language, symbolism and ideology in cultural texts than is afforded by numerical analysis. The main one is about reading gender and moral representation historically so as to notice not just how, but when the switch was made from a more inclusive religious perspective to a conservative one.

Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical perspectives inform the study:

Feminist Cultural Theory – in order to understand how patriarchy power relations are inscribed, maintained and reproduced in cultural stories.

Postcolonial Feminism by Chandra Talpade Mohanty- to situate the nexus of gender, culture, and religion with reference to a postcolonial state such as Pakistan

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital – this concept is useful to see how religious actors capture symbolic and cultural power.

Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity – in order to examine religious discourse that governs gendered behavior and embodiment

Taken together, these theories contribute to Punjabi culture as the stage for ideological struggle in which traditional feminist principles are made palatable through religious conservatism.

Data Sources

This study relies exclusively on textual and documentary sources, both primary and secondary, to ensure analytical depth and contextual validity.

Primary Sources

Folk Literature and Oral Narratives:

An analysis of the classic Punjabi folktales and poetic writings including Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnu, Mirza Sahiba and Sohni Mahiwal will lead us to explore gender identities and ways in which its rendition reflects varied contours of feminine

assertion as well as resistance in the pre-fundamentalist culture.

Sufi Poetry and Mystic Literature:
"Folk Feminism" will be grounded in the 15th and 16th centuries through the textual output of poets such as Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, Waris Shah, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh and others who have preached gender inclusivity, spiritual equality and humanism.

Contemporary Cultural Texts:
Looking at modern day Punjabi songs, TV content, and stage appearances (2000-2025), how is religious conservatism articulated in morality and gendered discourse, we will seek to discover.

Religious Discourse of Pressure Groups:
Official communication, social media, and public communication by leaders of TLP and TTP will be studied to investigate how ideology narratives that dictate morality, womanhood, cultural purity emerge.

Secondary Sources
Scholarly writings on Punjabi culture, Sufism, feminism, and religious nationalism in Pakistan.
Media analyses and reports on censorship, women's visibility, and attacks on cultural
expression
Academic discussions on postcolonial identity, Islamization, and cultural hegemony

Data Collection Procedures
Data collection will follow a documentary and archival research approach:
Collect written texts, lyrics, poetry, and public documents from print and digital archives, including translated anthologies and academic databases.
Select representative samples from both pre-1980s folk traditions (reflecting pluralism) and post-2000s cultural production (reflecting religious influence).
Use purposive sampling to ensure that selected texts meaningfully represent contrasting ideological eras.

Data Analysis Methods
The study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary analytical method, complemented by comparative textual analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)
Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the analysis is advanced as follows:
Textual Level Analyze word choice, metaphors, and visuals for women, love, and moralistic behavior in folk and modern texts
Discursive Practice Level Links: Examine the ways in which religious stories construct new moral codes and interpret what it means to be female in Punjab.
Level of Social Practice: Relate these changes to larger sociopolitical trends, such as Islamization, gender prescriptions, and cultural nationalism.

Comparative Textual Analysis

Folk and Sufi texts will be juxtaposed with religious and cultural texts of today in order to track:

Changes in how women are depicted (from being central, influential figures to moralized or invisible characters).

Cultural values (humanism to moral orthodoxy).

Pluralistic and female symbolism depleting from Punjabi art forms

The aim taken in this analysis is to demonstrate how religious discourse functions by letting feminist cultural heritage recede to the background and filling the symbolic power gap as a moral authority.

Literature Review

A Book on Feminist and Egalitarian Features of Traditional Folk Punjabi Culture

Such brimming with flirtatious back and fro, such liquid reserve Traditional and Modern Punjabi folk culture Born of the soil and Sufi humanism remains the fine feminine, egalitarian ethos down the ages Intangible customs like trinjan (female collective of spinning, singing) were cultural pockets where women had their expression through voices of feelings and desires also making resistance against patriarchal authority [(Political Pandora, n.d.); (Riphah & Riaz 2024)]. While the qissas (Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnu, Mirza Sahiban) highlight the rebel and female protagonist who goes against family and societal norms for love and freedom. Zubair, Zaheer & Muzammil (2024) rightly note that

these narratives, though are in some cases indeed tragic stories but they present women as agents of sense-moral and emotion not just helpless victims. While critiquing of male power has been encoded along with resistance in Punjabi proverbs, Nasir, Hussain & Hussain (2024) noted.

