Navigating Native Slipstream and Indigenous Futurism: Upending Western Tropes in Pakistani Speculative Art

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Article Info	Abstract
  	This research article delves into the concept of native slipstream and its interrelation with Pakistani speculative fiction art, with a particular focus on Omar Gilani's award-winning sci-fi artistic productions. Grounded in Dillon's critical theoretical framework on indigenous futurism expounded in *Walking the Clouds* (2012), this study seeks to challenge and decolonize the genre by subverting Eurocentric science fiction tropes and fostering an Indigenous perspective within the seemingly colonized precinct of sci-fi digital art. Through the concept of Native slipstream, this paper envisions a futuristic portrayal of Pakistani culture, creating a distinct Pakistani version of sci-fi art that challenges the dominance of mainstream Western sci-fi. This artistic study attempts to examine the futuristic discourses in Gilani's artworks, critique of the social dilemmas and AI-dominated future, the dependency of AI humans, and the gradual downfall of AI. The paper aims to scrutinize the contrivances employed by Pakistani artists, the nature of contemporary subject matters and artistic parameters evolved in the visionary future's depiction, the way native slipstream reworks in the process of decolonization, and the impact it will leave on Pakistan's artistic future. This paper highlights the need to develop an interdisciplinary research further on the emerging trends of indigenous futurism in Pakistani literary and artistic productions.

Introduction

The practices of slipstream and native slipstream represent pivotal methodologies employed by futurist writers to envision future scenarios and construct alternative worlds. This study focuses on an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted implications associated with the terms 'slipstream' and 'native slipstream' 'slipstream', emphasising the intricate relationship between these two concepts. More precisely, this paper will identify, scrutinise, and comprehensively assess the diverse components that constitute native slipstream within the domain of Pakistani art. This analysis will elucidate the underlying purposes that these components serve, as well as a critical inquiry into the inherent nature of futuristic subject matters and the narrative parameters that evolve while visualizing and depicting visionary futures.

The concept of slipstream functions as an investigative apparatus that extends beyond established frontiers to scrutinize the undercurrents of human meaning-making processes. In his paper, Steble underscores that slipstream denotes "the elusive and slippery mode of writing which is essentially postmodern fiction par excellence due to an unprecedented degree of genre mixing" (155). Similarly, in the article titled "Of Slipstream and Others," it is defined as "a hybrid text drawing on a number of genres and conventions, only one of which is science fiction" (Frelik 28). Furthermore, according to Collins dictionary, it is characterized as "a literary genre; a kind of fantastic or non-realistic fiction which crosses conventional genre boundaries between science fiction and fantasy." This definition aims to capture humanity's efforts to navigate the intricate landscape of postmodern reality (Collins Dictionary). Recognizing the contradictions of postmodern reality, Nevins quotes Bruce Sterling's definition of slipstream while delving into literature's most chilling genre, asserting that it "is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility" (322). For Frelik, slipstream mirrors science fiction's "changing status in the larger literary landscape" (21) of the twenty-first century (21). Thus, slipstream stretches the boundaries of narrative forms by providing a foundation for envisioning

humanity's future rather than merely serving as a communication medium. Write the following paragraph into academic English without changing the quoted sentences in in-text citation.

After providing a comprehensive definition of the slipstream genre, this section proceeds to examine the concept of native slipstream, a significant tool for exploring the nuances of narrative, identity construction, and contemporary conflicts in recent decades. Grace Dillon, an esteemed Anishinaabe associate professor within the Indigenous Nations Studies program at Portland State University in Oregon, introduced this term in her groundbreaking work, "Walking the Clouds," the first-ever anthology dedicated to indigenous science fiction. Within this seminal text, she articulates her definition of Native slipstream as "a species of speculative fiction within the sf realm, infusing stories with elements such as time travel, alternate realities, multiverses, and alternative histories" (Dillon 30), all while incorporating indigenous socio-historical values into the narrative framework. Furthermore, Dillon posits that "native slipstream perceives time as a continuum encompassing pasts, presents, and futures, flowing together like currents in a navigable stream. This perspective mirrors nonlinear thinking about space-time" (Dillon 3), with a specific focus on indigenous conceptions of time and space, aiming to explore the intersections of the past and the present. Consequently, she contends that "it enables authors to rekindle the native space of the past, draw it to the attention of contemporary readers, and contribute to the creation of more promising futures" (Dillon 4). Remarkably, it is worth noting that no alternative definition of Native slipstream exists within the available scholarship, as Dillon stands as the sole author to introduce and theorize this term.

In the recent decades, indigenous futurism in the realm of art, has emerged as a pivotal mechanism for challenging the established conventions within the genre of science fiction art. As a result, native slipstream has been harnessed to depict alternate realities by Indigenous communities, driven by their profound fascination with the future, which holds a prominent position in the futuristic portrayal of their native cultural traditions. Hence, the theoretical framework, native slipstream assumes substantial importance in shedding light on the endeavors undertaken by Pakistani artists in their pursuit of indigenizing Pakistan's future.

