

THROUGH THE LENS OF ART: REPRESENTING POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The paper presents a new way of understanding Pakistani art by suggesting that Pakistani artists have, knowingly or unknowingly, engaged with Marxist ideas in their artistic practices. However, the study contrasts representations of poverty with references to Marxist ideology in Pakistan. Although Marxism can serve as a useful framework for analyzing literary and artistic works and generating new interpretations, this study also emphasizes the destructive effects of capitalism. It examines the struggle of the lower classes against the upper classes and exposes the hardships and suffering experienced by poor and marginalized people in Pakistan. The study further demonstrates how class differences create social tensions and inequalities for individuals who work at the lower levels of society, while those who own or control the means of production—the bourgeoisie—enjoy greater social and economic privileges. In this context, Pakistani art reflects the persistent class divisions and socioeconomic inequalities within Pakistani society.

Keywords: *Art, Bourgeoisie, Marxism, Poverty.*

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1. Introduction

Art and literature are considered integral components of any ideological system within a particular historical period or civilization. They are illustrative of the dominant intellectual and theological traditions of their time and serve as mirrors through which the struggles, achievements, suffering, and transformations of a society or historical period are reflected. From a Marxist perspective, art and literature can reveal and represent the ideological principles associated with the dominant economic and social classes. In Marxist theory, art is regarded as part of the superstructure of society and is closely connected to its ideological formation. It constitutes a component of the complex structure of social consciousness through which relations of power and class domination are reproduced. Consequently, when one social class exercises power over another, such domination may be perceived by members of society as natural, legitimate, or inevitable, or it may remain largely unrecognized. Therefore, understanding literature requires an examination of the broader social process within which it is produced, circulated, and interpreted (Eagleton, 1996).

According to Marxist theory, capitalist society is fundamentally divided into two major classes: the **bourgeoisie** and the **proletariat**. The bourgeoisie, or capitalist class, owns and controls the means of production and derives profit from the labor of the working class. By appropriating the surplus value generated through workers' labor, the bourgeoisie accumulates and expands its capital. The continuous expansion of capital is central to the functioning and reproduction of the capitalist system. As Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" (Marx & Engels, 1848).

There is a fundamental desire for freedom within every individual. Although we live in a formally free state, many people continue to experience social and economic conditions that limit their ability to live freely. Poverty reflects a society in which a significant portion of the population is deprived of meaningful opportunities and cannot fully enjoy the benefits of freedom. Freedom is one of the most fundamental values of human life; however, a large segment of the impoverished population is unable to experience its full potential because poverty, inequality, and social subjugation have become deeply embedded in their lives. As a result, people living in such conditions may come to regard deprivation and subjugation as unavoidable aspects of their existence, preventing them from recognizing the possibilities and opportunities available around them.

2. Literature Reviews

Alan Woods (2001), from a Marxist perspective, argues that capitalism can be challenged and ultimately transformed through the empowerment of the working class. He

further suggests that the emancipation of women is closely connected to the struggle against class oppression, as class and gender oppression often operate simultaneously and reinforce one another (Woods, 2001). This perspective provides a useful theoretical framework for examining the representation of poverty, class inequality, and gender relations in Pakistani art. Hamid and Khan (2013), in their article *Beauty Out of Chaos: A Parallel Study of Pakistan's Trauma Art and Literature*, examine the relationship between trauma, art, and literature in Pakistan. Their discussion demonstrates how Pakistani artists and writers have responded to violence, social disruption, and collective trauma through creative expression. Similarly, Hill's discussion of Marxist theory in relation to culturalist and materialist explanations of class and race highlights the importance of examining social inequality through both material and cultural dimensions. Tejuja (2011), in his discussion of life in Issa Colony, a poor settlement in Karachi, draws attention to the social divisions between the wealthy and marginalized sections of Pakistani society. His account suggests that members of the upper classes may exercise considerable social and economic power, while the fear associated with such power can function as a mechanism of social control. He further illustrates this phenomenon through the example of a minor criminal who, despite his unlawful activities, was treated as a celebrity. Such observations are relevant to a Marxist reading of Pakistani society because they highlight the relationship between class, power, privilege, and marginalization. A number of writers adopting Marxist or socially critical perspectives have also examined the relationship between art, literature, and Pakistani society. Debates concerning the imitation of Western cultural forms have raised questions about cultural identity and the extent to which such practices may distance society from indigenous cultural values. In her article *In Pakistan, a National Literature Struggles to Be Born*, Nolen discusses the relationship between violence, trauma, literature, and urban life in Pakistan. She reports Mohammed Hanif's disagreement with the claim that Karachi as a whole was experiencing a mild form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Bilal Tanweer adopts a related approach in his novel *The Scatter Here Is Too Great*, which depicts the effects of a bomb blast in Karachi and explores the relationship between violence, memory, and urban society (Tanweer, 2014). A similar engagement with violence, trauma, and social disruption can be observed in the work of Pakistani visual artists.