Nasir and Ghalib Hussain (2024) also underscore the punjabi wedding songs lok geet as a site of ethnography of everyday forms of women's common sense resistance. These are songs that temper conformity and rebellion, ones where women (and all of society) can work out their frustrations in accepted performative rituals. Sanjarani et al. (2024) and Noor & Riaz (2024) revealed that in the Sufi tradition of Punjabi and Urdu poetry, women's spirituality is gendered—women are interpreted to long for divine, defeminizing emotion into spiritual power. Awan's, (2017) the "feminine metaphor" in Punjabi poetics again confirms an argument concerning early Punjabi literature favouring tenderness, sensuousness and exposure to feelings-qualities culture-gendered feminine but when spiritually examined through a Sufi lens elevated to high regard.

These works emphasize that folk culture in Punjab had always been a symbolic economy in which there was a place for women. Women's creativity— in songs, verses, and communal rituals—was wrapped into a set of harmonious community norms inspired by nature and humanistic spirituality rather than moral orthodoxy.

Cultural Shock: Sociopolitical/Religious sources of??cultural??transition

While the feminist fervour of Punjabi folk culture, loosened by 20th century transformations of Pakistan's social, political and ideological edifices. The Islamisation drive of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) had a significant impact in this direction, with the result that secularism was pushed back and indigenous (regional), and pluralist cultural forms from within Pakistan diminished (also see Chaudhry 2022; Rafi, 2019). Not only Punjabi culture, previously considered a threat

are brought to the brink as Urdu centered nationalism treated them and at the time of state identity recast on the lines of monolithic Islamic ideology (Mahmood & Ali, 2021).

They show that traditionalist (patriarchal) readings of religion and culture play an influential role in securing girls' access to education; they thereby reinforce systemic inequalities, which reflect broader social dynamics. Equally, Salahuddin, Ahmed and Nasim (2023) argue that efforts at women's empowerment are limited by deeply rooted socio-religious hierarchies which uphold morality and respectability in conservative terms. Saeed's (2011) classic ethnographic account Forgotten Faces: Daring Women of the Pakistani Folk Theater shows how there was a time, when women performers who were stars in the Punjabi stage, were ostracized to social peripheries under moralist glare.

There is more cultural policing since the advent of populist religious movements. Researchers note how the nature of protection afforded to artists and their art has been taken over by: "contemporary religious mobilization, which amounts to policing art in Pakistan's public sphere" (Khurshid & Tabassum & Zulfiqar, 2023). Seeking through this ideological well, women's presence in the cultural realm has been reduced collectively as Islamism further prescribes public morality and gender conduct (Mahmood & Ali, 2021; Raza, 2020).

Religious Interest Groups and the Transformation of Gender and Culture

Religious groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have developed an unparalled web of societal religious influence in last few decades. Their discourse revolves around moral cleansing, blasphemy politics and patriarchal domination of public spaces (Yusuf, 2023). And although we know very little about their cultural impact in Punjab from the scholarly material, studies of similar Islamist movements teach us about how religious populism realigns gender relationships and the aesthetics of public space. Aziz, Ali and Khan (2021) demonstrate how patriarchal codes such as Pashtun wali entangle with religion to carry forward male dominance—a pattern reflected in Punjab's religious moralism.

Studies on religious ideology in Pakistan educational and media discourses (Khalid & Rehman, 2022; Bukhari & Azam, 2025), reveal that moral conservatism has been naturalized via the cultural apparatus. Safdar & Siddique (2024) look at Punjabi stage dramas to explore how humour and irony reproduce misogyny, body shaming and gender policing as part of the larger social process of normalizing sexist attitudes. Also, Mir (2018) and Nasir et al. (2024) expose a phenomenon of linguistic misogyny in Punjabi proverbs whereby mundane vernacular reiterates patriarchal norms that match with the `religiously sanctioned' control of women.

