


FORUM ESSAY

Critical Forum: What is Critical Pakistan Studies?

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Introduction

Mubbashir Rizvi

This forum of short essays features interdisciplinary reflections from geography, anthropology, and art criticism that move beyond state-centric frameworks about Pakistani history and culture. The contributors reflect on theoretical and comparative frameworks that contribute to broader debates on identity, post/colonial sovereignty, aesthetic forms, and the perennial state of crises that has come to define Pakistan at the contemporary moment.

The scholarship on Pakistan has been shaped by Cold War Area Studies paradigms, the global war on terror, by short-lived geopolitical frameworks such as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), AF-PAK (Afghanistan and Pakistan), and the emerging China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In navigating these dynamics, the Pakistani state strategically promotes its official narratives concerning national identity and strategic location by tying its economic, political, and strategic goals to the desires, fears, and demands of the international community, that is, the North Atlantic states. These frameworks narrow the field of analysis where Pakistan is understood through problems defined by outside forces and unelected bureaucrats and less so by social and grassroots movements, thus coloring how critical topics like security, development, overpopulation, and terrorism are understood and discussed.

Pakistanis, as Naveeda Khan argues in this volume, often wonder how the complex problems endured by 200 million people are overshadowed by Euro-American representations of what is happening there on the ground. W. E. B. Du Bois called this kind of awareness *a double consciousness*: “This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks

on in amused contempt and pity.”¹ There is a corpus of trade and scholarly publications on Pakistan that presume to explain the country’s problems like “corruption,” “militarism,” “terrorism,” or tribalism based on some innate cultural trait or institutional failure without treating them as a symptom of broader historical processes and/or related to a global system that rewards anti-democratic military regimes. The task of “Critical Pakistan Studies” is to open up the space to interrogate the received categories of ethnicity, citizenship, and religious identities. Another task is to recover the histories that have been excised from the national narrative when they have been found to be at odds with prevailing norms about Muslim pasts such as the relationship to Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh relics and other uncomfortable truths about the postcolonial history of East Pakistan and the regional struggles for greater representation.

One of the obstacles to opening up Critical Pakistan Studies as a critical space of inquiry is the status of “Pakistan Studies.” Within Pakistan, the term is associated with state indoctrination. Young people are taught a “two-nation theory,” the history of Muslim empires in South Asia, the Muslim reform movements, Mohammad Iqbal’s vision for a Muslim Indian state, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s pursuit of Pakistan to ensure Muslim sovereignty (not minority rights) in the run up to Independence. As humorously noted by Ibn Insha in his satirical work *Urdu ki Aakhri Kitaab*, in Pakistan it is easy to find Punjabi people, Sindhi people, Baloch people, and Pakhtun people, but Pakistani people are hard to find in Pakistan.² Pakistan Studies narratives are often subject to satirical treatment or gallows humor such as the replacement of “Pakistan Zindabad” (long live Pakistan) with “Zinda Bhaag” (run for you life).

The state’s failure in this regard to create an all-encompassing identity has earned it labels such as “weak” or “insufficiently imagined.”³ Conversely, other scholars like Naveeda Khan have pointed to the peculiarity of Pakistani nationalism as a utopian project, a nationalism not based on metaphors of territory, blood, and soil but rather on aspirations of Muslim universalism and sovereignty.⁴ The absence of an all-encompassing national identity in Pakistan has resulted in the rise of ethnic-nationalist parties that promote alternative visions of federated, multinational polity or separate secessionist aspirations. These movements have endured severe repression, and some at other times have been co-opted by the state. The Pakistani military has been one of the key obstacles to the resolution of the national problem due to its repeated pattern of coups and martial law that erodes free range of discussion, debate, and the possibility to forge democratic consensus around fundamental issues.

The dominance of the military in Pakistan’s political, economic, and cultural spheres has further hindered the growth of democratic governance. However, challenges to military rule have emerged in every decade, with nascent political movements advocating for local empowerment through regional autonomy, linguistic recognition, and constitutional rule of law.

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2008).

² Ibne Insha, *Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitaab* (Karachi, Pakistan: Maktab-e-Danyaal, 1977).

³ Philip Oldenburg, “A Place Insufficiently Imagined: Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44.4 (1985): 711–33; Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London, Jonathan Cape: 1983).