In Grace Dillon's perspective, indigenous futurism plays a crucial role within the indigenous epistemological process, facilitating the envisioning of the future through the application of native knowledge practices. In her article, "Indigenous Futurisms, Bimaashi Biidaas Mose, Flying and Walking towards You," she advocates for scholars and artists to recognize the "qualities lauded in contemporary experimental science fiction as core elements of ancient Indigenous epistemologies" (Dillon 1). This perspective aligns with a passage from Octavia Butler's "Parables of the Talents" where it is mentioned, "To Survive/Let the Past/Teach You" (Butler). Furthermore, Lidchi and Fricke emphasize "the enduring relevance of indigenous thought, artistic practice, and expression; they reconfigure the relationship between past, present, and future, presenting the relationship between these temporalities as entangled, compacted, or cyclical, but emphatically not linear" (100-101), a concept vividly represented in the art pieces of Omar Gilani. Thus, the reinvention of the past assumes a pivotal role in the process of indigenizing the future.

Futuristic Discourses in Omar Gilani's Digital Art

Considering the pressing need to indigenize Pakistan's future, particularly in the context of the ongoing proliferation of artificial intelligence, widely regarded as an extension of the neo-colonial agenda in the modern world, this paper explores Omar Gilani's efforts to infuse native culture into his digital art to envision the future of Pakistan. As Omar Gilani, a Peshawar-based, award-winning young conceptual artist, illustrator, creative director, and mechanical engineer, aptly states, "it was the need of the hour to see beyond a purely Western narrative that led to self-taught Omar Gilani creating one-of-a-kind pieces offering a fusion of sci-fi and local culture" (Zahid). His sci-fi digital artworks challenge established norms, versions, and perspectives within the field of sci-fi art by blending South-Asian cultural heritage, while simultaneously presenting a "cautiously optimistic and thus realistic future" ("Contemporary Take"). Therefore, Gilani's portrayal of the future is imbued with the tapestry of religio-historical traditions, resulting in the presentation of an indigenous iteration of sci-fi art.

Gilani frames his art as a response from an Eastern artist situated within the context of the artificially intelligent world of the 21st century, influenced by the paradigms of Western modernity. He counters the agenda of colonial continuity implicit in artificial intelligence through the language of indigenous futurism, envisioning a future that embraces technological advancement not by disuniting ties with the past, but by adapting progress in accordance with locally inherited cultural practices. Therefore, his art subverts mainstream perceptions of sci-fi art through the incorporation of Pakistani culture and heritage. A striking contrast emerges between Western sci-fi art, which tends to disengage from the past and primarily focuses on a future dominated by high-tech development. However, as articulated by Austrian Ambassador Briggitt Blaha in an interview with Dawn news, Pakistani digital art "connects its past with the present and presents its vision for the future." In the same interview during his solo exhibition at Aks Gallery Islamabad, Gilani expounded on the paramount objective behind his art project titled "Pakistan+," noting that "the people of the subcontinent are ignored. As a result, he embarked on an artistic mission to present an indigenous

version of Pakistani sci-fi art to dismantle the artificially imposed perception of barbarism associated with the people of the Subcontinent by the imperial powers in sci-fi art and writing… we are reduced to barbarians, living in a terrorist wasteland" (16). The following digital artworks exemplify Gilani's depiction of Pakistan's future, a future that has even influenced artificial intelligence according to its Indigenous values, where the past and the modern coalesce to depict a dystopian and utopian world.

Furthermore, this study categorizes Gilani's sci-fi art into three thematic segments based on its subject matter. The first part of his digital art revolves around the indigenization of the future through the revival of cultural heritage and customs from the past, with an evident undertone of resistance permeating all his artworks. The second part of his speculative artworks offers a critique of contemporary social concerns within Pakistani society. It explores their potential continuity into the future if left unresolved in the present. The third section of Gilani's artistic productions highlights robots' dependency on humans and envisions the eventual decline of artificial intelligence, which had previously promoted the so-called robotic culture.

Revival of Cultural Heritage

Fig. 1. Gilani, Omar. *Dhaba*. HIP, 18 Mar 2017, https://www.hipinpakistan.com/news/1152095. Accessed 14 March 2021.

Fig. 2. Gilani, Omar. *Doodh guy*. HIP, 18 Mar 2017, https://www.hipinpakistan.com/news/1152095. Accessed 14 March 2021.