The representation of poverty also requires an understanding of how poverty has changed over time. Statistical descriptions of poverty provide important information about whether poverty has increased or decreased during particular periods; however, aggregate poverty figures do not fully explain the varying degrees of deprivation experienced by different sections of the population. The concept of poverty bands can therefore provide a more nuanced understanding by distinguishing among categories such as the extremely poor, deeply poor, poor, vulnerable, and marginally poor. Such distinctions are particularly

relevant when examining artistic representations of poverty because paintings may communicate dimensions of deprivation that cannot be adequately captured through statistical indicators alone. Pakistani artists have frequently used visual representation not merely to document social conditions but also to provoke reflection and emotional engagement among audiences. In her discussion of the exhibition *Hanging Fire*, Wang (2009) examines the question of whether Pakistani artists adequately address major social issues. The exhibition and the broader debate surrounding Pakistani art demonstrate the potential of visual culture to engage with poverty, violence, inequality, and other social concerns. The development of Marxist and progressive thought in South Asian literature also provides an important historical context for understanding these artistic and literary representations. According to Ayaz (2023), Marxist ideology influenced the development of Urdu and Pashto literature through a prolonged process of intellectual and political transformation. Anti-colonial thinkers and émigré revolutionaries established contacts with Bolshevik leaders in Afghanistan and Tashkent, while these intellectual connections initially had a particularly strong influence in areas such as the North-West Frontier Province and Punjab during the 1920s. The influence of Marxist and progressive thought subsequently became visible in South Asian literary movements, including Urdu and Pashto literature (Ayaz, 2023). Taken together, this literature demonstrates that poverty and social inequality in Pakistan can be examined not only through economic and statistical indicators but also through cultural and artistic representations. Marxist perspectives provide a framework for understanding the relationship between class, power, and inequality, while studies of Pakistani art and literature demonstrate how artists and writers have represented poverty, violence, trauma, and marginalization. This body of literature therefore establishes a basis for examining Pakistani paintings as visual narratives of poverty and social inequality.

2.1. Poverty in Pakistan

In the contemporary world, significant progress has been made in science, technology, education, and other areas of human life. Nevertheless, many fundamental social and economic problems continue to persist, raising questions about the extent to which such progress has benefited marginalized communities. Several countries in South Asia continue to face serious socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, inequality, inadequate healthcare, and limited access to education. Pakistan, one of the South Asian countries established in 1947, has experienced persistent socioeconomic difficulties since its creation (Zaffar, 1985). Poverty has remained one of the major socioeconomic challenges confronting Pakistan. Historical estimates indicate that poverty increased during the 1970s and 1980s and continued to fluctuate during subsequent decades. According to estimates reported in the literature, the poverty rate increased from 26.6% in 1993 to 32.2% in 1999. Rural poverty was particularly

pronounced, with the rural poverty rate reaching 36.3% in 1999 compared with 22.6% in urban areas. At the same time, increasing inequality in both urban and rural areas contributed to slower economic growth and limited the benefits of development for disadvantaged communities (Haider, 2021). These patterns demonstrate that poverty in Pakistan cannot be understood solely as a problem of insufficient income; it is also closely associated with unequal access to resources, employment, education, healthcare, and other opportunities.

