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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VISUAL NARRATIVES AND FEMALE AGENCY: EXPLORING GENDERED CONFINEMENT AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS IN DOMESTIC SPACES WITHIN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI FEMINIST ART"

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ABSTRACT

The research explores female visibility, autonomy and agency through autobiographical visual narratives embedded in domestic spaces, reflecting the artist's lived experiences surrounding a troubled marriage. Symbolic use of furniture and crumbled female clothing articulates the dynamics of power and silence within the marital sphere. It explores how female artists articulate personal experiences of spatial and societal restrictions imposed on women, using the home as a critical site of negotiation and resistance. Through an analysis of visual language and thematic representations, the research highlights how these narratives challenge traditional gender roles and expose the complexities of identity, autonomy, and oppression in Pakistani society. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of feminist art as a powerful medium for reclaiming space and redefining women's roles within both private and public spheres. The artist's series titled "The silent Spaces" articulates themes of isolation, loneliness, and marginalization within intimate spaces, the use of an ambient light to underscore female solitude despite bright, saturated colors. This analysis situates the works within a lineage of feminist artistic expression, that critically examines gendered confinement and the complex interplay of personal and political realities in Pakistani society.

Keywords: *Autobiographical Visual, gendered confinement, Contemporary Pakistani Feminist Art, marital sphere.*

1.INTRODUCTION

Within the landscape of contemporary Pakistani feminist art, the domestic spaces emerge as a potent stage for the exploration of female identity and resistance. Through autobiographical visual narratives, artists transform these intimate, often restrictive spaces into complex sites of storytelling. Their work actively interrogates the gendered confinement and socio-political constraints imposed upon women, using the personal realm to articulate a powerful and nuanced form of female agency that challenges patriarchal norms from within the very walls intended to enforce them.

The body of work concerning female visibility, autonomy, drawing inspiration from **Shahzia Sikander's iconic piece "The Scroll,"** developed during Pakistan's repressive Zia dictatorship, the conversation focuses on the representation of constricted female presence as ethereal and faceless, echoing greater sociopolitical limits on women's liberties.

This research investigates autobiographical visual narratives within contemporary Pakistani feminist art, focusing on the intersections of female agency, gendered confinement, and sociopolitical restrictions in domestic spaces.

These narratives reveal how Pakistani women artists critically navigate and contest restrictive cultural norms and political landscapes through personal storytelling and visual expressions. The domestic spaces often emerge as a site of confinement, reflecting broader struggles for autonomy and empowerment in a patriarchal society.

Influential feminist artists, including members of the Women Action Forum and practitioners like **Naiza Khan and Adeela Suleman**, have utilized diverse media to confront traditional portrayals of women, challenging stereotypes linked to subservience and passivity. Their works foreground the lived realities of women under socio-political pressures such as Islamization and postcolonial legacies, transforming personal and domestic experiences into collective feminist discourses.

This articulation of female agency through autobiographical art aligns with the feminist ethos of reclaiming identity and space, while addressing the intersectionality of gender, religion, and culture in Pakistan's contemporary art scene (Kamran 2021; Women Action Forum influence; Naiza Khan, Adeela Suleman contributions)

The excavation of gendered domestic spaces in this context not only critiques the imposed limitations but also reclaims them as arenas for socio-political expression and gendered empowerment, thereby making visible the often-overlooked narratives of women lived experiences within the home.

Through these visual autobiographies, the socio-political constraints on women's mobility and voice are interrogated, offering a nuanced perspective on confinement that transcends physical boundaries to encapsulate ideological and cultural restrictions. Consequently, contemporary Pakistani feminist art embodies a layered discourse where autobiographical visual storytelling and female agency intersect to challenge and negotiate the socio-political paradigms governing women's lives.

This research investigates the evolution of female identity representation in South Asia, questioning whether these depictions have transformed in parallel with the region's significant political and religious shifts. The inquiry is situated specifically within the realms of cultural practices and the changing trends of media content and storytelling. The analytical framework is anchored in art and visual culture, consulting a diverse terrain of scholarly works. These include Sita Anatha Raman's comprehensive two-volume study, "Women in India: A Social and Cultural History," Akbar Naqvi's chronological survey, "Image and Identity – 50 years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan," and Iftikhar Dadi's exploration of gendered influence in art movements in "Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia." Furthermore, the pivotal contributions of female artists are examined through Salima Hashmi's critical anthologies, "Unveiling the Visible" and "The Eye Still Seeks." The scope of the research also extends to design, advertisement, and cinema, drawing on Saima Zaidi's compilation "Mazaar Bazaar" for its discourse on popularized female stereotypes, and Wajiha Rizvi's "Visual Pleasure in Pakistani Cinema" for its study of the heroine trope.

Deconstructing the structure of femininity and female presence in a region as historically dense and culturally layered as South Asia presents a considerable challenge. This approach necessitated a foundational source to comprehend the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic historical underpinnings of female identity in the subcontinent. Consequently, Sita Anatha Raman's "Women in India: A Social and Cultural History" (Volumes 1 and 2) serves as a primary source for tracing the collective socio-political evolution of women across South Asia.