In the first digital painting, a local *chai dhaba* is depicted, and this portrayal is subject to the influence of high-tech developments, as evidenced by the presence of a robot serving tea to the seated patrons. Despite this technological intrusion, the artwork underscores the persistence of Indigenous tea consumption practices within the *dhaba*, where individuals engage in conversations reminiscent of a *baithak* setting. Significantly, the tea's preparation remains the responsibility of a human *dhaba* owner, while human patrons partake in critical discussions amongst themselves. In contrast, the robot occupies a restricted, subservient role as a tea server, catering to the needs of the human clientele. This depiction underscores the enduring nature of Indigenous, multidisciplinary interactions, which continue to raise questions about the future of conversational settings in public spaces. These interactions serve as a means of resistance against calls for a "change in cultural norms and policy" (10) put forth by proponents of robotic

integration, as highlighted by Bird, Skelly, and Jenner. Moreover, they affirm the artwork's alignment with the narrative of technology's "decisive impact on the narrative of global culture," as discussed in ("African American Art"). Similarly, the next artwork captures the image of a *dodh wala* or milk delivery man traversing one of the narrow streets of old Lahore astride a blue flying scooter, thus preserving old customs and traditions.

Fig. 3. Gilani, Omar. *Burger wala*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION, http://www.omargilani.com/. Accessed 14 March 2021.

The artwork represented in Figure 3 amalgamates traditional and modern cultural elements. This synthesis is exemplified by the portrayal of a flying truck, which serves as a manifestation of truck art, an integral facet of the local Pakistani art culture, while also alluding to the technological advancements of the contemporary era. Furthermore, the presence of burger shops and an Islamic book center within the composition symbolizes a Pakistani market that encompasses fast-food establishments alongside centers for native religious literature. Similarly, the inclusion of a high-rise building within the spatial context of the market signifies the profound influence of technology on the cultural landscape. Gilani's futuristic representation of Pakistan is emblematic of the enduring indigenous culture, which appears to withstand the full encroachment of modernity in the future, as articulated by Gilani himself, "My interest was in capturing the essence of more rustic Pakistani culture, and how tech advancements would (or wouldn't) affect that" (quoted in The Indian Express).

Fig. 4. Gilani, Omar. *Inner city*. 2020, fineartamerica, https://fineartamerica.com/featured/inner-city-omar-gilani.html. Accessed 4 April 2021.

In the art piece Figure 4, titled "Inner city" by Gilani, the flying "rickshaw" emerging from the Taxali gate, one of the numerous historic gates of Lahore, signifies the impact of advanced technology on cultural traffic. This painting provides a comprehensive portrayal of the inner city, as evidenced by the gothic architectural features reminiscent of Mughal architecture, which are found in the inner city of old Lahore. The presence of food shops and restaurants serves as a reference to Food Street, while the live dance performance by the woman represents the dancing and singing culture of the *Hira Mandi* bazaar, also known as *Shahi Mohalla*, or the Red-Light District in the Walled city of Lahore.

It is worth noting that the brothel houses in *Bazzar-e-Husn* of Hira Mandi were originally established for the entertainment of British soldiers, even though the buildings themselves were constructed during the Mughal era. This

historical transformation of a place initially designed for aesthetic and artistic purposes into a center of entertainment led to the loss of its inherent cultural and artistic charm, which had once been the focal point of the traditional representation of Indigenous culture during the Mughal reign. Hence, Gilani's artistic masterpiece can be viewed as an attempt to rekindle traditional heritage with a contemporary sensibility, aimed at rectifying the "cultural memory of historic events" that has been deliberately misrepresented (Menadue and Cheer 2).

Fig. 5. Gilani, Omar. *Sitaar Player*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION,
http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 6 April 2021.

In Figure 5, the depiction of a sitar-playing cyborg evokes the historical context of classical music during the reign of Muslim rulers in the Indian Subcontinent. The sitar, attributed to Amir Khusrau Dehlavi, an iconic Indian Sufi musician, gained recognition in the Western world through the efforts of Pandit Ravi Shankar, a renowned Indian sitar virtuoso and composer of the 20th century. Within the artwork, four hands are playing the sitar, two of which are human and two bionic. This configuration underscores the idea that a cyborg cannot independently perform sitar playing without human intervention, even though both human and bionic hands are in contact with the instrument. This suggests that robots are incapable of completely supplanting humans in their roles, and their contribution, at best, may be in the capacity of assistance, while the significant role remains firmly in human hands in the near future.

The context of the artwork's infrastructural setting implies that the cyborg is engaged in playing the sitar within one of the Mughal courts. This placement signifies that Gilani is not only reviving the ancient tradition of sitar playing but also presenting it within the framework of advanced technology, utilizing a cyborg player to envision a futuristic portrayal of Indigenous musical traditions. Thus, Gilani's science fiction art extends beyond a mere depiction of scientific advancements; it serves a primary purpose, as mentioned by Cheer and Menadue, of acting "as a tool for advocacy and cultural insight" (1) through the lens of native slipstream.
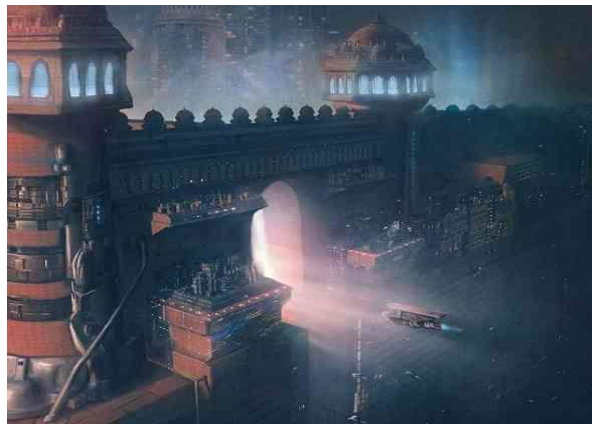