From a Marxist perspective, poverty and inequality are closely connected to the organization of society around class relations and ownership of the means of production. Marxist theory broadly distinguishes between the bourgeoisie, who own and control the means of production, and the proletariat, who depend primarily on their labour for their livelihood. Historical societies have similarly been characterized by relationships such as master and slave, landlord and peasant, and capitalist and worker. From this perspective, the emergence of private property and the unequal control of productive resources contributed to the formation and reproduction of social classes. The middle class occupies a more complex position within this structure because it may possess some property, businesses, or other economic resources while remaining distinct from the dominant economic class (Farooq, 2022). Pakistan can consequently be examined as a class-structured society in which economic inequality intersects with political, social, and institutional factors. Poverty is influenced by a range of factors, including unemployment, population growth, governance challenges, corruption, political instability, natural disasters, and unequal access to resources. These factors interact with one another and contribute to the persistence of socioeconomic inequalities (Farooq, 2022). A Marxist analysis is therefore useful for examining how economic structures and class relations shape the experiences of marginalized groups.

Pakistan faces a range of socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, illiteracy, inadequate healthcare, community safety concerns, and other forms of social vulnerability (Javed, 2021). Recent reports have also highlighted significant regional differences in poverty and deprivation across the country. Such disparities demonstrate that poverty is not experienced uniformly and that socioeconomic conditions vary considerably among Pakistan's provinces and communities. Moreover, aggregate poverty statistics alone cannot fully convey the lived experiences of individuals and communities experiencing deprivation. The relationship between poverty and class inequality is particularly relevant to the study of visual art. Pakistani artists have addressed a wide range of sociopolitical and economic issues through painting, sculpture, and other artistic forms. Artists such as Salima Hashmi, Ijaz-ul-Hassan, Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi, Shakir Ali, Anna Molka Ahmed, and Abdul Rahim Nagori have engaged with social and political themes in their artistic practices. Art can provide a means through which artists document social

conditions, communicate experiences of marginalization, and encourage audiences to reflect on social problems. Visual representation can therefore communicate dimensions of poverty that may not be fully captured through conventional economic statistics (S. R., 2022).

The relationship between art and social criticism is particularly significant in the context of Pakistan. Artists have responded to political conflict, violence, poverty, inequality, and other social issues through visual forms. Their works may function not only as representations of existing conditions but also as cultural documents that preserve particular experiences and perspectives. In this sense, painting can become a means of communicating social realities to audiences who may otherwise remain distant from the experiences of marginalized communities. Sindh provides an important regional context for examining the visual representation of poverty in Pakistan. The province has experienced significant forms of socioeconomic deprivation, and poverty has been discussed extensively by writers, researchers, and social commentators. Artists from Sindh have likewise used visual art to represent social problems and the experiences of marginalized communities. The role of the artist can extend beyond aesthetic expression to include observation, documentation, criticism, and interpretation of social change. Abdul Rahim Nagori was one of the prominent Pakistani artists who used his work to address sociopolitical issues. Born in Junagadh in 1939, Nagori developed a reputation for socially and politically engaged painting. His work addressed themes including militarism, violence, political oppression, social injustice, crime, and the suffering of ordinary people. In 1983, he organized an anti-martial-law exhibition sponsored by the Pakistan Union of Journalists. His subsequent exhibitions continued to engage with political and social issues (Akhtar, 2011). Nagori's paintings concerning the conditions and struggles of the people of Sindh are particularly relevant to an investigation of poverty and class inequality because they demonstrate how visual art can transform social experiences into visual narratives.

Other artists from Sindh have also addressed social problems through their artistic practices. Artists such as Zulkifl Rafah, Syed Arsalan Naqvi, Sandeep Kumar, and S. M. Raza have engaged with issues associated with poverty, child labour, and other social challenges. Their work illustrates how contemporary artists can use visual culture to represent the experiences of disadvantaged communities and draw attention to social problems that remain persistent in Pakistani society. Child labour represents one particularly significant manifestation of poverty and socioeconomic inequality. Children from economically disadvantaged households may enter the labour market because of household poverty, limited educational opportunities, and other structural conditions. Pakistan has undertaken various legislative and policy measures aimed at addressing child labour, including efforts reported in 2022 to strengthen the enforcement of laws and