Combined, these studies substantiate that pressure groups—such as TLP and TTP—are not independent entities but rather are the product of long-term religious re-socialization that reconciles cultural morality with political Islam. They are not limited to the domain of politics but stretch across symbolic realms of what counts as "honorable," "authentic" or even "moral" culture.

Impact on Women's Representation, Agency and Cultural Production

The net result of these changes has been the silencing of women in Punjabi cultural production. Zubair et al. (2024) point out that there have been growing trends to objectifying women in men modern re-framing of Punjabi folklore stories tantamount to the silencing of their voices. Safdar and Siddique (2024) describe analogous patterns in popular cultural theater, in which female performers are belittled as

objects of derision instead of as valued contributors to culture.

Mahmood and Ali (2021) and Afreen, Tehseem, & Laila (2024) find that gender representation in Pakistani culture is still an indication of social power relationship, where male-centered norms dominate cultural production hence denying women the space to shape themselves as subjects. A scoping review conducted by Aslam et al. (2022) in BMC Women's Health found that gender discrimination is widely prevalent under all sectors of Pakistan, which is perpetuated through cultural, religious and legal narratives.

In the Punjabi folk tradition, women's voices which were enhanced as part of a collective identity have been muted by moral policing and censor (Saeed 2011). Performers, writers and singers are subjected to institutional as well as informal constraints created by the religiously charged restrictions against female visibility and performance (Safdar & Siddique, 2024). And thus, progressively rather than suddenly, we see the gradual displacement of pluralist/confessional Punjabi culture by its obscurantist opposite with the latter's puritanical turn.

Indigenous Identity, Religious Nationalism, and the Transformation of Culture

The transition from folk humanism to religious nationalism in Punjab mirrors greater postcolonial identity battles. Felt unnoticed during the state-sponsored neglect of Punjabi language and Sufi pluralism, cultural dominance shifted from community-held property to that of the clerics and political elites (Chaudhry, 2022; Noor & Riaz, 2024). This displacement, according to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, is a transfer of symbolic power: religious elites now have the say in defining cultural authority.

Research on language politics suggested that Punjabi has been purposefully repressed in order to promote Urdu, leading to what Ahmad (2021) refers to as "linguistic self-estrangement", a situation where the Punjabis have moved away from their roots. Writing in the medium of essay collections such as Language, Faith and Power (2023), this linguistic marginalization is tied to moral homogenization in which women's voices and variability across space from regional accents is treated with suspicion, as Non-Muslim.

Using a feminist lens, we can also see the double colonization that people from postcolonial societies face as now explained by Chandra Mohanty (2003) under the term "postcolonial feminism" women in postcolonial contexts continue to be colonized at ideological and patriarchal levels. Folk feminism and its subsequent transformation to fundamentalism, in Punjab reflects this double subjugation where the local religion of nationalism intersects with femininity to efface gurgling native feminine identities.

Summary of Gaps and Theoretical Contributions

Although there is an increasing literature on gender, culture and Islamisation in Pakistan, it has left a vacuum both theoretically and empirically as far as how the disorganization component of Punjab? cultural feminism is being transformed under the impact of religious pressure groups. There are, however, all too few studies of the intersectional dynamics that connect the two in other words, how religious populism systematically transforms gendered cultural identities.

Current scholarship has a tendency to excavate cultural artifacts as if they are of a world apart from the social and political realm in which they are re-appropriated. Folklore, of course, is not a form to begin with; it's content has often been passive

tradition, not active ideological contestation. But Punjabi culture that is embodied in Heer, Jugni, Boliyaan, and Sufi Kafi has always been dialogic and fluid; mediating between folk spirituality and institutional religion. This conversation, in our time, has become hijacked by orthodoxy as pressure groups like TLP and TTP claim the moral territory of culture, redrawing lines between what is "Islamic" and what is "immoral". The melas and dholkis in which women sang and danced have gone, replaced with men-only religious congresses who could occupy a superior moral high ground through their insistence on disciplined conduct. Jugni's mocking, salacious verses become staidly moralizing ones that erase most of her subversive wit: As a figure of fun, Jugni is possibly threatening; as someone who likes to boast about how good she herself is, she becomes atleast ideologically safe for the middle class. Again, the TV versions of Heer Ranjha have little vibrancy to Heer's resistance as being to desire or life today also creating her a pristinely pure family dutiful daughter. These are passages that figure the incapacitate of female subjectivity and Punjabi ancestry within patriarchal moral rhetoric.