Fig. 6. Gilani, Omar. *Delhi Gate*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION,
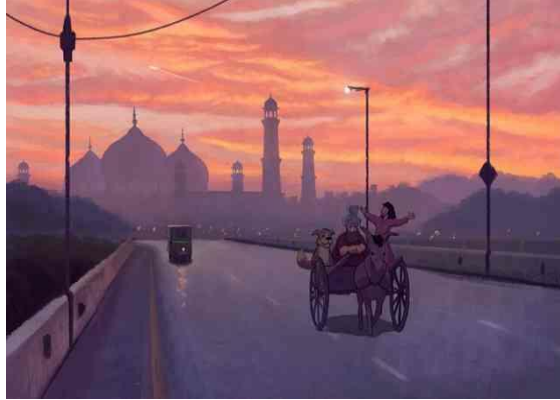http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 6 April 2021.

Fig. 7. Gilani, Omar. *Lahore at Dusk*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION,
https://www.reddit.com/r/pakistan/comments/jbjwt7/lahore_at_dusk_painting_by_omar_gilani_art//. Accessed 14
March 2021.

The digital painting, represented as Figure 6, offers a futuristic rendition of Delhi Gate, which stands as one of the six surviving historical gates constructed during the Mughal era, serving as a principal entrance to Lahore. Presently, this gate is recognized as *Chitta* Gate and is situated within the walled city of Lahore. The gate depicted in the image appears to possess a contemporary facade, although its fundamental architectural structure remains in keeping with the original gate. Comprising both red bricks and robotic materials, the gate symbolizes a fusion of traditional aesthetics and mechanical components. While Gilani harmoniously combines elements of the past and the present, he ensures that modernity does not supplant the essence of traditional heritage. Consequently, despite the mechanized modifications evident in the gate, its fundamental structure, form, historical context, and function remain unchanged, and it retains its nomenclature as Delhi Gate of Lahore in the future.

Similarly, in Figure 7, .a traditionally powerful local mode of transport is portrayed against the backdrop of the Badshahi Mosque along the roads of old Lahore. This representation encapsulates Pakistan's rich cultural history. Simultaneously, a flying rickshaw behind the Tanga introduces an element of futurism, attributed to the influence of technology.

Fig. 8. Gilani, Omar. *Uncle Sargam*. The Nation, https://nation.com.pk/15-Dec-2016/recalling-uncle-sargram-through-omar-gilani-s-painting. Accessed 18 April 2021.

Gilani's rendition of Uncle Sargam, as depicted in Figure 8, serves to revive the presence of a fictional comic character that emerged in the 1980s through the creativity of puppeteer Farooq Qaiser. The character of Uncle Sargam made its debut in the children's program *Kaliyan*, broadcast on Pakistan Television (PTV). It assumed the role of a satirical character, intended to critique the socio-economic issues prevalent in Pakistani society and impart moral values to children. Within the digital painting, Gilani's portrayal conveys the image of a wearied figure, as Uncle Sargam is depicted seated alongside a sunlit and shadowed wall of a house, holding a jug in one hand and a bottle in the other. The presence of a plain wall, an arched door, and an aged, curtained window evokes elements of Mughal architecture, which still endures in the walled cities of certain Pakistani locales. Gilani employs a palette of subtly sophisticated colors to capture the scene with a sense of simplicity. In contrast to contemporary comic characters,

which are often characterized by their reliance on technological gadgets to attain unattainable goals, Uncle Sargam's character remains firmly rooted in traditional values. A young girl, quietly observing him while clutching a balloon, appears to be aligned with the same traditional values to which Uncle Sargam is drawn. In this manner, Uncle Sargam endures as a symbol of a moral instructor and advocate of simplicity, resisting the inculcation of modern and inhumane tendencies in children.

Fig. 9. Gilani, Omar. *Rural Pakistan*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION, http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 4 April 2021.

Fig. 10. Gilani, Omar. *Derelict*. Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/ogilani/. Accessed 4 April 2021.

The digital painting, as illustrated in Figure 9, presents a futuristic representation of a village in the Punjab, featuring what appears to be a space-shuttle shooter in the background, a scene reminiscent of villages such as Baathi Qaisrani, Litra, and Mithwan, which are situated near the Koh-e-Sulaiman range. This range is a north-south extension of the southern Hindu Kush mountain *Hindu Kush* Mountain system, spanning across Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is renowned for its highest peak, 'Takht-e-Sulaiman,' documented by Ibn-e-Battuta. Notably, the region hosts the world's largest salt mine and is celebrated for its mineral potential. The Koh-e-Sulaiman Mountains, which straddle the borders of Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan, are characterized by their rugged terrain and rocky landscape, distinct from the lush greenery of the Himalayas. Similarly, the mountains featured in the futuristic artwork also lack the characteristic greenery associated with fertile landscapes.