address exploitative forms of child labour (UNICEF, 2023; *Pakistan's Journey Towards the Elimination of Child Labour*, 2022). Nevertheless, child labour remains an important social issue in Pakistan. Its persistence provides an important subject for visual artists because the experiences of working children can make broader issues of poverty, inequality, exploitation, and social exclusion visible to the public. Thus, poverty in Pakistan should be understood not only as an economic condition but also as a social and cultural phenomenon. Statistical indicators provide evidence concerning the scale and distribution of poverty, while Marxist theory offers a framework for examining the relationship between class, ownership, labour, and inequality. Pakistani visual artists contribute another dimension by representing the lived experiences of poverty and marginalization through painting and other artistic forms. Examining these paintings can therefore provide insight into how poverty, class inequality, child labour, and social injustice have been perceived, represented, and communicated within Pakistani society.

One such artist is Arsalan Naqvi, who, through his artwork, portrays the lives and struggles of street children in Pakistan. Born in Hyderabad, Naqvi completed his Diploma in Fine Arts from Khana Farhang Iran, Hyderabad. In an interview, Naqvi stated, “I know the lives of street children, and I know their unforgettable pain, unbearable vulnerability, innocence and helplessness. These people always haunt the bitter and dark memories of my childhood. I paint what I see on these streets” (Naqvi, personal communication, December 11, 2023). Naqvi’s painting *Two Boys and a Dog* addresses the theme of **poverty**. In this work, the artist depicts two street children alongside a dog against a red background. The dog functions as a significant symbol in the painting and, according to Naqvi, represents a spiritual animal and a symbol of loyalty for those who have no one else. Both the children and the dog exist in conditions of deprivation and vulnerability. Street dogs often lack food, shelter, and access to clean water and survive by consuming food from garbage heaps and drinking contaminated street water. Similarly, the children depicted in the painting are deprived of basic necessities and live without adequate shelter, food, and financial security. Explaining the relationship between the children and the dog, Naqvi stated, “Because the dog is painted with the street children, both their lives are the same. There is no house, there is no roof, nor do they get enough wages to eat good food. When they are hungry and thirsty, they eat what the dog eats” (Naqvi, personal communication, December 11, 2023). Through this juxtaposition, Naqvi draws attention to the shared conditions of deprivation experienced by marginalized people and stray animals. The painting therefore presents poverty not merely as an absence of material resources but as a condition of vulnerability, exclusion, and social neglect.



An artist from Pakistan's Hindu community, Sandeep Kumar, has also expressed his concerns about poverty through his art. Kumar graduated with an Honors degree from the Department of Art and Design at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. The poverty of Sindh can be observed in several of his recent works. He replaces the actual image of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah with the image of a poor child. The painting portrays an innocent boy carrying a plate in his hand. Coins generally symbolize wealth, capital, and economic success in society; however, Kumar uses the symbol of the coin in a contrasting way. By replacing the image of the country's founder with that of a poor child, he draws attention to the marginalization and economic deprivation experienced by poor communities. In an interview, Kumar explained: "When Pakistan was formed, Quaid-e-Azam was its founder, and there was a picture of our founder on the coin. But I defaced Quaid's image because I feel that the poor have no founder."



S. M. Raza is another artist from Sindh who works as a muralist and educationist. His work has been featured in both local and international art exhibitions. Raza created a

series of paintings entitled *Lucid Dream*, which depicts the life and struggles of child laborers living and working on the streets of Karachi. The series portrays children engaged in various difficult circumstances: some are shown carrying blankets, while others are sleeping on the roadside. One painting depicts a girl collecting garbage, while another shows a girl drawing butterflies in a notebook, creating an imaginary world of her own. Through these contrasting images, Raza highlights the harsh realities of childhood poverty while also drawing attention to children's imagination and their desire to escape difficult circumstances. In an interview, Raza discussed the ideas and emotions behind the *Lucid Dream* series.

