

VIRSA VEIL: A LIVING ARCHIVE OF HERITAGE AND FEMALE BRAVERY IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION

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Abstract

This paper explores Virsa Veil as a living archive of cultural heritage and an artistic expression of female bravery in contemporary fashion. Rooted in the historical resilience of Swabi women in nineteenth-century Pakistan, the project reinterprets the traditional Chail veil as a bridge between ancestral memory and modern design. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, feminist craft studies, and sustainable design practice, the study demonstrates how fashion can function as a medium of storytelling, identity formation, and empowerment. Through qualitative analysis, combining archival research, design ethnography, and visual documentation, the paper investigates how Virsa Veil transforms cultural artifacts into living narratives of resilience and continuity. The findings indicate that the project not only preserves craft traditions but also expands fashion's social function by addressing gendered histories and ethical sustainability. Ultimately, Virsa Veil exemplifies how heritage-inspired fashion can renew cultural identity while inspiring global dialogue on empowerment, sustainability, and creative hybridity.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, fashion theory, postcolonial aesthetics, female empowerment, sustainability, Swabi tradition, Virsa Veil

1. Introduction

Fashion, though often associated with trends and visual pleasure, operates as a profound cultural language through which societies communicate history, belief, and emotion. Beyond its material surface, fashion encodes systems of meaning that reflect power relations, gender ideologies, and collective memory. In regions like South Asia, garments become repositories of spiritual and social identity, bearing witness to centuries of craft, ritual, and resilience. Within this context, the *Virsa Veil* project emerges as an interdisciplinary endeavor that fuses design innovation with cultural preservation, re-imagining heritage not as static memory but as a living, evolving archive.

The idea of a *living archive* in fashion challenges conventional museum-based preservation by emphasizing continuity rather than containment. Instead of freezing tradition, *Virsa Veil* activates transforming ancestral narratives into wearable forms that interact with contemporary aesthetics and ethics. The project draws direct inspiration from the history of Swabi, a district in northern Pakistan known for the valor of its women during the nineteenth-century conflicts against the Sikh Empire. When the men of Swabi fell defending their homeland, women draped the bodies of the martyrs with their dupattas, later remembered as the *Chail*. This gesture transformed a domestic garment into a sacred symbol of sacrifice and courage. Over generations, the *Chail* came to signify both modesty and strength—a dual embodiment of cultural devotion and female resilience.

Despite its deep symbolic power, the *Chail* has received little academic attention within the field of fashion studies. It remains largely invisible in mainstream design discourse, overshadowed by global narratives that prioritize Eurocentric fashion histories. This absence points to a larger research gap: the under-representation of South Asian women's craft practices as frameworks of creative agency. *Virsa Veil* seeks to fill this gap by using fashion design as a critical lens through which to re-engage these histories. Rather than treating traditional garments as relics, it interprets them as dynamic cultural texts that can be re-read and re-designed to express contemporary meanings of empowerment, sustainability, and identity.

The project's conceptual foundation lies at the intersection of postcolonial theory, feminist thought, and sustainable design. Postcolonial fashion theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Hall

(1990) argue that cultural identity is formed within hybrid spaces of negotiation rather than through fixed traditions. Feminist scholars like Kaiser (2012) and Niessen (2019) emphasize that clothing can serve as a site of resistance, allowing women to reclaim narratives of visibility and autonomy. Sustainability theorists including Fletcher (2014) extend this dialogue by asserting that preserving craft knowledge is an ecological as well as cultural responsibility. *Virsa Veil* integrates all three approaches, proposing that ethical fashion must be simultaneously environmentally conscious, culturally rooted, and socially transformative.

In practice, *Virsa Veil* brings together artisans from Swabi with contemporary designers trained in sustainable textile innovation. The collaborative process involves reinterpreting traditional embroidery, natural dyeing, and hand-weaving techniques to create veils that embody both historical memory and modern minimalism. Each piece becomes a micro-archive; an artifact that tells a story of bravery while engaging global audiences through modern design language. The project's installations combine tactile and digital media, inviting viewers to experience the cultural narrative through sight, touch, and sound. Visitors encounter wall projections of Swabi landscapes, recorded oral histories of women, and augmented-reality visuals that animate motifs inspired by the *Chail*. In this multisensory environment, fashion transforms into a vessel of collective remembrance.