Contemporary Pakistani feminist art offers a critical lens through which to examine the intricate dynamics of female agency, gendered confinement, and socio-political constraints, particularly as these manifest within domestic interiors.

The home, traditionally conceived as a private and intimate sphere, often operates paradoxically as a site of both protection and limitation for women in Pakistan. This research investigates how autobiographical visual narratives enable female artists to articulate personal and collective experiences of confinement while challenging prevailing socio-political discourses that restrict women's freedoms within domestic spaces.

This study foregrounds the domestic spaces not merely as a physical setting but as a complex, symbolic space where gendered power relations are enacted, contested, and resisted. Through their artwork, Pakistani women artists engage with autobiographical storytelling to highlight the intersection of personal identity, cultural expectations, and political realities. Such narratives reveal how domesticity can become a site where patriarchal norms are reinforced, yet simultaneously serve as a platform from which female agency and self-definition emerge.

Situating this inquiry within feminist art theory and socio-political critique, the research explores how these visual narratives confront deep-rooted structures of gendered control entrenched in both private and public spheres. It examines the ways in which contemporary artists address issues such as mobility restrictions, surveillance, and the negotiation of autonomy under conservative social frameworks. Moreover, the study highlights the artists' strategies of transforming intimate domestic environments into spaces of critical reflection, subversion, and empowerment.

By analyzing selected works from leading feminist artists in Pakistan, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender, space, and agency in South Asian visual culture. It underscores the potent role of autobiographical art as both a mode of resistance and a means of reimagining domestic interiors beyond their traditional confines. Ultimately, this study aims to deepen understanding of how contemporary feminist visual practices articulate the complexities of women's lived experiences within socio-politically charged domestic realms in Pakistan.

2.Literature Review

This research, titled

"Autobiographical Visual Narratives and Female Agency:

Exploring Gendered Confinement and Socio-Political Constraints in Domestic Interiors within Contemporary Pakistani Feminist Art"

aims to investigate the conceptualization and evolution of female identity within South Asia through the lenses of religion, society, art, and visual culture. The study is structured in two parts: the first part investigates historical evidence of female identity and embodiment in the region, while the second focuses on contemporary transformations of the female image as a motif of subversion, feminist critique, and sociocultural change. This research seeks to construct a coherent argument amid the diverse array of sources regarding the contemporary significance and representation of female identity/body in South Asian culture.

To explore this complex subject, the study engages with scholarship by both South Asian and international academics who have examined the transformation of the female image over time. Key political-historical events including the colonization and decolonization of the Subcontinent, the Partition and independence of 1947, the emergence of modernism in post-Partition Pakistani art, the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, and the socio-political shifts following 9/11—are critically considered for their impact on female identity and visibility.

Emphasis is placed on analyzing how these historical moments have shaped women's roles from marginalization as secondary subjects to occupying more central positions within social and cultural dialogues.

The research scope encompasses a broad range of sources including seminal scholarly texts, scriptural writings, and contemporary art historical critiques to discern patterns in the discourse surrounding female visibility.

2.1 Foundational texts such as Sita Anatha Raman's Women in India:

A Social and Cultural History (Volumes 1 and 2) provide essential insights into the pre-Islamic and

non-Islamic histories of feminine identity in the region, especially through explorations of divine feminine figures in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Raman's work contributes nuanced perspectives on the socio-religious complexities and class dynamics influencing gender roles, revealing both empowering and oppressive forces embedded in early South Asian societies.

Further, the research interrogates the role of art and visual culture in shaping and contesting female representation and visibility. Dr. Iftikhar Dadi's Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia offers a critical historiography of Muslim South Asian art, situating artists within broader political and cultural transformations while highlighting the male gaze's predominance in shaping female imagery. The study critically engages with Dadi's focus on male artists like Abdur Rehman Chughtai and the relatively limited recognition accorded to pioneering female artists, noting the marginalization of key figures such as Shahzia Sikander within canonical narratives.

The work of Naiza Khan is examined for its subversive interrogation of female sexuality, identity, and religious strictures, as exemplified by her sculptural series Heavenly Ornaments, which dialogues with Islamic scripturalist texts to critique socio-religious policing of women's bodies.

Complementing this, Salima Hashmi's Unveiling the Visible and The Eye Still Seeks are pivotal in foregrounding the contributions and challenges of female artists in Pakistan. These texts amplify the narratives of pioneering women who carved out spaces of feminist artistic expression despite political repression and cultural conservatism, particularly under General Zia's regime.

Hashmi's work articulates an advocacy for recognizing women's critical role in shaping the Pakistani art scene, challenging prevailing gender hierarchies within the discipline. This research thus positions itself at the intersection of art history, gender studies, and cultural politics, emphasizing a dichotomous discourse between male and female artistic representations of femininity.

It investigates how male artists historically constructed the female body as an object of aesthetic and symbolic value, while female artists have reframed the female image as a locus of resistance, complex identity negotiation, and socio-political critique. Through a critical examination of these divergent narratives, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of female visibility, agency, and empowerment in South Asian art and culture.