Artist S. M. Raza describes his series of paintings, *Lucid Dream*, in terms of the relationship between dreams and reality. He explains that a “lucid dream” is a “bright dream,” in which a person becomes aware that they are dreaming and, to some extent, can control the events within the dream. According to Raza, this sense of control gives the dreamer a feeling of power, allowing them to shape the dream according to their wishes. However, when the dreamer wakes up, they encounter a reality that is different from the imagined world of the dream. Thus, Raza uses the concept of the lucid dream to create a contrast between the imagined possibilities of the child and the harsh realities of poverty. In response to a question about the meaning of the series, Raza stated that the lucid dream “indicates that man is aware of his dream even in sleep; when he wakes up, he sees that it is not real” (S. M. Raza, personal communication, December 2023).



Every artist has his or her own way of expressing perceptions of social problems and injustices. S. M. Raza similarly expresses his concerns about poverty through his artistic practice. In his series *Lucid Dream*, Raza moves beyond conventional representations of poverty and presents the lives of impoverished children through an

imagined world. Rather than depicting poverty solely through images of suffering, begging, and street life, Raza focuses on the imaginative and aspirational worlds of children living in such conditions. His paintings suggest that, despite the harsh realities surrounding them, poor children continue to possess dreams, aspirations, and hopes for a better future. The concept of fantasy is central to Raza's *Lucid Dream* series. Fantasy can be understood as an imagined world created by an individual or constructed through external influences. Raza employs this idea to juxtapose the difficult circumstances of impoverished children with their imagined possibilities. His paintings therefore do not simply document poverty; they also represent hope and the possibility of transformation. Through the imaginative worlds of his subjects, Raza suggests that their present circumstances do not necessarily define their aspirations for the future. One of the paintings in the series, *All She Wants Is a Pair of Wings* (42 × 30 inches, acrylic on canvas), depicts a young girl who, according to the artist, begs on the roadside. Rather than representing her solely as a victim of poverty, Raza places a pen in her hand and depicts her drawing butterflies in a notebook. The butterflies appear to emerge from the page and fly into the surrounding space. The blue, yellow, and pink butterflies can be interpreted as symbols of hope, freedom, and the possibility of a better life. The image consequently creates a contrast between the girl's difficult physical circumstances and the freedom represented by her imagination. Like the concept of a lucid dream, the painting presents a world in which the child can temporarily transcend the limitations of her everyday reality.



The second painting in the series is entitled *I Want to Be a Superstar* (42 × 30 inches, acrylic on canvas). In this work, Raza presents the young girl in a manner that contrasts sharply with her social circumstances. She is shown sitting shirtless on a pile of ragged clothes, while the composition simultaneously evokes the visual language of fashion and modeling. Through this juxtaposition, Raza draws attention to the contrast between the girl's material deprivation and her imagined aspirations. The artist explained the idea behind the work: “This is a picture all too familiar, yet uninspired of the child, and we have a modeling pose against a high-fashion backdrop” (S. M. Raza, personal communication, December 2023). The final composition in the series, *Holding Hope*,

further explores the relationship between reality and imagination. Like the other works in *Lucid Dream*, the painting can be understood as a representation of the tension between the difficult circumstances experienced by impoverished children and their capacity to imagine a different future. Collectively, the series shifts attention from poverty as a condition of material deprivation to the inner worlds, aspirations, and hopes of children living within those circumstances.

Balochistan is located in the southwestern part of Pakistan. It is the largest of Pakistan's four provinces in terms of land area, covering approximately 347,190 square kilometers, while it is the least populated province. Quetta is the provincial capital. The province is home to diverse ethnic communities, among which the Baloch and Pashtun are two major groups. Balochistan is also rich in natural resources and is strategically important because of the Port of Gwadar, which has significance for regional and international trade. Its geography is characterized by extensive mountainous and arid areas, limited rainfall, and water scarcity. Despite its substantial natural-resource base, Balochistan continues to face significant socioeconomic challenges. Poverty in the province is associated with limited livelihood opportunities, drought and water scarcity, inadequate access to social services, and a large population of unskilled or underemployed youth. The province has also experienced recurrent droughts, which have placed additional pressure on rural livelihoods and agricultural communities. These socioeconomic conditions have provided an important subject for artists who address poverty and social inequality through visual representation.