Mediating between the two is this study, which intervenes in order to consider such turns very specifically discursively; it analyses the conceptual shifts through which Punjabi culture has been re- articulated away from an organic feminism and Sufi egalitarianism towards a religious nationalism and patriarchal ethics. It deploys Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodological tool toward critically looking at how such changes linguistically and symbolically seal upon cultural texts such as, proverbs, songs, popular dramas, in public discourse.

The study theory base was Feminist Cultural Theory, Postcolonial feminism and Bourdieu, about the symbolic power, making it possible to analyzed culture as a contested site of ideology.

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further offers us a theoretical scaffold from which to consider how Punjabi womanhood, once performed through song, and gesture (oral narrative), has been re-disciplined under religious surveillance. Once an identity and solidarity performance between women, a song or dance or story-telling is now accused of being performed in
vétité or sin. This transformation reveals that performative gender spaces are politically made and enforced.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), on the other hand, situates this within a larger critique of how "Third World women" have become essentialised under colonial and neo-patriarchal discourses. In the case of Pakistan, religious nationalism yield a similar homogenization: Punjabi women transformed into vessels not of cultural creativity but collective honor whose voice must be managed to maintain the ideological purity of the nation. Mohanty's concept of discursive colonization" gives an illuminating insight into how women's autonomy and customs are colonized by state and religious discourse to "preserve" them.

Symbolic power is a synthesis of the above discussion that can be deepened with Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic power to understand how cultural transformation gives rise to a struggle for who has right authority over determining and legitimating meaning in relation to cultural capital. In pre-Islamization Punjab the Sufi poets and folk singers and the village women shared the symbolic capital in narrating song, performance, and music. "Today, this capital is in the hands of men of religion and male clerical chiefs who alone have moral authority". Damn, it's not just an aesthetic from Heer's snubity-snobity to Heer's renown but evidence of a

structural realignment of cultural power.

These conceptual tools provide the means by which this investigation is able to expose ideological processes silencing feminist under/currents in Punjabi culture. They also highlight the discursive violence implicit in overlaying heterogeneous cultural practices, whether pluralist and inclusive or gender fluid, with unitary religious imperatives.

The present study will reveal such a politics of reinterpretation, how cultural symbols, which once functioned as figures for freedom, desire and divine love, are reinscribed as technologies of conformity and moral injunction. So, when Bulleh Shah once sang (and by singing offered resistance to spiritual authority): "Bullah ki jaana main kaun", what becomes of it within present routines of interpretation is an allegory of feminine submission. This re-signification is similar to what Butler calls "the resignification of identity through regulatory norms."

This study based Punjabi transformation in cultural terms an interdisciplinary theoretical subsector that had at once met a scholarly void, as well produced a model by which to analyze similar instances of cultural erasure elsewhere in the Global South. It is a feminist cultural theory because it shows how indigenous emancipatory and inclusive local traditions can be internally colonized by moralists. In so doing, it reconceptualizes culture not only as religious or the political turn of "Islamization," but as a gendered mediation on the symbolic reconfiguration of power and rewriting (or, more accurately, writing anew) what authenticity, purity and girlhood mean in Punjab after partition.

Finding and discussion:

The study, in short, unearths a fundamental transformation of Punjabi cultural life, the change from liquid folk feminism to solid moral fundamentalism. Punjabi culture has in the past cherished the voices of women through their vocal performance in visible gender-specific fields such as oral traditions, poetry and Sufi singing. The women of Punjab whether through Heer or Sassi, Jugni and Sahiba were not the objects of desire but subjects, not monuments but signposts to resistance. Their songs and stories, their sayings, expressed something like an emotional intelligence, a sexuality and a profound moral imagination that frequently undermined patriarchal as well as feudal power. Yet over the last two decades, this balance of cultural power has undergone a process of symbolic reordering on religious pressure groups' ideological motion like the TLP and TTP. Over the centuries, these marchings have helped to shape culture talk into moral surveillance; they have reshaped womanhood Art: silenced constraints on self-formation that softened little reservoirs of unspoken power.