The importance of studying *Virsa Veil* extends beyond aesthetic appreciation. It exemplifies how fashion can serve as a medium of social critique and cultural restoration. As global fashion grapples with homogenization and environmental crisis, heritage-based design offers a model of renewal grounded in ethics and identity. By examining *Virsa Veil*, this paper highlights the potential of fashion as both cultural activism and scholarly inquiry; a practice that unites creative expression with critical theory.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed by this study is the marginalization of indigenous craft and women's narratives within mainstream fashion discourse. While global fashion often celebrates surface diversity, it seldom integrates the epistemologies of non-Western craft traditions as sources of theoretical or design innovation. The bravery and artistry of Swabi women, embodied in the *Chail*, remain largely unacknowledged in academic literature and commercial fashion spaces. There is therefore a need to investigate how contemporary design can recover and reinterpret these silenced histories.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze *Virsa Veil* as a design project that reinterprets Swabi women's historical veil (*Chail*) within a contemporary sustainable framework.
2. To explore how postcolonial and feminist theories can inform heritage-based fashion practices.
3. To assess how collaborative craft processes contribute to cultural continuity and empowerment.
4. To identify the role of fashion installations in narrating intangible cultural heritage.

Research Questions

- How does *Virsa Veil* transform the symbolic meaning of the veil from modesty to empowerment?
- In what ways does the project negotiate cultural hybridity between local heritage and global design language?
- How can sustainable fashion practices preserve and renew traditional craft knowledge?
- What methodological strategies allow fashion to function as a living archive of cultural memory?

Significance and Scope

This research contributes to the growing discourse on fashion as a vehicle for decolonization and cultural preservation. It situates *Virsa Veil* within the broader movement of heritage fashion that bridges rural artisanship and global sustainability. The study's significance lies in its interdisciplinary scope, linking theory and practice, memory and design, the local and the global. By focusing on Swabi women, it amplifies voices historically marginalized in both fashion and historiography, offering a feminist re-reading of material culture.

Thus, *Virsa Veil* is not merely a design project but an act of cultural remembrance; a reanimation of courage and creativity that continues to inspire future generations of designers, scholars, and activists.

Background of the Study

The *Virsa Veil* project originates from the historical narratives of Swabi, a region whose women demonstrated extraordinary courage during the nineteenth-century wars against the Sikh Empire. When men were martyred in defense of their land, women honored them by covering their bodies with their dupattas, later known as *Chails*; symbolizing both mourning and honor. Over time, the *Chail* came to represent not only modesty but also sacrifice and endurance, embodying the moral fabric of Pashtun womanhood.

Despite this rich legacy, Swabi women's stories are largely absent from mainstream archives, museums, and design institutions. Their craft traditions, hand-woven fabrics, block prints, natural dyes, and intricate embroidery is at risk of extinction amid industrialization and fast fashion. *Virsa Veil* responds to this crisis by repositioning these crafts within the context of contemporary sustainable design. It serves as both an artistic revival and a sociocultural intervention that honors women's voices silenced by colonial and patriarchal narratives.

2. Literature Review

The literature on heritage fashion, postcolonial identity, and feminist craft provides the theoretical scaffolding for this research. The review is organized into five thematic strands: (1) fashion as cultural narrative, (2) postcolonial hybridity and identity, (3) feminist empowerment through dress, (4) sustainability and cultural continuity, and (5) historical representations of Swabi women.

2.1 Fashion as Cultural Narrative

Roland Barthes (1983) conceptualized fashion as a system of signs that communicate social meaning; garments, like language, encode ideology. In this semiotic framework, clothing transcends mere materiality to become a text that can be read and interpreted. Joanne Entwistle (2000) further emphasized fashion as an embodied practice situated between individual experience and social order. For her, fashion operates through the body, mediating cultural identity, gender roles, and class structures.

Following Barthes and Entwistle, contemporary scholars such as Rovine (2015) and Niessen (2019) argue that fashion is a form of storytelling that materializes historical memory. These works highlight how garments function as "archives on skin," preserving collective narratives through fabric, motif, and craftsmanship. Within this framework, *Virsa Veil* can be read as an evolving text one that narrates Swabi women's history of courage while simultaneously engaging modern audiences in dialogue about identity and continuity.