This research investigates the evolution of female identity representation in South Asia, questioning whether these depictions have transformed in parallel with the region's significant political and religious shifts. The inquiry is situated specifically within the realms of cultural practices and the changing trends of media content and storytelling. The analytical framework is anchored in art and visual culture, consulting a diverse terrain of scholarly works. These include Sita Anatha Raman's comprehensive two-volume study, "Women in India: A Social and Cultural History," Akbar Naqvi's chronological survey, "Image and Identity – 50 years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan," and Iftikhar Dadi's exploration of gendered influence in art movements in "Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia." Furthermore, the pivotal contributions of female artists are examined through Salima Hashmi's critical anthologies, "Unveiling the Visible" and "The Eye Still Seeks." The scope of the research also extends to design, advertisement, and cinema, drawing on Saima Zaidi's compilation "Mazaar Bazaar" for its discourse on popularized female stereotypes, and Wajiha Rizvi's "Visual Pleasure in Pakistani Cinema" for its study of the heroine trope.

Deconstructing the structure of femininity and female presence in a region as historically dense and culturally layered as South Asia presents a considerable challenge. To systematically analyze this complex tapestry, the research adopts a dichotomized framework, distinguishing between the male and female narratives within South Asia's feminine history. This approach necessitated a foundational source to comprehend the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic historical underpinnings of female identity in the subcontinent. Consequently, Sita Anatha Raman's "Women in India: A Social and Cultural History" (Volumes 1

and 2) serves as a primary source for tracing the collective socio-political evolution of women across South Asia.

Sita Anatha Raman's research is systematically organized into several chapters that critically examine the cultural and religious factors shaping women's lives in South Asia. Her work explores the historical development of these influences and identifies the normative frameworks governing women's roles across the Subcontinent. As a foundational source, Raman's text offers comprehensive and insightful historic references that significantly contribute to understanding female representation in South Asia. Particularly notable is her detailed discussion of the feminine divine as conceived in Hinduism and other ancient regional religions such as Jainism and Buddhism. Raman emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the feminine presence in ancient Sanskrit texts, portraying the female as embodying the extremes of virtue and power, encompassing both benevolent and malevolent dimensions.

For instance, Raman cites the Rig Veda (10.72.3), which poetically describes the creation of the quarters of the sky from the female figure (Aditi Uttanapad), underscoring the reverence accorded to the female principle in early South Asian society. In her exploration of Hindu mythology, Raman maintains an impartial stance by addressing the societal distinctions imposed upon women of different classes and the varied representations of women as heroic or frail in epic narratives such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. She acknowledges both the empowering legends of virtuous women and the later emergence of misogynistic texts from the classical era, providing a balanced account of how sexism and patriarchy were entrenched and perpetuated, particularly through religious and spiritual authorities operating within hierarchical social structures.

To further interrogate issues surrounding the representation of female identity and the female body in art, the research incorporated prominent scholarly essays and books related to female visibility, both as artistic subject and creator. This dimension received special focus due to the intersections of gender politics with art as a medium for propaganda, storytelling, and activism.

The role of art in shaping cultural expectations of gender roles was critically examined.A key text informing this inquiry was Dr. Iftikhar Dadi's Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia, a seminal contribution to South Asian art scholarship.

Dadi's work is introspective, providing a historical and political framework that traces the impact of Muslim conquests, the Timurid dynasty, and the Mughal empire, offering a useful parallel to Raman's account of Hindu history. This comprehensive historical context enabled the researcher to map the trajectory of artists and their evolving artistic practices as they negotiated identities as Muslim South Asian creators within a socio-politically divided post-Partition landscape. Notably, Dadi's analysis of Abdur Rehman Chughtai, a pioneering figure in representing Muslim feminine existence, proved both critical and illuminating for examining transformations in the female image and the operation of the male gaze.

While Dadi's discourse is valuable for understanding influential male artists' role in shaping female imagery, his study primarily emphasizes modernism and pays limited attention to artists who actively foregrounded pivotal changes in representations of the female figure. Significantly, only two female artists receive mention throughout his expansive analysis of Muslim South Asian modern art. Of these, Zubeida Agha is acknowledged mainly for her contributions as an educationist and modernist painter rather than for advancing feminist artistic empowerment or transforming female imagery.

Naiza Khan stands as the sole female artist recognized for instigating critical conversations about female visibility and identity in Muslim South Asia. Despite Khan's comparatively later emergence, Dadi's omission of other prominent female figures—such as Lala Rukh, Salima Hashmi, Nahid Raza, and especially Shahzia Sikander, whose pioneering work redefined traditional miniature painting through technological innovation and global discourse—represents a notable oversight in the historical narrative.

Nonetheless, the analysis of Khan's selected artworks profoundly influenced the researcher's studio practice and provided a critical comparative framework, juxtaposing Chughtai's traditional motifs affirming Muslim cultural heritage against Khan's modern interventions that offer renewed perspectives on the female image. Khan's oeuvre is particularly significant for its engagement with traditional Islamic values while simultaneously subverting prevailing notions of female sexuality and identity as mere instruments of male pleasure or decoration.