⁴ Naveeda Khan, *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

Since the 1970s, religion has been used by the Pakistani state to counter populist demands for recognition, with Islamist political parties shaping populist discourse through movements like Tablighi Jamaat and sectarian parties clashing over the perceived threats regarding Prophet Mohammad's finality as God's messenger, the status of the Prophet's companions (*Sahaba*), and the eminence of the Prophet's Family. Despite these challenges, the ongoing debate raises fundamental questions about identity, such as who speaks for Pakistan and who gets to define the meaning of Pakistan.

For this forum, we asked noted scholars of Pakistan to reflect on which theoretical, comparative frameworks or revisions have proven most insightful in developing a critical approach to Pakistan Studies. To this end, Majed Akhter sees "Critical Pakistan Studies" as a call to dismantle essentialist assumptions, proposing new analytical building blocks rooted in subaltern and people's histories. For Akhter this project involves close examination of spatial and infrastructural developments to understand how the Pakistani state materializes as a source of connection or dispossession across the region. Naveeda Khan's essay on the Pakistani delegation at the 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP27) delves into how Pakistan routinely uses its position of vulnerability to maneuver diplomatically, but also to critique international political norms and double standards that keep it (and many developing countries) in a state of perpetual crisis. Iftikhar Dadi focuses on the dearth of art criticism and cultural analyses to fully apprehend the significance of emerging social-cultural trends. Dadi calls for a more circumspect and reflective criticism that is attuned to the rich tradition of commentary, criticism of aesthetic forms, and the vernacular repertoire in engagement with critical theory. The growth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international cultural patronage for arts, drama, and visual culture has resulted in a topical and often reactive impulse to use art for advocacy that overlooks a rich and nested tradition that can still be found in some works of cinema (*Zinda Bhaag*), and art (Lala Rukh's paintings).

The essays in this forum come at an exciting time in Pakistan Studies when young scholars are pushing the politics of location and identity of Pakistan in broader historical and comparative contexts. A new body of work in history, religious studies, women's studies, and anthropology is trying to recover contemporary history left out of textbooks as well as disentangling public imaginaries of nationalism, ethnicity, gender, and religion. We hope that Critical Pakistan Studies can become a venue for this critical scholarship and exchange.

The Hatchet and the Seed

Majed Akhter

Within a year of each other, two lavish new museums in Lahore opened their doors. The Army Museum opened in September 2017, and the National History Museum (NHM) in July 2018. While the NHM's centering of oral history accounts is exciting, both museums ultimately present truncated and misguided narratives about Pakistan. The NHM doesn't mention Bangladesh's 1971 civil war and independence struggle, arguably the most crucial event in Pakistan's history. Meanwhile, the Army Museum proclaims with all seriousness that Pakistan's independence in 1947

merely “re-established the status quo ante,” a “rebirth” of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization.

The need for Critical Pakistan Studies has never been more urgent. Declaring a scholarly field as “critical” is a call to arms. Critical Pakistan Studies – as a journal and as a community of researchers and educators, is an invitation to produce a new type of scholarship about Pakistan. Critical scholarship on Pakistan needs both the hatchet and the seed, to steal an agrarian metaphor from geographer Paul Robbins.⁵ One hand wields a hatchet to mow down tired assumptions of what Pakistan is and how it should be studied. The other hand plants a seed, to nurture a different type of scholarship about Pakistan and its people. Together, the hatchet and the seed enact an alternative scholarly way of knowing Pakistan.

Begin with the hatchet. The hatchet targets overgrowth – the disproven and misguided thicket of assumptions that continue to guide mainstream scholarship. I can gesture to four of these: the territorial trap, geo-cultural essentialism, Pakistani exceptionalism, and elite vantage points. Much research – not just about Pakistan – falls prey to the “territorial trap” or methodological nationalism.⁶ To fall into the territorial trap is to assume that all crucial dynamics occur neatly within the container of the territorial state. But flows of ideas, people, nature, and goods regularly transgress national boundaries. There is no better example of a constitutive, transborder flow than the Indus River, which hydraulically binds Pakistan to upstream India, all attempts of the Indus Waters Treaty and the Indus Basin Plan notwithstanding.⁷

Another trap is geo-cultural essentialism – to reduce a given area and people to one trait or feature. In studies of Pakistan, this essence might be Muslim, Eastern, Asian, underdeveloped, or authoritarian. But of course, Pakistan – like all other states and societies – is irreducibly complex. A related analytical assumption is exceptionalism – the idea that Pakistan is so unique that theories, concepts, and experiences from elsewhere have no application. Mainstream scholars in all countries insist that their countries are somehow distinctive cases – but we live in a connected world, and no region evolves independently.