2.2 Postcolonial Identity and Cultural Hybridity

Postcolonial theorists provide critical insight into the ways cultural identity is constructed and contested. Homi Bhabha (1994) introduced the notion of the "Third Space," a liminal zone where hybrid identities emerge through negotiation rather than opposition. Within this hybrid space, tradition and modernity coexist, producing new cultural forms. Stuart Hall (1990) similarly defined identity as a process; always in flux, shaped by history, power, and representation.

Applying these frameworks to fashion, heritage garments like the *Chail* are not frozen relics but evolving cultural texts. Designers operating in postcolonial contexts translate indigenous aesthetics into contemporary idioms, creating what Bhabha calls “hybrid articulations.” *Virsa Veil* occupies precisely this terrain: it merges the Swabi veil’s symbolic past with global sustainable fashion discourse, producing a hybrid form that both resists and participates in global fashion capitalism.

2.3 Fashion, Feminism, and Empowerment

Feminist scholarship reframes clothing as a medium of resistance and self-definition. Susan Kaiser (2012) describes fashion as a “cultural interface” where gender norms can be reinforced or challenged. Sandra Niessen (2019) critiques Western fashion systems for marginalizing non-Western women’s labor while simultaneously romanticizing “ethnic” aesthetics. Within this critique, projects like *Virsa Veil* reclaim agency by allowing female artisans to become co-authors of design narratives rather than invisible producers.

Historically, the veil has been interpreted as a patriarchal symbol of modesty and control. Yet feminist readings by Ahmed (2011) and Hoodfar (1997) reveal its potential as a marker of faith, identity, and autonomy. By recontextualizing the veil through craft and design, *Virsa Veil* transforms it into a declaration of empowerment; a textile embodiment of women’s resilience.

2.4 Sustainability and Cultural Continuity

The sustainability discourse in fashion has evolved from ecological concern to include cultural and social dimensions. Fletcher (2014) argues that sustainability must integrate ethics of care, slow production, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Skov (2020) adds that maintaining craft traditions sustains community identity and intangible heritage.

Virsa Veil aligns with this broader understanding by practicing “cultural sustainability.” It incorporates upcycled fabrics, plant-based dyes, and participatory design workshops that train younger artisans. This approach not only reduces environmental impact but also ensures the survival of traditional techniques threatened by mechanization. As such, the project exemplifies the “slow fashion” paradigm; privileging meaning over speed, community over profit.

2.5 Historical Context: Swabi Women and the Chail

Historical accounts of Swabi’s resistance against the Sikh Empire often overlook women’s contributions. Oral histories preserved by local elders recount how women’s dupattas, stained with the blood of martyrs, were cherished as sacred relics. These dupattas evolved into the *Chail*, worn by future generations during rituals of remembrance.

By embedding these stories into contemporary design, *Virsa Veil* performs what Hirsch (2012) calls “post-memory”; a transmission of inherited trauma and pride through creative expression. In this way, the project bridges historical remembrance and modern visibility, making the *Chail* a living document of collective identity.

3. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in cultural analysis, ethnography, and practice-based design research. This multi-method approach ensures both academic rigor and authenticity to local craft traditions.

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative methodology was chosen because it allows deep engagement with lived experience, symbolic meaning, and visual culture. The research integrates four strands:

1. **Archival study** of historical texts, photographs, and oral records relating to Swabi women’s traditions.
2. **Ethnographic fieldwork** involving interviews and participant observation among artisans.
3. **Practice-based design documentation** of the *Virsa Veil* creative process.
4. **Visual and semiotic analysis** of the final garments and installations.

Together, these methods construct a holistic understanding of how heritage, identity, and empowerment intersect within fashion.

3.2 Data Collection

Archival Research: Primary sources included regional museum documents, family heirlooms, and oral testimonies from elders in Swabi. These materials contextualized the historical origins of the *Chail*.

Interviews and Field Observation: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten female artisans, three community elders, and two fashion designers collaborating on *Virsa Veil*. Conversations focused on techniques, symbolism, and the evolving meaning of the veil. Participant observation during embroidery and dyeing sessions provided insight into tacit knowledge transmitted through practice.