Gilani's portrayal conveys the idea that even in the presence of towering technological advancements, the agricultural practices and fundamental infrastructure of Pakistani villages remain unchanged. An agricultural laborer is depicted manually watering the fields, adhering to traditional methods rather than adopting newly introduced irrigation techniques. Likewise, in Figure 10, a school-going village student is shown attempting to deter a robot, exemplifying his brave resistance against what is an imposing giant robot and the associated robotic culture. These elements are presented as part of a neo-colonial agenda, perceived as an encroachment under the guise of modernity, and the young student's action symbolizes an effort to safeguard his village from the overwhelming influence of these technological advancements.

Fig. 11. Gilani, Omar. *Independence Day*. Omar Gilani YouTube,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0hvWvjEPHw. Accessed 4 April 2021.

The depicted scene pertains to the celebration of Pakistan's Independence Day, providing a panoramic view of a grand firework display at Minar-e-Pakistan, resplendent with an array of colorful lights. Notably, Minar-e-Pakistan is adorned with green and white lights, meticulously aligning with the colors of the Pakistani flag. The dazzling fireworks illuminate the night sky, elevating the fervor and zeal of the populace. In the spirit of commemorating Pakistan's liberation from British colonial rule, a robotic truck partakes in a jubilant dance to exalt the spirit of freedom.

Gilani employs a distinctive artistic language that challenges the overarching agenda of artificial intelligence, which, it is contended, seeks to relegate a segment of humanity to a state of redundancy, resulting in their physical and intellectual incapacitation as they are displaced from the job market. By utilizing science fiction art as his medium, Gilani offers a counter-narrative to the Western world, conversing with them in the language of technology. On one hand, he introduces the emerging culture of robotics through the portrayal of a robot, a dynamic technological innovation. On the other hand, he marries this futuristic concept with the humble Pakistani truck, a quintessential local mode of transportation. In doing so, he incorporates local themes, indigenous settings, and Pakistani imagery and customizes the robot to align with the Indigenous culture of the region. This dual representation envisages a potential futuristic depiction of Pakistan in the era of artificial intelligence, highlighting how a technologically advanced Pakistan might appear in the future.

Hence, Gilani's speculative art serves to construct a distinctly Pakistani variant of speculative art, offering a counter-narrative to the established and dominant paradigm of science fiction art, which is often perceived as a benchmark in artistic expression. As Jackson asserts, "art possesses the capacity for interpreting the form of a culture and translating its aesthetic across space and time," and in this vein, Gilani not only encapsulates the local culture and indigenous imagery but also underscores the role of speculative art in shaping narratives about the future (Jackson).

Critique of the Social Dilemmas and AI Dominated Future

Fig. 12. Gilani, Omar. *Guy bargaining with a rickshaw wala*. HIP, 18 Mar 2017,
https://www.hipinpakistan.com/news/1152095. Accessed 14 March 2021.

In the digital artwork presented above, the scene unfolds with a man engaged in a negotiation with a rickshaw driver within the confines of an inner city. Notably, the composition features the presence of flying vehicles, encompassing a car, a rickshaw, and a truck, thereby signifying Pakistan's technological progress within the context of aerial transportation. Simultaneously, these airborne conveyances provide a visual representation of Pakistan's cultural fabric, highlighting the enduring significance of rickshaws and traditional attire, as evidenced by the attire worn by the young boy. In addition to these elements, the theme of social class division is palpable, as the two cars are depicted at a higher altitude, contrasting with the auto-rickshaw, which operates as a more economical means of travel, typically utilized by individuals from lower socio-economic strata and positioned closer to the ground.

Moreover, the composition incorporates the presence of a utility store in the background, a government initiative aimed at providing subsidized goods and services to benefit the less privileged segments of society. This multifaceted representation in the artwork aligns with Farrukh's observation in her essay, "Imposed, Interrupted and Other Identities: Rupture as Opportunity in the Art History of Pakistan," featured in the anthology "Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology, and Art History in South Asia." She highlights that the debates stirred by art serve as a mechanism for raising awareness within the complex and at times repressive postcolonial landscape of Pakistan, reflecting the nuanced and evolving narratives within the country's artistry (Farrukh 1).

Fig. 13. Gilani, Omar. *Cyborg-beggar*. HIP, 18 Mar 2017, https://www.hipinpakistan.com/news/1152095. Accessed 14 March 2021.

Fig. 14. Gilani, Omar. *Galli Cricket*. HIP, 18 Mar 2017, https://www.hipinpakistan.com/news/1152095. Accessed 14 March 2021.