Finally, there is the idea of vantage point. From the vantage point of the US State Department, the most critical thing about Pakistan may be its security threat. But for most people who care about the country, it is many other things – a homeland to return to; a place to work, to raise a family, to make meaning, and to struggle with, for, and against. Even while living in the same city, Pakistan means something entirely different to, for example, a wealthy Punjabi Sunni man and a working-class Hindu woman. Vantage point matters – and a critical approach to the study of Pakistan should question the vantage points of the elite and powerful and seek to bolster the vantage points of the vulnerable and marginalized, which are usually erased from the conversation.

⁵ Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

⁶ John Agnew, “The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory,” *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 53–80.

⁷ Majed Akhter, “The Hydropolitical Cold War: The Indus Waters Treaty and State Formation in Pakistan,” *Political Geography* 46 (2015): 65–75.

Now, the seed – I want to propose three aspects of an alternate perspective, drawing on my background in political geography and development studies. The first is the crucial distinction between nation and state. The nation is an imagined political community – a group of people assumed to have common political interests and duties in common. It is a project, a work in progress. Nations are contested, resisted, and adored – often simultaneously. On the other hand, a state is the bureaucratic-military apparatus of rule – the entity that levies taxes, declares wars, dispenses formal justice, and exercises the right to eminent domain. The state attempts to monopolize the national narrative – as the opening of this commentary suggests – and considers oppositional or alternative nationalisms anathema. Given the explicit history of the militarized Punjabi domination of the Pakistani state, it is no surprise that the nation gets contested. Critical scholars should enforce distance between the nation (the aspirational political community of the people) and the state (the apparatus of rule). If the state is the sole spokesperson of the nation, critique is extinguished. Especially in diasporic contexts, it is tempting to conflate the love of the nation with the defense of the state – but this is a fatal mistake.

The second building block is relational comparison.⁸ Rather than studying Pakistan in an isolated and atomistic way, the region should be analyzed through connections, shared trajectories, and divergences with other related places over extended periods. This approach is not the old-fashioned comparison that lists similarities in one column and differences in another, but a way to study broader processes (e.g., urbanization, globalization, commodification, patriarchy) as they unfold in connected ways in distinct places. The comparisons and connections with the rest of South Asia are apparent. But other possibilities abound – Egypt, Turkey, and Indonesia in a national frame; Central Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, or the “Muslim World” in a regional framework.⁹ Relational comparison is the antidote to essentialism and exceptionalism, as it highlights the dynamic and interdependent regional evolution.

Critical studies of Pakistan must engage with the ethical, representational, and historiographical questions raised by the Subaltern Studies project. Who has permission to narrate what Pakistan is? Or what land relations in a “developed” Pakistan should look like?¹⁰ How (and why) should scholars represent the political consciousness and demands of the powerless? It includes Pakistan’s poor and its political, religious, and sexual minorities. Many academics based in the United States/United Kingdom – part of the postrepresentational wave – want to move on from the challenge thrown down by Subaltern Studies. However, the questions raised by this tradition, deepening and stretching the thought of Antonio Gramsci around the intertwined politics of power and representation, cannot be wished away. And

⁸ Gillian Hart, “Relational Comparison Revisited: Marxist Postcolonial Geographies in Practice,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 3 (2018): 371–94.

⁹ Majed Akhter, “Muslim Peripheries: A World Regional Perspective.” *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2023): 20438206231191738.

¹⁰ Abdul Aijaz, “State, Scarcity, and Survival: A Minor History of People and Place in the Lower Bari Doab, Punjab,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/25148486221147172?icid=int.sj-abstract.citing-articles.1> [accessed September 21, 2023]); Mubbashir Rizvi, *The Ethics of Staying: Social Movements and Land Rights Politics in Pakistan* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Nosheen Anwar, “The Politics of the Commons in Karachi,” *Antipode* 44, no. 3 (2012): 601–20.

especially not in Pakistan, where most of the population has been subject to generations of oppression and state violence – and where professional scholars and researchers tend to constitute a relatively superprivileged group, especially in the diaspora.