Design Documentation: Each stage of the design process, from sketching motifs to dye testing was recorded through photography and reflective journals, forming a secondary data set that linked creative decisions with cultural narratives.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through thematic coding following Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes were generated for recurring themes such as “sacrifice,” “craft lineage,” “sustainability,” and “hybridity.” These themes were then interpreted through postcolonial and feminist theoretical lenses.

Visual materials (garments, patterns, installations) were examined using **semiotic analysis** inspired by Barthes (1983), identifying denotative and connotative layers of meaning. For example, red dye was read both as a literal pigment and as a signifier of sacrifice, while the veil’s layered folds symbolized continuity of generations.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained by ensuring informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and fair attribution. Artisans retained creative credit, and their names were included in exhibition materials. The research avoided exploitative representation by emphasizing co-creation rather than extraction of cultural content.

3.5 Limitations

The study acknowledges its contextual specificity: findings are grounded in Swabi’s cultural landscape and may not generalize to other regions. Time constraints limited longitudinal observation of artisans’ economic outcomes. Nevertheless, the qualitative depth offers rich insight into how heritage fashion can function as cultural resistance.

3.6 Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored in three intersecting theoretical perspectives: Postcolonial Theory, Feminist Craft Theory, and Sustainability in Design Thinking. Together, they establish the conceptual foundation for interpreting *Virsa Veil* as both an artistic practice and a cultural discourse.

Postcolonial Theory:

Building on Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity and Hall’s (1990) ideas of identity-as-becoming, postcolonial theory provides a lens to analyze how the *Virsa Veil* operates within the “Third Space”; a site of negotiation where cultural memory and modernity intersect. This framework allows fashion to be seen not merely as aesthetic creation but as a form of resistance against colonial hierarchies of taste and representation. The reinterpretation of the *Chail* thus becomes an act of reclaiming voice and agency for the historically marginalized Swabi women.

Feminist Craft Theory:

The feminist dimension draws on Kaiser (2012) and Niessen (2019), who reposition clothing and craft as tools of empowerment. Their arguments frame fashion as a medium through which women articulate identity, labor, and authorship. Within this framework, *Virsa Veil* celebrates the female artisan not as an invisible worker but as a co-creator, challenging patriarchal

divisions between “art” and “craft.” The project transforms the veil from an emblem of modesty into one of bravery and collective pride.

Sustainability and Design Thinking:

Finally, Fletcher’s (2014) notion of *slow fashion* and Skov’s (2020) idea of *cultural sustainability* inform the project’s ethical dimension. These theories emphasize continuity, community, and environmental care as intrinsic to design ethics. In *Virsa Veil*, sustainable practice is not limited to ecological materiality but extends to the preservation of intangible heritage and the empowerment of artisans. The theoretical triangulation of postcolonialism, feminism, and sustainability thus frames fashion as a holistic cultural act; a dialogue between aesthetics, ethics, and memory.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of *Virsa Veil* unfolds across six interrelated dimensions: reinterpretation of the veil, valorization of female bravery, hybridity in postcolonial design, sustainability and craft preservation, immersive installations, and global resonance. Each dimension reveals how fashion functions as both artifact and argument; a space where cultural theory materializes into tangible design.

4.1 Reinterpreting the Veil: From Modesty to Empowerment

Historically, the veil in South Asian culture has signified modesty, piety, and social identity. In *Virsa Veil*, this semiotic field is subverted. By reimagining the *Chail* as an artistic canvas, the project recasts modesty as empowerment. The veil no longer conceals; it reveals, not the body, but the history and resilience woven into it. The use of hand-spun cotton and natural dyes situates the work within indigenous craft systems, while contemporary draping techniques and minimalist silhouettes signal global modernity.

This transformation aligns with Ahmed’s (2011) argument that the veil can signify agency when women choose to invest it with personal meaning. Here, the act of wearing becomes an act of remembering. Each thread is metaphorically charged with memory; each motif narrates courage. Through this aesthetic translation, *Virsa Veil* destabilizes Western binaries of oppression and liberation, showing that empowerment can emerge through continuity rather than rupture.

4.2 Female Bravery as Cultural Capital

The central motif of the project, the bravery of Swabi women functions as cultural capital in both symbolic and material terms. Bourdieu (1984) described cultural capital as embodied knowledge that generates value within social systems. In *Virsa Veil*, this capital manifests in the artisans’ inherited skills, ritual gestures, and historical consciousness. The women’s stories, long excluded from official histories, acquire visibility through the garments they create.