Several artists from Balochistan have explored social issues such as poverty through their paintings. Among them, two artists are particularly relevant to this study: one from the Baloch community and the other from the Pashtun community. Their work provides an opportunity to examine how artists from different ethnic and geographical backgrounds represent poverty and social hardship in Balochistan. One of these artists, Shakira Mir, comes from the village of Shoran in Kachhi District of Balochistan. The region is historically significant because the Kachhi Plain is associated with the archaeological site of Mehrgarh, one of the important Neolithic settlements of South Asia (Mengal, 2016). At the same time, communities in the Kachhi region have experienced socioeconomic difficulties associated with water scarcity, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate access to services. The Kachhi Plain is an important agricultural region, but water availability remains a significant challenge for local communities.

Mir's own experience of growing up in Kachhi strongly influenced her artistic practice. In an interview, she recalled the difficulties she experienced in pursuing education: "We have lived a very difficult life in Kachhi. I want to get higher education, and I used to walk for hours from my village to another village to get education" (S. Mir, personal communication, December 20, 2023). Her early engagement with art was

similarly shaped by limited resources. According to Mir, she began making drawings during childhood when she did not have access to pens or paper; instead, she used a piece of wood to sketch on dry clay.

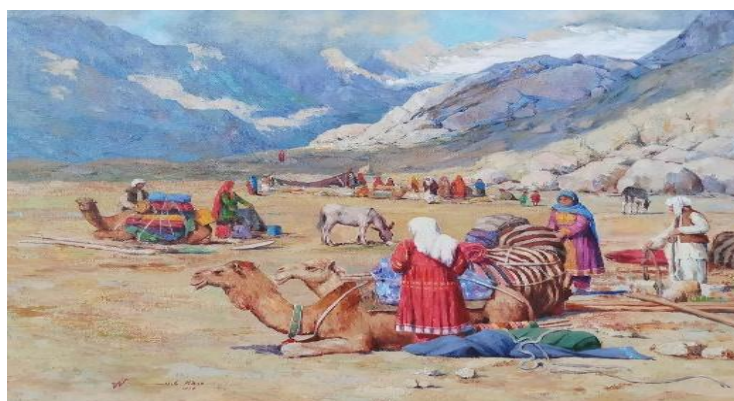
When Mir later moved to Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, to pursue higher education with the assistance of a relative, she arrived with very limited financial resources. Reflecting on this experience, she stated, “When I went to Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, with the help of a relative, I had nothing in my hand except a passion for education and a talent for art” (S. Mir, personal communication, December 20, 2023). During her studies, Mir participated in and won several art competitions, which helped her meet some of her educational expenses. Her personal experiences of poverty and deprivation subsequently became important themes in her artistic practice. Mir explicitly connects her artistic work to her lived experience. In an interview, she stated, “I have painted my life, which we spent because of poverty” (S. Mir, personal communication, December 20, 2023). Her paintings therefore provide not only a representation of poverty in Balochistan but also a visual account of her own experiences of economic hardship, limited educational opportunities, and social deprivation. Among her works on poverty, two paintings are particularly significant for the present study and are discussed below. When she was young, Shakira Mir often had to travel long distances to fetch water. Reflecting on her childhood experiences in an interview, she stated, “Every day I used to see my house from afar, which was a difficult path. Between me and my dreams, I put a lock on my clothes” (S. Mir, personal communication, December 20, 2023). Her statement reflects the physical and social obstacles she encountered while pursuing her aspirations.

In another painting, Shakira Mir depicts the life of her sister, who had to discontinue her education because of poverty. Her sister wanted to become a doctor, but financial constraints prevented her from continuing her studies. The painting portrays a ditch, a mountain, a closed door, and a girl with her hands raised. The girl appears to be expressing her inability to fulfil her aspirations because of poverty. According to Mir, poverty not only deprived her sister of an opportunity to continue her education but also contributed to her being married at a young age. Mir explained, “Poverty is a different thing; our people don't even have consciousness. Here, girls don't even have the right to decide on their own marriage” (S. Mir, personal communication, December 20, 2023). The difficult path, the closed door, and the girl's raised hands can therefore be interpreted as visual representations of the barriers surrounding her aspirations. The raised hands suggest a gesture of supplication, expressing a plea to Allah, while the lock symbolizes the restrictions that prevent her from pursuing her dreams. Through *Fatima*, Mir connects poverty with restricted educational opportunities, early marriage, and limited agency for women in her community. Another artist from this region is Naseer Khan, a visual artist from Kuchlak, Balochistan. He graduated in Fine Arts from the Balochistan University of

Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), Quetta, in 2015. He currently works as a lecturer in Fine Arts. Khan works in a variety of artistic forms, including hand drawings, symbolic and cultural paintings, portraits, landscapes, mixed-media works, and calligraphy. His artistic practice also engages with Pashto and Balochi literature, cultural traditions, and customary practices. In particular, he has explored the lives of nomadic communities and their everyday experiences in Balochistan.

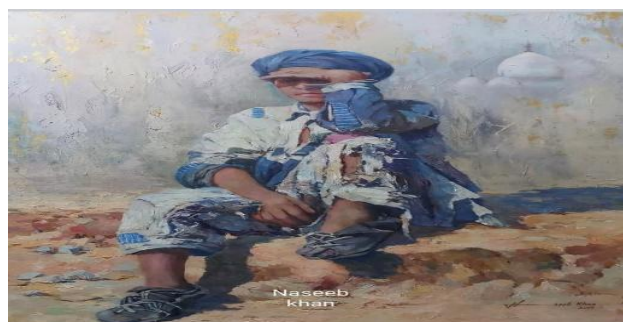
Poverty is a recurring theme in many of Khan's works. His paintings depicting nomadic communities show people living without permanent houses and residing in traditional *gidan* (nomadic tents). In an interview, Khan explained, "I show the whole culture of Balochistan through my art. We Pashtun people are suffering from thousands of problems, but we do not lose heart and have earned money by working hard" (N. Khan, personal communication, December 10, 2023).

Khan further stated, "Poverty is our main problem. We are living a 200-year-old lifestyle even today in 2023" (N. Khan, personal communication, December 10, 2023). His statement emphasizes his perception of the persistence of traditional ways of life alongside contemporary socioeconomic challenges. Khan also connects poverty with limited educational opportunities and the persistence of certain traditional practices. When asked why he addresses topics such as *Walwar* in his artwork, he explained that "because of lack of education, unfortunately, people who are not familiar with education are still stuck in old customs" (N. Khan, personal communication, December 10, 2023). He further associated social change with education, suggesting that changes in people's thinking can occur through increased access to education.



In one of his paintings, Khan represents the nomadic way of life in Balochistan. He depicts men, women, and children engaged in different activities throughout the day. In an interview, he explained that members of nomadic communities work from morning until evening to earn their livelihood and feed their families, but do not beg from others. He stated, "No hands are spread in front of a rich man" (N. Khan, personal communication,

December 10, 2023). Through this representation, Khan emphasizes both the economic hardship of nomadic communities and their sense of dignity and self-reliance.



Another painting by Khan, entitled *Naya Zamana*, depicts a laborer wearing tattered clothes. The figure represents the economic hardship experienced by sections of the population in Balochistan. Explaining the title of the painting, Khan stated, “I gave this title to my painting just to pay attention to it” (N. Khan, personal communication, December 10, 2023). Through this work, Khan draws attention to the continued presence of poverty and labor-related hardship within contemporary Balochistan.



3. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that poverty has remained a persistent social and economic challenge in Pakistan since its establishment in 1947. Poverty, however, cannot be understood through a single definition because its nature and manifestations vary according to the social, economic, geographical, and cultural conditions of different regions. In general terms, poverty may be understood as the deprivation of basic needs and the lack of access to essential resources and opportunities necessary for a dignified life. Its manifestations differ across communities and regions according to their particular circumstances. At the time of independence in 1947, Pakistan faced considerable

economic challenges and inherited a weak economic base. Nevertheless, the country's early political leadership confronted these challenges while attempting to establish functioning economic and administrative institutions. Over subsequent decades, economic inequality has remained an important issue in Pakistani society. Wealth and economic opportunities are distributed unevenly, creating significant differences in living conditions between different sections of the population. This inequality is reflected in the experiences represented by the artists examined in this study. The paintings analyzed in this research demonstrate that poverty is not merely an economic condition but also a social experience that affects children's education, aspirations, dignity, and future opportunities. A common feature across the works of the artists examined in this study is the representation of children living within conditions of poverty. Whether depicted begging, working, collecting garbage, living in difficult circumstances, or imagining a better future, children occupy a central position in these paintings. Their presence emphasizes the intergenerational nature of poverty and raises questions about the future opportunities available to children who grow up in deprived environments.