We need both the hatchet and the seed to critique the field's existing state and enact new ways of understanding. There are many reasons to be wary of the idea of “Pakistan Studies” –exceptionalism, essentialism, and the risk of uncritically conflating state and nation. But – and this is the aporetic crux – we cannot help but be politically and emotionally invested in the category and the aspirations of the people it represents. There is already a rich tradition of critical scholarship.¹¹ In this space between the hatchet and the seed, between cynicism and hope, may a critical approach to studies of Pakistan flourish.

Potencies of a Transected Sovereignty: Reflection on “What is Critical Pakistan Studies?”

Naveeda Khan

The 2023 annual Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, informally referred to as COP27, was held in the sublunar desert landscape of Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. Pakistan had a prominent presence at COP27, with a pavilion with black walls with the following words inscribed on them: *What Goes on in Pakistan Won't Stay in Pakistan*. Many more passersby were to be found snapping pictures of the pavilion than of other pavilions. When asked what the text referred to, Sherry Rehman, the minister of climate representing Pakistan at COP27, said that it was to draw attention to the disastrous floods suffered by Pakistan in 2020, citing the floods as an instance of a poor and vulnerable country experiencing the fallout of climate change, a problem not of its own creation. Rehman and the Pakistan delegation were there to push for a loss and damage fund, not as charity but as a matter of climate justice. Rehman explicitly referred to how the global climate system made Pakistan porous to environmental harms originating elsewhere. But what the words implicitly, perhaps inadvertently, evoked, and why they likely titillated passersby, was Pakistan's history with religious and ethnic radicalism and its outpouring. Maybe there was even an internal link (hinted at) between climate impacts and increased radicalism.

Be that as it may, Pakistan did something that I have always felt that it does best as a nation-state, for better or for worse. It wryly took potshots at political norms and ideals that have acquired the quality of the sacred and the aura of the sanctimonious on the international stage. Earlier, I have explored how Pakistan, both state and society, inherits the mantle of a failed state and perpetual crisis in a particular mode

¹¹ Asad Ali and Kamran Asdar Ali, eds., *Towards Peoples' Histories in Pakistan: (In)audible Voices, Forgotten Pasts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023); Majed Akhter, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, and Hasan Karrar, “The Spatial Politics of Infrastructure-led Development: Notes from an Asian Postcolony,” *Antipode* 54, no. 5 (2022): 1347–64; Naveeda Khan, ed., *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2012); Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (New York: Verso, 2000).

of self-reflexivity and derogation and how it espouses nationalism in a novel form of disappointment, which does not presume a preexisting ideal.¹² Listening to Rehman, I couldn't help but think of Pakistan as publicly mocking state sovereignty.

State sovereignty is the master principle within the United Nations. In the meeting's hallways and rooms, one hears repeatedly that this is a "party driven process," reminding that state sovereignty overrides the differences internal to states and the solidarities of larger political groupings, such as that of the Group of Seven (G7) or the more recently emergent intergovernmental organization comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (BRICS) representing ascending developing powers to which Pakistan seeks to belong. I didn't hear Pakistan as abjuring state sovereignty. It is likely invested, as any other country, in the authority that such sovereignty provides within negotiations. Invited by Egypt, the host country, it did, after all, play a crucial role in ultimately ushering in the loss and damage fund at the eleventh hour of COP27. But I do hear Rehman as suggesting that this authority is at best limited because sovereignty in the world today (and likely at every time) is transected by internal and external forces that stand to enter many different combinations within and outside of the purview of the state.¹³

The commitment to binding climate policy already presumes a certain slackening of sovereignty.¹⁴ But such transected sovereignty is also borne out by familiar stock phrases such as "bilateral agreements," "strategic partnerships," "private investment," and "structural adjustment" that throng the negotiations and the theater of international relations more widely. What if we were to take Pakistan to be not just drawing attention to this condition but affirming it, in the Nietzschean mode of willing it rather than having it befall one?

Historically, Pakistan Studies has contended well with the issue of such entangled forms of sovereignty. We need only think back to the early constitutional debates as to whether the legitimacy and authority of the state derives from God or the people or God via his people. Scholarly investigations into the authority of saints in their shrines in relation to that of God and his Prophet, even of the Prophet in relation to God, extend the examination of sovereignty into the interstitial spaces of state, society, interiority, and intersubjectivity. Then there are the efforts to understand the military in Pakistan beyond thinking of it as a remnant of colonialism, parasitic on Pakistan's state and economy, and a serious contender for sovereignty through its law-pronouncing capacities and cultural hegemony. More recently, there have been examinations of state sovereignty and the autonomy of civil society by thinking of how the "war on terror" runs an unseen dimension through everything.