Dadi highlights Khan's sculptural series Heavenly Ornaments (2005), which engages with Ashraf Ali Thanwi's mid-twentieth-century scripturalist text Bihishti Zewar—a manual prescribing pious, obedient, and chaste living for South Asian Muslim women. Khan's works critically dissect and respond to the cultural and religious oppressions institutionalized by such texts, employing visual language to expose and contest the policing of women's bodies. Dadi's interpretation of Khan's work is relevant not only for this research but also for its broader contribution to modern art history, emphasizing the complex ways female artists across South Asia engage with themes of rebellion, critique, and affirmation.

This research also draws extensively on the comprehensive compilations of Pakistani female artists' works by Dr. Salima Hashmi, particularly in her books Unveiling the Visible and The Eye Still Seeks. These publications were instrumental in broadening the researcher's understanding of pioneering female artists in Pakistan, many of whom had previously been overlooked. Serving respectively as a prequel and sequel to critical conversations about the evolution and challenges of female artistic discourse, these texts offer valuable insights into the emergence and persistence of feminist artistic spaces within the Pakistani art scene, which continue to resonate with the country's ongoing social and political issues.

Their works introduced critical gender politics into a previously limited visual culture surrounding the female subject. This recognition was crucial in uncovering thought-provoking artworks that might otherwise have been neglected, addressing a significant gap in the discourse on female representation in South Asian art.

Hashmi's efforts to map the lineage of women who carved out a feminist artistic voice within Pakistan proved especially valuable. As a participant in this ongoing struggle, Hashmi writes with a discernible critical tone, deeply aware of the historical marginalization faced by female artists. She highlights, for instance, how in the 1940s, institutional attitudes relegated women's art education to developing "artistic" skills rather than nurturing them as "artists," with the Department of Fine Arts reserved exclusively for women and aimed at enhancing their domestic roles rather than artistic careers. This bias is reflected in the broader marginalization of women in the art world during that era.

Unveiling the Visible consciously prioritizes female artistic visibility rather than merely providing honorary mentions, positioning itself as a key corrective to male-centric art historiographies such as Iftikhar Dadi's Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia. While Dadi's work remains a seminal contribution to South Asian art history, it is criticized here for its predominant focus on male artists and limited engagement with female perspectives. Hashmi's purposeful emphasis on including both historical and contemporary female artists aims to inscribe their contributions firmly into the canon alongside their male counterparts.

The book brings to light artists such as Nazish Attaullah, Ruby Chishti, and Nahid Raza, among others, whose thoughtful works emerge directly from lived female experiences. It also underscores the resistance and critique their works elicited within a socio-political context marked by cultural conservatism and state-imposed restrictions, particularly during the regime of General Zia ul Haq. Despite the laws and norms constraining creative expression, these women persevered in advancing their artistic vision and feminist critique.

Understanding the struggles of female artists in Pakistan, who sought creative autonomy within a fundamentally patriarchal and often oppressive art

establishment, is further enriched by contributions like Nafisa Rizvi's essay in The Eye Still Seeks. Rizvi critically observes earlier modernist artists such as Abdur Rehman Chughtai, describing his work as nostalgically clinging to "past Muslim glories," which critics have sometimes deemed decadent. She goes on to emphasize the importance of recognizing the vitality and significance of female artistic discourse, noting that Pakistani women artists continually engage with the anxieties of living in Pakistan through reflective and purposeful expressions that transcend nostalgia or sentimentality.

This nuanced perspective is highly relevant to the research's exploration of the dichotomy between male and female artistic approaches to the female image. It illuminates the disparities in outcomes and intentions between male artists—who often depict the female body as an object or muse—and female artists, who utilize the image as a catalyst to articulate anger, sorrow, hope, and a call for social transformation.

Throughout this study, Hashmi's insights and critical framework have been invaluable in addressing fundamental questions regarding women's contributions to South Asian art. This foundation has enabled the subsequent examination of female artists who actively subverted traditional female imagery, creating a more inclusive, complex, and multidimensional representation of femininity.

The exploration of female visibility, autonomy, and agency through autobiographical visual narratives aligns with ongoing feminist artistic and theoretical discourses that investigate gendered spaces and socio-political confinements. Visual autobiography as a form has been notably analyzed for its capacity to express personal and political histories, with artists like Maria Lassnig revealing the intimate negotiation between female subjectivity and the medium of painting, framing women's historicity within socio-cultural constraints.

Shahzia Sikander's seminal work "The Scroll," created during Pakistan's repressive Zia regime, is frequently referenced as a landmark feminist artistic expression that critically challenges the erasure and spectral representation of women's presence. Sikander's strategy of depicting anonymous, constrained female figures in an extended temporal and spatial frame elucidates the layered dimensions of patriarchal control and the struggle for female self-representation .