Using critical discourse analysis of folk lore and talk, serials (television), song remakes, Facebook trends etc., the article argues that women's expressive authority in Punjabi community has been strategically dislocated. In earlier versions of Heer Ranjha, Heer was a vocal and politically conscious rebellious girl fighting against family power. But in more contemporary re-enactments aired on religiously observant television networks, her activism is recast as moral infraction, a gesture of humility rather than rebellion. And, in similar mocking challenges, the mischievous and irreverent Jugni has been re-propped on a discourse of devotion unfortunately devoid of irony and female subjectivity to tame her radical critique about hypocrisy and authority (Rafi, 2019; Noor & Riaz, 2024). These discursive moves point readers

towards Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, whereby the signification of what it means to be feminine is produced through continuous cultural performances that are disciplined by power. A performative gesture of emancipation has turned now into a ritualized performance of piety.

The transformation is also linguistic. Proverbs and proverbs-kin, idioms, poetic tropes that long- celebrated women's wit and resilience have been moralized into instruments of control. A saying such as "aurat di akal pair vich" (meaning, woman's wisdom lies in her feet) originally meant ironically, yet to be shared among both groups who are the most aware of and experienced with communal life of humiliation now is offered as moral truth from pulpits and media talk shows this very day. We suggest this rewired discourse represents what Bourdieu (1986; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) has referred to as symbolic power, the capacity of dominant groups to interdict new meanings

that reorganize collective sense-making. The vernacular — once a realm of irony and resistance — reflects ideological domination This re-signification, found in cultural texts such as the stage play, chat shows and music videos re-conceptualizes femininity as an immoral threat to be stifled rather than praised (Safdar & Siddique, 2024).

This symbolic colonization, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has shown, stands in for the logic of colonial discourse that set women up as dependent subjects requiring regulation and protection.'. Meanwhile, religious conservatism does much the same in present-day Punjab – depositing women as community virtue-signalers even as it robs them of the gift of cultural voice. This quagmire is the crux of the postmodern Punjabi gender vice, where women are valorized for moral integrity but deprived altogether of their creative sensibility that was emblematic of cultural wholesomeness on this soil.

Movements like TLP and TTP have also produced a politics of visibility, powerful elites disappear in thin air when the going gets tough. The language of hurmat and ghairat in public discourse is employed as a justification to curtail women's cultural expression. Public festivals like Basant and Lok Mela, used to be an expression of the 'vibrancy,' if we may use that clichéd term, of Punjabi pluralism have been declared "un-Islamic" or "obscene." These kinds of bans and censorship (of female artistes) on one hand, and gender-specific environments on the other echo 'moral policing' of women's public presence (Chaudhry 2022; Yusuf 2023). The process is one element, according to Foucault's analysis of internalization of surveillance, when people begin observing their own behaviour on ideological terms of desires and requirements. They make out of the increased stakes of women's bodies the battleground in which to fight the war for moral purity, converting cultural mastery into self-restraint.

Nonetheless, in these acts of erasure the study identifies counter flows of resistance that contrast with homogenizing processes on Punjabi culture. Punjabi idiom is being re-appropriated by women artists, poets, and digital media activists in contemporary times to re-inscribe agency. The kind of project like "Girls at Dhabas" and artists like Meesha Shafi or Natasha Bajwa are taking back the public sphere and forms of language that have historically been denied to women. Their production uses the Punjabi idiom functionally, as a feminist medium and without spiritual habit. If you read re- imaginations of Heer Ranjha on the internet, if you watch Sufi poetry on the web, they aren't representing Heer as a tragic victim but a figure who survived and resisted and that's what fits with Butler's theory – repeating itself can be subversive.

By reenacting cultural scripts in new contexts these women unsettle the borders of what is defensible femininity and, in so doing, they also re-open sites of feminist cultural revitalization.