Each of these issues shows Pakistan Studies struggling with transected sovereignty as a problem for thought and action. What if we were to cease thinking of the porosity of sovereignty as a problem for Critical Pakistan Studies and instead ruminate on its

¹² Naveeda Khan, ed., "Introduction" *Beyond Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2010); Khan, *Muslim Becoming*.

¹³ By "transection" I am simply drawing on the dictionary meaning of the word, meaning crossed over or in the case of "transecting," crossing over some space, territory, or jurisdiction.

¹⁴ Karen Litfin, "Sovereignty in World Ecopolitics," *Mershon International Studies Review* 41, no. 2 (1997): 167–204.

potencies (i.e., vectors of forces and the fields of influence that run through sovereignty)?¹⁵ Such forces may run the gambit from foreign capital, weapons, and waste to ideas, affects, and artisanry. It also means the fluctuations of the strength of these forces and fields in the form of the rise and fall of material influence and emotional ardor. Potencies presume the bipolarity of romanticism as an oscillation between conditions, such as between the stance of affecting and being affected, rather than the dialectic of historical materialism that arches toward decisionism.¹⁶ And it imputes a potentiality that is not yet realized rather than presuming the stranglehold of history. What sensitive studies of the ebb and flow of power and vulnerabilities could such a focus on sovereignty in Pakistan yield?

Critical Pakistan Studies and Cultural Analysis

Iftikhar Dadi

The call for a Critical Pakistan Studies platform comes at a point in time when many observers are consumed by the multiple crises that continue to plague contemporary Pakistan.¹⁷ The trope of crisis and its relation to criticality has been imbricated in scholarship on Pakistan for some time now.¹⁸ Broadly, I endorse the relay between the perception of an ever-deepening crisis and the modality and need for scholarship to address this. Nevertheless, in this reflection, I draw upon the analysis of cultural *forms* to suggest ways contemporary social and aesthetic dilemmas can be situated in more complex registers whose temporality is not linear and whose causality is not subject to an immediate and tight cause-effect relay. My emphasis on the formalist and structural aspects of culture – rather than their straightforward narrative or representational dimensions – intends to foreground a deeply neglected methodology in contemporary scholarly studies of art and visual culture in Pakistan and its society.

I understand cultural forms as recursively shaped by economic and societal transformations. Simultaneously, cultural forms are also partly independent of social currents in that evidentiary events do not immediately lead to new forms of cultural practice. This is because each inherited cultural form bears a considerable formalist lineage, furnishing it with its structure and conceptual scaffolding. When it becomes public, a specific cultural artifact is meaningful in a dual sense – it engages critically with this formal and tropological lineage to find contemporary resonance among communities of reception.

Thus, even when a new work of art gets created in response to an evidentiary provocation, the *form* of the work nevertheless owes a great deal to how specific artistic forms have developed. Cultural form and cultural memory often inhabit a delayed and recursive temporality. A single, seemingly finished work may uneasily imbricate multiple and often clashing forces within and may simultaneously manifest

¹⁵ Bhrigupati Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Naveeda Khan, *River Life and the Upspring of Nature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

¹⁷ For example, on Pakistan's independence day, see: Faiq Zafar, "Will Pakistan's 'Nazuk Mor' Ever End?," *Dawn*, August 14, 2023 (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1769603> [accessed September, 2023]).

¹⁸ The latter is evidenced by the landmark volume, Khan, ed., *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan*.

both nostalgic and prophetic evocations. Changes in cultural forms are inevitable, of course, but these do not necessarily correspond with the immediate temporality of the nation-state and ongoing travails.

An analysis of cultural form is thus arguably very significant in understanding persistent underlying tensions in a society. But conducting conceptual, symbolic, and analytical analysis beyond a slavish adherence to superficial realism has become challenging beyond the endless provocations of political theater and scandals stoked by the 24-hour news cycle. The absence of critique also deprives growth of the creative sphere itself. For example, in contemporary cinema and television serials, hardly any effort is being made to venture beyond a bland realist aesthetic. These works consequently scarcely offer any imaginative trajectories to their audiences beyond the present limitations of society. There is currently very little creative and discursive space to formulate experimental moving image projects that might draw upon and reconfigure alternative lineages into the present. *Zinda Bhaag* (Run for your life), from 2013 and directed by Meenu Gaur and Farjad Nabi, is a rare example of such an approach. The feature film narrates the story of three young men who attempt fatal risky journey with their lives to leave a society that presents little possibility for forward movement. This highly intermedial and reflexive film returns in many ways to earlier cinema by juxtaposing realism and fable and activating lineages of cultural memory in oral and cinematic mediums across South Asia. Its fabling draws on other imaginative modes – literature, poetry, and theater – to transform them into new, fantastic modes of aspiration promised by neoliberal entrepreneurial effort, participation in shadowy economic schemes, and physical migration.¹⁹