The spectral and anonymous figures in "The Scroll" resonate with broader socio-political restrictions on women's freedom, pointing to a historic and ongoing marginalization within public and intimate spheres.

The "Silent Spaces" series deepens this investigation by portraying themes of isolation, loneliness, and marginalization within intimate, domestic interiors. The use of sparsity and ambient light to spotlight female solitude amid vivid colors conveys the emotional landscape of constrained autonomy and silencing within marriage and family structures. Literary and artistic analyses of similar works highlight the intersection of personal trauma and political repression, emphasizing the domestic space as both a site of gendered confinement and symbolic resistance.

Contemporary critiques emphasize how such art forms contribute to feminist discourse by mapping the interplay between personal narrative and broader cultural and political realities, particularly within Pakistani society and the Islamic post-colonial context.

Visual semiotics applied to these narratives reveal complex symbols—like furniture and discarded female clothing—that articulate power dynamics and silencing mechanisms in domestic and marital spheres.

These visual signs serve as critical interventions, dismantling stereotypes, and fostering visibility and agency for women subjected to patriarchal suppression.

Collectively, this body of work situates itself within a lineage of feminist art that employs autobiographical and symbolic visual strategies to critique gendered confinement, while also voicing resilience and a quest for autonomy amidst socio-political adversity.

This literature review synthesizes critical feminist scholarship on autobiographical visual narratives and Pakistani feminist art, offering a contextual

grounding for the themes reflected in the discussed paintings and series.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology tailored to exploring autobiographical visual narratives and female agency in contemporary Pakistani feminist art. The primary approach is descriptive-analytical, focusing on visual and textual analysis of selected artworks created by female artists who address gendered confinement and socio-political constraints within domestic interiors.

The research data will be collected through a purposive sampling of artworks from established and emerging Pakistani women artists engaged in feminist discourse, including examination of paintings, installations, sculptures, digital media, and photographic works. These materials will be analyzed using feminist theory frameworks, with particular attention to concepts of gender, authorship, gaze, and socio-political context, drawing from critical feminist aesthetics and postcolonial feminist theory.

Historical and socio-political contextualization will be integrated to understand how these autobiographical narratives navigate and contest dominant cultural norms related to gender and domesticity in Pakistan.

Interpretive analysis will seek to elucidate how the domestic interior is represented as a site of both confinement and resistance, revealing the layered complexities of female agency under patriarchy and Islamization. This multi-method qualitative approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between personal narrative, feminist art practice, and socio-political constraints in the Pakistani context.



Figure 1: Malik, Hina. Hide me if you can. Oil on canvas. Concept/Methodology. 4x6 feet.2019.

As the body of work progressed, the artist's personal experiences—particularly those related to the challenges within and subsequent exit from a troubled marriage—became increasingly embedded in the visual imagery. The interiors within domestic spaces assumed new symbolic significance, reflecting a transition from public to private spheres that paralleled the evolving personal narrative of female visibility.

This shift marks a continuation of the artist's changing life circumstances, wherein the intimate and personal dimensions began to dominate the discourse on autonomy and agency.The works can be understood as largely autobiographical, functioning as self-representations that use domestic space as a conceptual and visual canvas. Through this lens, themes of visibility, power, and agency are explored and materialized.

The sensation of being overshadowed and silenced within the marital relationship manifests in the imagery through two primary elements: the brightly lit and elaborately rendered furniture and

interiors, which symbolize the dominant masculine or marital presence, and the discarded or recently removed female clothing, which signifies the muted and marginalized female presence.

In highly ornate domestic settings such as dining rooms, bedrooms, and drawing rooms exemplified in the work "Hide Me if You Can?" (Fig. 1)—the inclusion of rumpled shalwar kameez garments serves as a potent metaphor for female defeat and suppression. These garments, scattered throughout the compositions, evoke the complex emotional and spatial dynamics of a silenced feminine identity embedded within the domestic environment



Figure 2: Malik, Hina. Can you unsee me? Oil on canvas. Concept/Methodology. 3 x 5 feet. 2019

The elaborate domestic settings depicted in the work symbolize grand ideals of love, companionship, homeliness, and familial spaces. Within these compositions, the furniture—particularly the opulent sofas—functions as an emblem of power, specifically masculine authority. In contrast, the rumpled clothing, frequently positioned against monochromatic backgrounds or within brightly lit rooms, represents the muted, dejected female self, as exemplified in the artwork Can You Unsee Me? (Fig. 2).

By rendering the female presence as absent and evoked only through discarded garments, the artist articulates a profound sense of dispossession: a loss of sexual and romantic freedom, curtailed aspirations, and the denial of an active, fulfilling role within the domestic sphere and marital life.

The vividness of the clothing colors stands in stark opposition to their neglected placement. These garments are neither neatly arranged nor allowed to flow naturally through the space; rather, they appear discarded and used, their brightness paradoxically protesting the disregard they receive evoking a yearning for recognition and acknowledgment amid marginalization. This dynamic metaphorically conveys the artist's emotional experience within marriage: a persistent attempt to be seen and valued, met with neglect or invisibility.