Young Punjabis are resurrecting cultural forms that not so long ago were stamped down and out. From community theaters to underground musical collectives and rogue Basant festivals, unceded spaces are making a comeback in Lahore — and even Faisalabad and Multan. What these acts of cultural resurgence symbolize is more than nostalgia; they signal a desire to revisit an inclusive, Sufistic humanism that had once founded the historical self-image of Punjab (Safdar and Siddique 2024). Implicit in the revival is a critique of the authoritarian moralism that religious populism seeks to enforce — a jeremiad of joy, color and female voice at Punjabi core.

The results also indicate a shift in the structure of cultural authority. But where the village traditions that shaped folk were once dedicated to shared experience, ours is dominated today by arenas of institutional and political humiliation. Religious clerics and the political and media elite have become cultural custodians, deciding what qualifies as “authentic” Punjabi speech. The field of symbolic capital, the monopoly on symbolic capital, which does not differ greatly from the provision with which Pierre Bourdieu (1986) opened up his investigation of cultural hierarchy 18 those who have the means for the production of culture, those also hold a monopoly over its legitimate existence. To give women the kind of center stage that has always been central to performativity in Punjab, this heritage would constitute a challenge to the ideological industry of restraint and obedience, to which visible female creativity simply doesn´t fit.

Stating these findings, the study argues that such pressure groups have in fact played a crucial role in recasting a gynocentric-communel heritage of Punjab into to primitivist-moralist-patriarchial society. But the persistence of folk memory, and the preservation of subversive re-readings, along with quiet returns to expressions that finessed a link between Sufism and femaleness makes clear that this erasing is not absolute or uncontested. Power, as Butler (1990) and Foucault have taught us is never so pure; it produces its own counter-discourse. There is a new articulation along any silencing.

So the story of Punjabi culture under siege by religion is more than just one of loss; it’s also a story of tension — between repression and creativity, between imposed modesty and self-assertion. The transition from folk feminism to fundamentalism remains a work in process, but it’s also partly reversible. In the opponent law-breaking bustle of a Basant, in the verses of a feminist poet summoning Ishq as resistance, and Jugni’s unrepentant digital reincarnations today, Punjab continues to speak in multiple tongues of dissent. The problem isn’t that folk feminism is dying, it’s how it’s being reincarnated in the era of moral authoritarianism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The formation of Popular culture in Pakistan expresses the violent struggle between its historical pluralism and the forces of religious moralization that are currently at work. Where recently Punjabi culture was known for female expressiveness, wit, sexuality and Sufi egalitarianism Tarar argued we find that "Punjabi society is being symbolically reconfigured under ideological pressure from groups such as the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and the Taliban" Sahir Mirza. The feminine voice that at one time enlivened Punjabi orality and performativity has been displaced by

these operations through discourse, censorship and institutional power relations, replaced with messages of deference, purity and lack.

What this research signals is that the change in Punjabi culture is not just aesthetic but epistemological; it signifies a change in how knowledge, morality and identity are made culturally. This linguistic, performative and institutional evidence cuts across the media scape, peopling both folk art as well as every day talk, thereby proving the hypothesis of this study–that due to the rise of religious pressure groups Punjabi folk feminism has been converted into a patriarchal moral order. The reinvention of Heer as subservient, the silencing of Jugni's insubordinate contra-voice and the moral policing of public festivals all mark the more general ideological enterprise to manage gendered subjectivity.

The results confirm Butler's (1990) perception of gender being performatively produced in regulatory orders, and Bourdieu's (1986) claim that also symbolic power maintains the social hierarchy through cultural domination. In this regard, Punjabi culture is a site at which patriarchal and feminist forces clash over the signification of meaning and authenticity. Mohanty's (2003) critique of discursive colonization is particularly prescient: like the project of colonialism reconfiguring indigenous women as subjects to be morally rectified, so does Today's religious populism refashion Punjabi women as representations of piety to be disciplined and contained within a moral order.