Similarly, when one examines contemporary architecture in Pakistan, one is struck by the conspicuous lack of innovation and experimentation in its practice and the glaring absence of scholarship on the subject. I am trying to stress that meaningful scholarship and criticism can potentially contribute to addressing this crisis of creativity in Pakistani society by offering comparative insights from other periods and sites. The need to study cultural forms of the past thus also has a contemporary creative relevance in enriching the impoverished present, as do comparative approaches that bring insights from other countries and regions to the study of Pakistan.²⁰

This dearth of scholarly engagement disengages the significance of cultural developments from society. After all, if art is not well understood even by sympathetic scholars from other fields (such as history and anthropology), what hope is there for it to be understood more broadly as being relevant to issues beyond its specialized sphere? Moreover, as pointed out earlier, art practice itself is inhibited by

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of *Zinda Bhaag*, see Iftikhar Dadi, *Lahore Cinema: Between Realism and Fable* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022).

²⁰ The scholarly study of various cultural forms – architecture, art, literature, theater, music, cinema, television serials, etc., that are arguably important for understanding Pakistani society – is highly uneven. The study of Urdu and English literature(s) are arenas in which some good work is being done. Work on and in regional literature(s) remains limited to their linguistic spheres and usually does not reach wider publics. In other cultural arenas, such as theater and music, we have hardly scratched the surface of critical scholarship. The number of methodologically significant books and journal essays published during the past three decades is embarrassingly small in my field of modern and contemporary art.

the lack of critical engagement. For example, the much lauded revival of miniature painting from Lahore is now at least three decades old. Apart from an anthropologically oriented investigation published over a decade ago, one is hard-pressed to find any extended critical study on the topic.²¹ Consequently, it's not an accident that miniature practice itself has not developed much during the last 30 years. Another example is recent work by a few artists who have started to engage with climate change, land dispossession, and indigenous perspectives. This direction of art practice is important – for its flourishing, it needs to be in a dialogue with the broader environmental humanities. Otherwise, it risks uncritically valorizing indigenous lifeworlds and naively viewing all modern developments as being inherently destructive. The Lahore-based artist and feminist Lala Rukh (1948–2017) is exemplary in addressing urgent social issues, and also contributing to art practice beyond the immediate confines of the present. Lala Rukh was steadfastly committed to issues of social and gender justice. She cofounded the Women's Action Forum in 1982 and was deeply involved with public demonstrations against the Zia regime. Yet her personal creative projects are spare and minimalist experiments on diverse unorthodox materials and resist simple narrative realist readings. Many of them foreground opacity and gesture toward infinity, and in doing so, they offer new possibilities for the inhabitation of emergent subjectivities beyond the limitations of the present.²²

In recent years, the critical study of Pakistan has been undergoing a welcome transition. A new generation of scholars informed by methodological rigor and social relevance has emerged. However, most of these gains are in fields of study like anthropology, sociology, history, communication studies, economics, geography, and Islamic studies. Other areas of research – especially cultural analysis – remain impoverished.

Given this present unevenness, a possible way forward for a genuinely multidisciplinary critical Pakistan study to flourish is for scholars to extend themselves beyond their immediate areas of expertise. They can address key questions that benefit from multidisciplinary perspectives, by embracing opportunities to create and participate in platforms that address questions that cut across disciplinary formations. These platforms must proactively address cultural questions and invite responses from diverse disciplinary perspectives. One hopes that this journal will serve to catalyze this critical work.

²¹ Virginia Whiles, *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

²² On Lala Rukh, see Jyoti Dhar, "Tranquility amid Turmoil: Lala Rukh," *ArtAsiaPacific* 102 (2017): 122; Sadia Shirazi, "Fugitive Abstraction: Zarina, Mohamedi, and Lala Rukh," PhD diss., Cornell University, 2021 (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/items/d8b47483-6361-47e2-bb0a-c3c885d6b3fe> [accessed September 21, 2023]).