Conversely, the grandiose furniture and pristine walls and mantelpieces emerge as silent yet stagnant presences within the paintings. Despite their ostentatious appearance, these objects embody an oppressive stillness reflective of the partner's inert and overbearing masculinity. The resultant stasis induces greater discomfort than the chaotic energy signified by the vibrant, disordered clothing.

The deliberate absence or invisibility of the female figure, particularly in relation to the discarded clothes, symbolizes the erasure of female agency and visibility across various social spaces. Although local cinema and societal gender roles inform the artist's work, the female figure itself rarely appears explicitly. Earlier depictions focused on questioning societal perceptions of female sexuality through specific motifs rather than direct representation.

This invisibility reflects broader socio-political struggles in Pakistan, where women have repeatedly mobilized to assert control over their bodies and lives, contesting oppressive structures restricting their security and agency both publicly and privately. Notably, during General Zia ul Haq's regime, the state's rhetoric emphasized the protection of "chaadar aur chaar diwaari" (veil and four walls) as safeguarding a woman's honor and home.

Feminist activists, however, challenged this notion, exposing how such frameworks, especially under laws like the Hudood Ordinance, functioned to further restrict women rather than protect them. For example, the poet Fahmida Riaz vocally opposed this slogan through her work, reflecting the claustrophobia and repression experienced within the domestic "sanctuary."

Here, the disordered clothes symbolizing the female presence starkly contrast with the meticulously ironed and spotless environments associated with the male subject, thereby highlighting the persistent gendered disparities in visibility, agency, and spatial control within domestic contexts.



Figure 3: Malik,Hina. The Silent Spaces Series, I. Oil on canvas. 4x4 inches. 2020. Artist



Figure 4 : Khalid, Aisha. 2004. Gul e Lalah. Opaque watercolor on paper. Devi Art Foundation, India.

https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/gul-e-lalah/CQGShDsUZAtCcA.
(Accessed, September, 2019)
Muslim women.

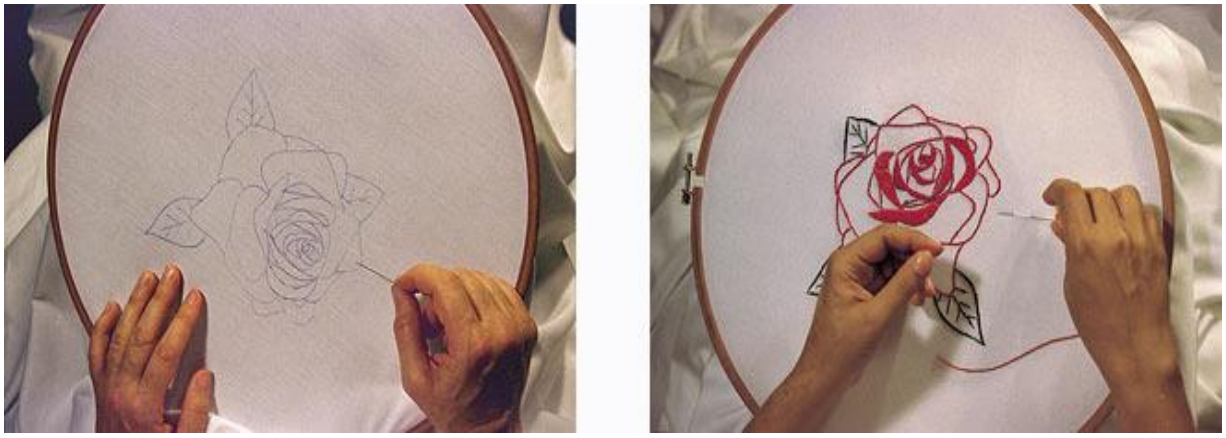


Figure 5: Khalid, Aisha. 2002. Conversation. Dual channel video installation. Devi Art Foundation, Podhar and Anupam Collection, New Delhi. https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2010/resemble-reassemble. (Accessed, November, 2019)

The sensibility in her work and the physical practice she carried out to create,it became an individualistic form of marking her identity as a female artist. "*The 'female-ness' of Aisha's work is confident and overt.*", writes Salima Hashmi in "*Unveiling the Visible*", when talking about Khalid's artistic discourse, "*It is enjoyed in the manner of a banner or manifesto, yet the content can be disturbing, sombre or wry. It can refer to the claustrophobic experience of being female, hemmed in by encroaching walls, smothering drapes, or deafening patterns.*"

They use a language that supersedes specific issues and notions, and that makes it easier to connect to their visual language. While there may not be direct connections between the works artist do consider the influence of their ideology to have helped shape her visual vocabulary, through reading about their process and understanding the female condition they explored.

Shahzia Sikander – Her seminal work The Scroll (1989–90) is crucial in understanding feminist art in South Asia, blending miniature painting traditions with political and gender narratives



Figure 6: Sikander, Shahzia. 1990. The Scroll. Gouache and vegetable pigment on wasli. Pakistan Embassy, Washington, D.C.

https://asiasociety.org/files/uploads/509files/Sept%202016%20Exhibition%20Review%285%29.pdf. (Accessed, September, 2019).