In a parallel vein, Figure 13 presents a poignant tableau wherein a cyborg beggar, or a child whose arm has been mechanically replaced, appears for alms at the window of a car. This scene offers a symbolic representation of one of Pakistans prevailing socio-economic challenges, namely, poverty. Furthermore, it serves as a critical commentary on the notion that advances in biotechnology, as noted by Harari in *Homo Deus* (2015), may facilitate the physical restoration of a poor child's limb, yet it does not inherently alleviate the entrenched state of poverty that afflicts societies. A similar thematic underpinning can be discerned in Figure 14, where towering skyscrapers stand as symbols of urban progress, while juxtaposed against this urban backdrop are images of impoverished children engaging in street cricket. Herein, Gilani's art operates as a vessel for rejuvenating traditional values from the past and

a means for examining contemporary socio-economic predicaments. In this endeavor, his art endeavors to reconceptualize a native future, thereby reshaping the discourse surrounding Pakistani art and challenging the dominant "art practices that continue to evade a comprehensive scholarly study or even discursive articulation" (Hashmi and Batool 1).

Fig. 15. Gilani, Omar. *Petty Bribes*. 2017, Pixels, https://pixels.com/featured/petty-bribes-omar-gilani.html. Accessed 4 April 2021.

The digital artwork presented above bears the title "Petty Bribes." Within this composition, the portrayal of a flying car and bike exemplifies the technological influences that may enable such modes of transportation to achieve flight in the future. Notably, the young boy on the bike is observed beseeching the man in the car for a contribution toward his tea. In the local context, the act of requesting 'tea' in Pakistan serves as a subtle euphemism for soliciting a 'bribe.' This symbolic representation underscores one of the prevailing social issues afflicting Pakistani society, namely, the pervasive problem of bribery.

Gilani's art functions as a vehicle for exposing the entrenched social dilemmas within our society. It compels us to confront the grim reality of this issue's persistence into the future if it remains unaddressed in the present. Consequently, artists like Gilani, as articulated by Ali, "express and examine the complicated nature of Pakistani national and cultural identities by looking at the society's most volatile concerns" while engaging in the act of envisioning the future.

Fig. 16. Gilani, Omar. *Nomad*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION, http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 4 April 2021.

Similarly, the painting presented above portrays a nomadic group residing in hogans situated at a distance from the city. Amidst the backdrop of towering urban structures and a flying rocket, the composition seeks to underscore the impact of modernity. However, amidst these symbols of technological advancement, certain elements resist the encroachment of the future on local culture. These include a "charpai," meticulously crafted with hand-woven threads, a donkey harnessed to a cart, serving as a vital means of transportation and livelihood for these individuals, and a mother and her daughter seated by a fire, seeking warmth during a cold winter evening.

This representation can be interpreted as a stance against the prevailing narrative of modernity, which purports to enhance the quality of life, yet appears to have left the lives of nomadic or economically disadvantaged segments of society largely unaltered, perpetuating the existing class divisions. Gilani's futuristic digital art thus

confronts the socio-economic divide, inherent in the very design of the city that remains an undeniable reality in contemporary society, as well as a looming specter for the future, akin to the artistic expressions of Mamoona Riaz, an interdisciplinary Pakistani artist (Brittney).

Fig. 17. Gilani, Omar. *Ramadan Ban Enforcers*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION, http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 5 April 2021.

Furthermore, Figure 17 offers a composition open to multifaceted interpretations. On one hand, the signpost reading *Ehtraam Kren* may be seen as a symbol of the enforcement of a ban on public eating during the fasting period of Ramadan, an Islamic month dedicated to fasting, as a gesture of reverence. In this context, the scene portrays a child resorting to consuming food in an unsanitary environment due to the prohibition. Conversely, a more detailed analysis of the painting reveals two inspectors meticulously examining garbage and damaged trolleys. This aspect of the composition advocates for responsible waste disposal, promoting the idea that refuse should not be discarded indiscriminately but rather placed in designated trash bins, thereby emphasizing the significance of maintaining a clean environment.

The underlying subtext of the artwork becomes apparent as the child is depicted partaking in a meal within a filthy setting, marked by his evident hunger, dishevelled appearance, tattered clothing, and untidy surroundings. This imagery serves as a poignant commentary on the circumstances faced by the marginalized sectors of society. Gilani's intent is to raise awareness among the more privileged segments of society, those who typically utilize forks and knives, about the harsh realities of the less fortunate. Thus, Gilani's artistic pursuit revolves around a critical examination of contemporary concerns to envision a more ameliorated indigenous future.

Fig. 18. Gilani, Omar. *Chief Burger Peshawar*. Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/ogilani/. Accessed 4 April 2021.