But the study also uncovers counter-currents that undercut this moral dominion. Through the popular media and feminist art, and in ways so unexpected as reappropriation of folk symbology, new generations—especially women—have mythologized their own identity. Cultural Resistance such as the resurgence of Basant festival Re-reading Heer Ranjha from a feminist perspective the artist activist led renaissance of Punjabi language India is under dense cultural resistance. Such expressions reinvigorate a feminist spirit so deeply woven in the tapestry of Punjab, which considers emotional maturity, play of wit and moral courage above sheer meekness. They remind us that despite its ideological subjection, the creative imagination of Punjab is strong, not brittle; and it is resolute as well as deeply humanist.

More generally the study is a reminder that cultural change does not simply occur in isolation from political power. The Islamization of cultural conversation in Pakistan is a political project to lay claim over gender and morality. This also re-casts not only definitions of citizenship, but it also shifts definitions of being a "good" Pakistani or a "pious" Punjabi – one often has to be shaped into model femininity and masculinity (which is created by religious elites). And that is what the skirmish over culture is, a skirmish over nation and memory and belonging.

On the theoretical level, this study aims to intervene in the feminist cultural studies by marrying Butler's performativity with Bourdieu's symbolic power within a South Asian postcolonial condition. It demonstrates the workings of local religious populism, as a form of internal colonization in reproducing gender hierarchies not via foreign imposition but with a home-based encounter with moral discourse. Punjab's case demonstrates how ideology filters through language, rituals and art so as to alter the very grammar of ordinary lives.

Recommendations:

Cultural Policy Reform:

Regional policies ensuring and promoting regional cultural diversity, particularly through artistic works by women, are urgently required. Provincial culture departments and the Pakistan National Council of the Arts need to support folk festivals, theater and music that help us learn about women's contribution to our Punjabi culture.

Educational and Linguistic Revitalization:

The inclusion of the Punjabi language, folk and Sufi literary tradition in schools would help to restore pluralist ethos as well with moral uniformity imposed by extremists contestable. Heer Ranjha and Bulleh Shah can be taught as feminist texts, philosophical ones; thinking of one's forged belly-chain would resonate easily with young people.

Media Responsibility and Representation:

Introductory texts (like initial in-depth Bible and Qur' ān studies etc.) on public and private media networks need to focus mindfully about gender equitable portrayals in the field of drama, music as well as talk shows. But censor boards must not allow censorship to mute women creatively in the name of moral shield.

Empowerment through Digital Platforms:

Digital and social media turn out to be sites of cultural reimagination. Supporting women as well as regional artists in their of independent digital projects is also a small step towards reclaiming Punjabi narratives from ideological manipulation and for cross border conversation with the Punjabi diasporic.

Further Research:

"With regard to the future, there is a need for further research on class, language and gender in the transforming Punjabi identity; a comparative study of Punjabi culture in India and Pakistan." Such a cross-border lens might help to reveal how religious nationalism has distinctively influenced gendered cultural expressions across shared linguistic traditions.

Concluding Reflection

The destruction of Punjabi culture in the face of religious blackmail is a tragedy but also a testament. It demonstrates how porous cultural memory is to a certain ideology, and yet how incredibly stubborn it is. Already, the hushed strains of Heer, the laughter peels of Jugni and the nameless village women balladeers' numbers reverberate in an amorphous collective consciousness that Punjab is."These are tunes that wish to be played again and told all over again. The task of academics, artists and policy makers is not only to mourn what has been destroyed, but also to revive the feminist soul of this rich heritage of Punjab that has always struggled for equality and sought liberation from various forms of domination of colonial, feudal or religious.

As long as we speak, sing and live Punjabi, we keep alive its feminist spirit — perhaps in whispers (certainly not over) but never put out. So the tale of Punjab is not just one of disappearance but also of survival: a dialogue between memory and power

— an unfinished dialogue, that, between silenced and speaking, between folk feminism and fundamentalism.

Ethical Considerations

The relatively low level of ethical risk associated with the study is due to not collecting any respondent data other than publicly available texts and documents. The research will not, however, discriminate in any way among these religious materials but will treat all of them with academic impartiality and cultural respect. the interpretations would be prevented from being influenced by individual or doctrinal determinations, and turned exclusively toward the discourse, and the representation of it in its social and cultural context."

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