Shahzia Sikander's "The Scroll" (Fig.6) serves as a significant point of reference in the exploration of female presence within Pakistani society. This groundbreaking artwork, created by a female artist during a politically repressive era in Pakistan, exemplifies a critical study of gendered confinement. Produced under the restrictive Zia regime, when public freedoms were severely curtailed, Sikander's painting repeatedly depicts a spectral female figure within a single sprawling frame. This figure appears as a ghostly shadow, silently inhabiting various rooms and spaces throughout the house. However, the figure's identity remains deliberately obscured, with the face consistently unseen, underscoring anonymity and invisibility.

The figure's recognizable attributes—white garments and flowing hair—persist across the composition, symbolizing the pervasive yet constrained female presence under military dictatorship. This representation reflects the broader socio-political context in which women's physical mobility, autonomy, and fundamental rights were heavily restricted. Through these visual strategies, Sikander effectively communicates the experience of confinement and erasure faced by women during this period, positioning "The Scroll" as both an artistic and socio-historical commentary on gender and agency in Pakistan.



Figure 7*:* The Silent Spaces Series, II. Concept/Methodology Oil on canvas. 6x8 inches. 2020. Artist

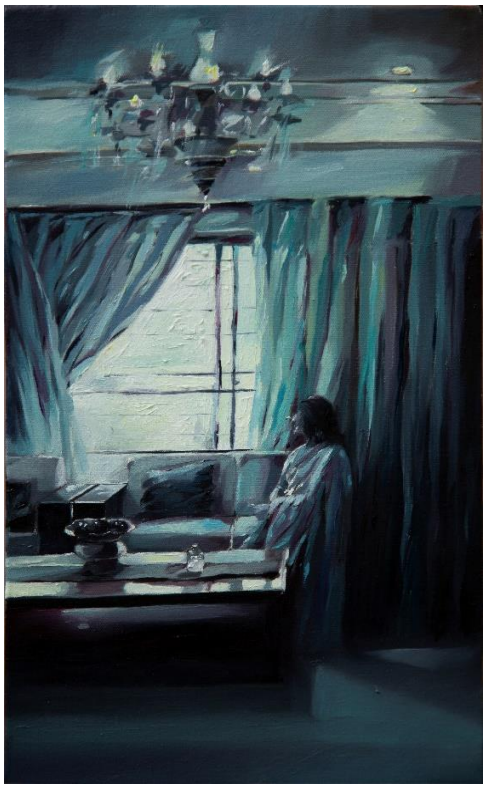


Figure 8*:* The Silent Spaces Series, III. Concept/Methodology. Oils on canvas. 7x12 inches 2020. Artist.



Figure 9: Detail of the "The Scroll"

The figures in the painting draw partial inspiration from the spectral figure depicted in "The Scroll," which appears in multiple locations within that work. However, the interior scenes and activities portrayed are deliberately disconnected from this prominently recurring central figure. In this painting, the female figure—particularly within the Silent Spaces—is either only partially visible or blurred, creating a sense of forced presence. Despite the expectation that she naturally belongs within these spaces, her appearance feels more like an intrusive obstruction than an integrated element. Even in brightly lit rooms, illuminated by natural sunlight, her presence evokes loneliness rather than comfort or inclusion.

In contrast to Sikander's approach, which conveys loneliness through the depiction of multiple figures engaged in indifferent, routine activities within the house, this work expresses loneliness through stillness and the mundane. The stagnancy and permanence of solitude are central in the portrayal of the household. Additionally, the artistic legacy of pioneering figures, notably Lubna Agha, emerges as a significant influence. Agha's creation of feminine space resonates with the artist's personal narrative; her work appears as an autobiographical exploration of a woman feeling trapped and isolated, inhabiting a temporal stasis marked by complicated dynamics of companionship and absence.

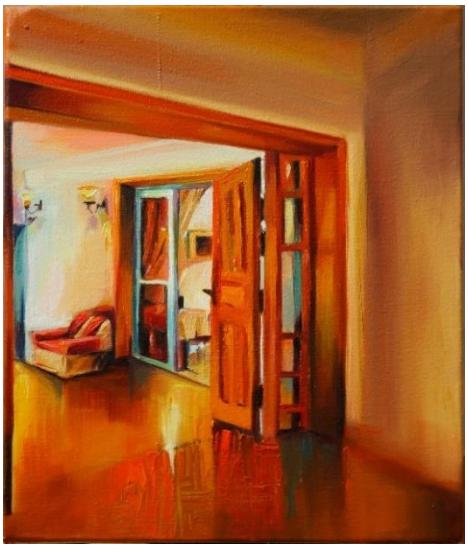


Figure 10: The Silent Spaces, Series IV. Concept/Methodology. Oil on canvas. 5 x 8 inches. 2020.