The digital speculative art piece, as exemplified in Figure 18, delves into the realm of two pivotal concerns that resonate within the context of Pakistan. The first concern pertains to the endeavor to envision an indigenous future, while the second entails the critical examination of contemporary apprehensions. In addressing the first matter, Gilani skillfully captures the essence of Chief Burger Peshawar, a local setting that serves as a canvas for conceiving a future deeply rooted in Pakistan's socio-historical heritage and cultural traditions. His intent in incorporating this distinctly Pakistani milieu is to expand the boundaries of science fiction art and present a unique Pakistani rendition.

Conversely, the second concern revolves around the scrutiny of pressing contemporary anxieties, one of which centers on the ecological crisis induced by rampant pollution. In this context, Gilani rejects the enlightened yet fundamentally detrimental facets of modernity that have set industrial systems into motion, resulting in the global

menace of climate change attributed to industrial emissions. In this futuristic artwork, he strategically situates a burger eatery and a factory near one another, thereby foreshadowing and emphasizing the very conundrum that, if left unaddressed, will persist in contaminating not only the present but also the sustenance of future generations.

Fig. 19. Gilani, Omar. *Lari Adda*. Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/ogilani/. Accessed 5 April 2021.

Fig. 20. Gilani, Omar. *Bus Conductor Shenanigans*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION, http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 5 April 2021.

Furthermore, the artwork presented above is titled "Lari Adda Departure." This speculative representation offers a glimpse into a futuristic rendering of the General Bus Stand at Badami Bagh in Lahore, commonly referred to as 'Lari Adda.' This bus terminal stands as one of the three central transportation hubs in Lahore, serving as a principal point of arrival and departure for many buses. Notably, the composition features a network of robotic roads, designed as airstrips for buses to take flight, supplanting conventional airplanes. Similarly, Figure 20 encapsulates a scene replete with flying shuttles equipped with robotic tires, traversing through a bustling local bazaar. The whimsical image of a conductor extending both hands to grasp hold of these airborne buses adds an element of playfulness to the narrative.

Through these futuristic portrayals of Indigenous transportation culture, Gilani endeavors to convey his resistance to prevailing norms, employing his artistic medium to subvert the conventions of science fiction art. He does so by intricately weaving elements of Pakistani settings and characters into his sci-fi digital paintings. In doing so, he conveys that while modernity may introduce modifications to certain facets of life, it is inherently incapable of altering the fundamental structure of the local system.

Dependency of AI on Humans and Gradual Downfall of AI

Fig. 21. Gilani, Omar. *Synthezoid Repairs*. Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/ogilani/. Accessed 5 April 2021.

In Figure 21, a synthetic humanoid robot is depicted engaging with a mechanical and robotic apparatus in tool repair. Notably, the automated device in question is developed through artificial intelligence, rendering it subservient to human control, as it is both the creator and the user of this technology. The device is inherently programmed to fulfil the specific tasks it is assigned. Gilani employs this portrayal to critique the inherent dependency of such robots, noting that even in their role as mechanized entities, they are compelled to adopt a human-like form and setting while emulating the various functions of human physiology in executing their assigned tasks.

Furthermore, the image of a running fan serves as a symbol that underscores the need to replicate human temperature sensations, oscillating between hot and cold. By juxtaposing these elements, Gilani conveys that the advent of robotic systems and the development of high technology, both byproducts of Western modernity, cannot eradicate indigenous customs and traditions ingrained in native populations, transforming them into mechanized entities devoid of their cultural identity.

Another potential interpretation of this art piece delves into the reference it may make to the issue of child labour. Gilani's work underscores his commitment to illuminating the contemporary dilemmas and pressing challenges within our community, emphasizing the potential dire consequences they may carry into the future. Consequently, Gilani's futuristic depiction straddles the line between utopian and dystopian, drawing from the realities of the prevalent concerns of our times.
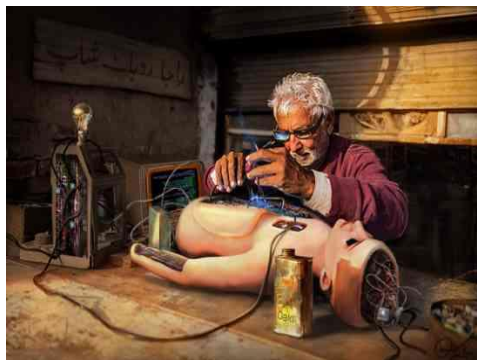

Fig. 22. Gilani, Omar. *Raja Robot Shop*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION, http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 12 April 2021.

Similarly, Figure 22 underscores the theme of the dependency of robots on human intervention. The artwork presents an old man who is either constructing or repairing a robot, thereby highlighting the central role of human beings in creating and maintaining robotic entities. This depiction serves as a testament to the notion that the human mind, as the creator, remains inherently more active and intelligent when compared to a robot. The robot itself is a product of artificial intelligence, designed to simulate human intelligence. This, in turn, prompts the question of whether a replica, by its very nature, can ever truly mirror the intellectual and other faculties of the original.