The paintings discussed in this study also demonstrate that poverty can be transmitted from one generation to another when children lack access to education, adequate living conditions, economic opportunities, and other basic social services. From this perspective, poverty is not simply an individual's failure to achieve economic security; it can also be reproduced through unequal access to resources and opportunities. Although governmental and non-governmental organizations, income-support programs, and other social interventions can provide important forms of assistance, the findings suggest that addressing poverty requires attention to the structural conditions that reproduce inequality. The artists examined in this research approach poverty from different geographical, cultural, and personal perspectives, yet their works share two prominent themes: poverty itself and its impact on children. Young artists across different provinces of Pakistan have represented poverty through diverse visual languages, reflecting their own experiences and observations. Their works can be understood as attempts to create social awareness by drawing attention to the circumstances in which children live and the consequences these circumstances may have for their future.

The recurring presence of children becomes particularly significant when the paintings are considered collectively. In Arsalan Naqvi's work, the image of the crow and the boy draws attention to the vulnerability of childhood. Shakira Mir's *Fatima* represents the interruption of a young woman's educational aspirations because of poverty. In Naseer Khan's work, the figure of a laborer in worn clothing reflects economic hardship, while S. M. Raza's *I Want to Be a Superstar* presents a child whose aspirations exist alongside severe material deprivation. Similarly, Sandeep Kumar's representation of children associated with begging highlights the denial of basic opportunities and dignity

experienced by impoverished children. Artists themselves explicitly connect their work to concerns about the future of children. Arsalan Naqvi explains that his purpose in creating paintings on poverty is to draw attention to the difficult circumstances faced by children and the danger that their futures may be compromised by poverty. He emphasizes the social responsibility of artists to create awareness through art and argues that children should be in schools rather than on the streets trying to earn enough for their daily meals. Sandeep Kumar similarly emphasizes that children should not be forced into begging and argues that, as citizens of Pakistan, they are entitled to basic human rights.

Shakira Mir's painting *Fatima* is particularly connected to her own family experience. Mir explains that her sister, Fatima, was interested in education but was unable to continue her studies because of poverty. She represents her sister's suffering through the painting and imagines an alternative future in which Fatima could have fulfilled her aspirations. This personal dimension demonstrates how poverty can affect not only material conditions but also educational aspirations, family decisions, and individual life choices. M. Raza's work presents another dimension of the relationship between poverty and childhood. He describes his paintings as containing both hope and despair. His *Lucid Dream* series presents children who experience difficult social and economic conditions but continue to imagine alternative lives. Through these imagined worlds, Raza suggests the possibility that children may one day wake from their dreams to find that their circumstances have changed. His work therefore creates a visual tension between the harshness of present reality and the possibility of a more hopeful future.

Taken together, these paintings suggest that poverty is closely connected with social and economic inequality. The experiences represented by the artists can be examined through the theoretical framework of Marxism, particularly its emphasis on the relationship between economic structures, class relations, and inequality. Marxist scholarship has long examined how unequal economic structures can produce and reproduce differences in wealth, resources, and opportunities. From this perspective, poverty is not viewed solely as an individual condition but as a phenomenon connected to broader social and economic structures. Inequality can become intergenerational when unequal access to education, employment, healthcare, and other opportunities limits the ability of individuals and families to improve their socioeconomic position. The findings of this study therefore demonstrate that Pakistani artists use visual art not only to represent poverty but also to question the social conditions that allow poverty to persist. Across the paintings examined, children function as important symbols of both vulnerability and possibility. Their presence reminds viewers that the consequences of poverty extend beyond the present generation and may shape the future of the country. Through their paintings, these artists transform individual experiences of poverty into broader social

commentary, encouraging viewers to consider questions of inequality, education, dignity, human rights, and children's futures.

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