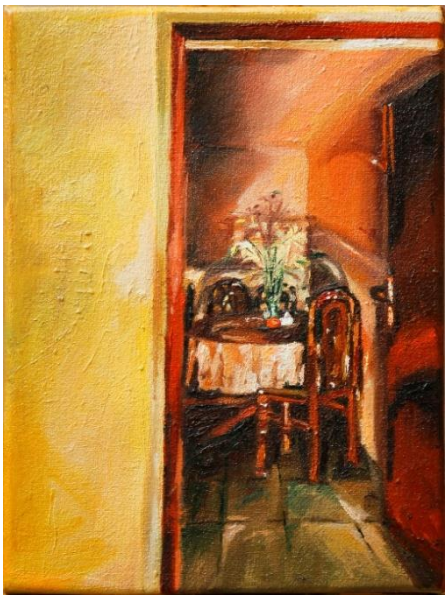


Figure 11: "The Silent Spaces, Series V. Concept/Methodology Oil on canvas. 6x8 inches. 2020. Artist.

The relation of the Empty Room Series with the feminine space created by Lubna Agha in her work also became a source of inspiration.



Figure 12: Agha, Lubna. 1994. Three Days. Oils on canvas.

https://artuk.org/discover/artists/agha-lubna-19492012. (Accessed, December, 2019)

Throughout the developmental stages of the "The Silent Spaces" series, the artist used the series as a means to negotiate and articulate their own struggles with isolation and circumstance. Although the later pieces introduce a brighter palette contrasting with the initially dark tones, the composition consistently emphasizes the sparseness and precariousness of female presence. The female figure remains scarce and appears reluctant or marginalized within the painted spaces. The introduction of vivid yellows and luminous surfaces does not alleviate, but rather accentuates the inherent loneliness and barrenness that define the scenes. The ambient light, despite its warmth and brightness, fails to diminish the pervasive emptiness, underscoring the unyielding solitude embedded within the domestic environment.

The scenes' innate melancholy and desolation are highlighted rather than lessened by the use of bright yellows and glowing surfaces. Even with its warmth and brightness, the ambient light is unable to lessen the overall emptiness, highlighting the unwavering loneliness that permeates the home.

There are undoubtedly many female artists who have produced works about women's oppression and the violence that surrounds them, but the reason is to feel a connection to these few artists is that they set the tone for a generation of artists who came after them. Whether it was through the methods they employed, as in the cases of Shahzia Sikander and Aisha Khalid, or through the way they reimagined historical narratives to highlight the historical repression and policing of the female body through sculpture and text, as in the work of Naiza Khan.

It is simpler to relate to their visual language since they speak in a language that transcends particular problems and ideas. They employ a language that transcends particular topics and concepts, facilitating a deeper connection to their visual expression. Although my works may not be directly linked, I believe the impact of their ideology has contributed to shaping artist's visual language, as I have gained insights into their process and the female experience , they examined.

Conclusions

The artist's work can be read within the feminist lineage established by Aisha Khalid, Shahzia Sikander, and Lubna Agha. Like Sikander's The Scroll, it transforms personal and domestic space into a site of identity, resistance, and self-definition; like Khalid's practice, it uses symbolic visual language to address women's visibility, silence, and social restriction; and like Agha's work, it draws on a broader Pakistani visual tradition that connects abstraction, ornament, and cultural memory. Together, these artists help frame the work as a reflection on female agency, confinement, and the redefinition of women's roles in Pakistani society.

The discussed body of work explores female visibility, autonomy, and agency through autobiographical visual narratives embedded in domestic spaces, reflecting the artist's personal experiences surrounding an apprehensive marriage. Symbolic use of furniture and crumbled female clothing articulates the dynamics of power and silencing within the marital sphere.

It explores how female artists articulate personal experiences of spatial and societal restrictions imposed on women, using the home as a critical site of negotiation and resistance. Through an analysis of visual language and thematic representations, the research highlights how these narratives challenge traditional gender roles and expose the complexities of identity, autonomy, and oppression in Pakistani society. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of feminist art as a powerful medium for reclaiming space and redefining women's roles within both private and public spheres.

The artist's "The Silent Spaces" series further articulates themes of isolation, loneliness, and marginalization within intimate spaces, using sparseness and ambient light to underscore female solitude despite bright, saturated colors. This analysis situates the works within a lineage of feminist artistic expression that critically examines gendered confinement and the complex interplay of personal and political realities in Pakistani society.

The concept of representation, particularly regarding female identity within South Asia, resists being encapsulated within a single, definitive narrative. The exploration of female identity's evolution requires traversing varied and intersecting paths to grasp the multifaceted panorama of identity fully. Drawing on lived experiences, artistic practice, and scholarly discourse, it is apparent that South Asian history is not a monolithic entity to be neatly categorized, but a complex amalgamation of ancient religions, cultures, and civilizations (Wadhwa, 2025; Spivak, 1988).

Pakistan epitomizes this richness and complexity, embodying the convergence of cultural and historical streams that shape its contemporary identity landscape. In this evolving context, the female image—intertwined with themes of sensuality and spirituality—remains fluid, dynamic, and in a continuous state of transformation rather than settling into a fixed identity (Gupta, 2025).

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