Additionally, the choice of the name for the old man's establishment as 'Raja Robot Shop' holds significance. This nomenclature not only draws attention to the exalted status of the elderly man, who is likened to a Raja or prince, signifying his authority over all matters within his domain. Traditionally, older individuals are esteemed for their wisdom and experience. Thus, Gilani conveys a message to those advocating for the advancement of artificial

intelligence, emphasizing that it can never supplant the capabilities of human beings, who surpass their own creations by virtue of their innate faculties.

Fig. 23. Gilani, Omar. *Progress*. CONCEPT ART & ILLUSTRATION,
http://www.omargilani.com/pakistan. Accessed 4 April 2021.

In the digital painting, as depicted in Figure 23, Gillani offers a visual representation of the potential trajectory of progress in Pakistan. He illustrates how progress, while making a marked impact, will not be potent enough to supplant Indigenous culture entirely. This is evident in the juxtaposition of the progressive elements, such as a robotic figure and towering buildings, against the enduring presence of donkey riders and a dog navigating the narrow city streets. The contrasting condition of the adjacent walls serves as a visual allegory: while the wall near the robot displays signs of development, the wall near the dog consists of basic brick construction, symbolizing the local sewage pipeline.

The image of the weary, seated robot symbolises the inherent vulnerability of technological advancement, as it remains unable to fundamentally alter the core values and traditions of the native culture. In this context, Gillani's work aligns with the themes explored in Risam and Gairola's anthology, "South Asian Digital Humanities: Postcolonial Mediations across Technology's Cultural Canon," which seeks to promote and examine the indigenous dimension of sci-fi digital art, as exemplified by Gillani's creations. This perspective positions digital humanities as a method through which South Asian studies can actively engage in the ongoing struggle for representation within the sphere of digital knowledge production, primarily through the medium of art (Amazon).

Fig. 24. Gilani, Omar. *Dead Robot*. Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/ogilani/. Accessed 4 April 2021.

The speculative science fiction artwork depicted above visually represents an urban landscape. Within this city, the dominance of towering skyscrapers is attributed to the assistance provided by robotics and artificial intelligence. Amidst the backdrop of these technologically driven high-rise structures, the presence of trees symbolises nature's resistance. Additionally, a lifeless robot, bearing the marks of broken legs and arms, stands isolated amidst the trees, at some distance from the towering skyscrapers. This portrayal underscores the transient nature of robotic systems, emphasizing their limited capacity to govern or disrupt the natural order of existence. These robots succumb and lie lifeless, symbolizing their inability to assert control over humanity or disturb the natural cycle of life. In this manner, Gilani employs his art as a subversion of mainstream speculative art tropes, offering an artistic representation of Pakistan's resilience and envisioning the eventual erosion of modernity within the country.

Considering the imperative need to envision an indigenous future, this study originally aimed to explore the artistic and aesthetic pursuits of Pakistani speculative fiction artists. However, it has evolved to demonstrate this endeavour's remarkable diversity and richness. Gilani's artworks play a central and significant role in this exploration, showcasing his pivotal contribution to the indigenization of Pakistan's artistic trajectory. Employing various analytical frameworks grounded in the concept of native slipstream, derived from Grace Dillon's indigenous theory, his work highlights the artistic awareness within Pakistani sci-fi digital painting.

Gilani's artistry encompasses the incorporation of alternate realities, technological tools such as digital painting, virtual reality, animations, interactive displays, ambient sounds, projection mapping, and hovering rickshaws. This transformative approach redefines the creative process of art. Simultaneously, his integration of elements from Mughal architecture, musical instruments, Pakistani settings, and Indigenous cultural values breathe new life into the classical foundations of Subcontinental art in the 21st century. His examination of contemporary socio-ecological, econo-political, and religio-historical concerns reshapes the role of art, making it both a source of aesthetic pleasure and a medium for contemplating societal dilemmas.

Furthermore, Gilani's unique artistic production subverts established Western sci-fi trends by seamlessly weaving sci-fi elements into the fabric of native traditions. Through the concept of Native slipstream, he envisions a futuristic portrayal of Pakistani culture. He represents a distinct Pakistani version of sci-fi art, challenging the dominance of mainstream Western sci-fi. His mission involves subverting Western sci-fi tropes, decolonizing the realm of artificial intelligence, and indigenizing Pakistan's artistic future by reclaiming religio-historical and socio-economic values while addressing contemporary concerns in sci-fi art. By merging Subcontinental folklore with modern scientific paradigms, this research seeks to redefine the indigenous identity through artistic expression and the absorption of Western influences on oriental consciousness.

Conclusively, Gilani's artistic productions serve as a platform to elucidate the intricacies of imaginative literary space. While originating from personal domains, his work amplifies the Global South's national, cultural, and regional concerns, aiming to rekindle the past, analyze the present, and indigenize Pakistan's artistic future. By challenging prevailing Western sci-fi tropes, trends, epistemologies, and practices, his art offers alternative visions and mediums preserve and reinvent local customs. This endeavor contributes to a deeper understanding of rituals for the Indigenous community and the broader global audience in modern times.

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