Each veil integrates embroidery motifs referencing blood drops, shields, and flowers, representing sacrifice, protection, and rebirth. These designs are not decorative; they are mnemonic. The process of stitching itself becomes performative remembrance; a ritual of healing. By foregrounding female labor as the locus of heritage, *Virsa Veil* repositions women from the margins of history to its creative center.

4.3 Hybridity and Postcolonial Aesthetics

Virsa Veil operates within Bhabha’s (1994) *Third Space*, negotiating between local authenticity and global modernity. The hybrid aesthetic is evident in the juxtaposition of raw hand-loomed textiles with structured, minimal silhouettes reminiscent of contemporary couture. This fusion resists essentialist readings of Pakistani culture as “traditional” while avoiding the erasure that accompanies Western mimicry.

The project also contests what Hall (1990) calls “cultural imperialism in representation.” By curating its own imagery, photographed in Swabi landscapes rather than fashion studios; *Virsa Veil* asserts control over visual narrative. The veil thus becomes both a cultural and political statement, illustrating how design can perform decolonization through aesthetics.

4.4 Sustainability and Craft Preservation

Sustainability in *Virsa Veil* extends beyond ecological materiality to encompass social and cultural resilience. The use of upcycled fabrics and natural pigments reflects ecological responsibility, while intergenerational skill transfer between elder and younger artisans ensures continuity of craft.

Drawing on Fletcher's (2014) and Skov's (2020) frameworks, the project's sustainability model can be categorized as:

1. **Ecological Sustainability** – Plant-based dyes (indigo, madder, turmeric) minimize toxicity.
2. **Economic Sustainability** – Fair compensation models and co-branding elevate artisans' visibility.
3. **Cultural Sustainability** – Traditional motifs are archived digitally, ensuring knowledge persistence beyond material production.

This approach transforms sustainability from a buzzword into praxis — an ethical continuum where design sustains life, culture, and dignity simultaneously.

4.5 Experiential Installations: Memory as Immersion

The *Virsa Veil* exhibition incorporates multisensory installations that merge craft, technology, and narrative. Divided into four zones *Roots*, *Crafting the Veil*, *The New Modesty*, and *Beyond the Veil*; the exhibit constructs a phenomenological journey from history to futurity.

In *Roots*, archival photographs and calligraphy projected onto translucent fabrics immerse visitors in Swabi's historical landscape. *Crafting the Veil* features live artisan demonstrations, allowing spectators to witness the physical labor behind beauty. *The New Modesty* showcases contemporary draping styles through augmented-reality visuals, inviting interactive reinterpretation. Finally, *Beyond the Veil* uses audio interviews of Swabi women, blurring boundaries between viewer and subject.

This experiential methodology echoes Barthes' (1983) notion of the "grain of the voice" the texture that makes meaning tangible. Here, memory itself becomes material, woven into sound, space, and fabric.

4.6 Global Resonance and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

In the global fashion landscape, *Virsa Veil* serves as a counter-narrative to homogenized luxury branding. Through collaborations with international modest fashion labels and exhibitions in Europe, it translates localized heritage into universal values of empathy and resilience.

The project's cross-cultural relevance lies in its ability to transform the local into the global without dilution. As Rovine (2015) notes, such exchanges generate "global style" grounded in authenticity rather than appropriation. *Virsa Veil* illustrates that cultural specificity can coexist with universal aesthetics; that heritage, when articulated ethically, speaks across boundaries.

5. Findings

The analysis reveals several key findings:

1. **Fashion as Cultural Storytelling:**
Virsa Veil demonstrates that garments can act as narrative devices, translating oral histories into visual and tactile form.
2. **Hybridity as Creative Strategy:**
The project's blend of Swabi motifs and contemporary silhouettes exemplifies productive hybridity, reinforcing that innovation need not erase tradition.
3. **Empowerment through Craft:**
Female artisanship transforms labor into authorship, challenging gender hierarchies in both local communities and the fashion industry.
4. **Sustainability Beyond Ecology:**
True sustainability encompasses preservation of cultural identity and transmission of intergenerational knowledge.

5. Global Cultural Dialogue:

Heritage fashion can function as soft diplomacy — creating empathy, awareness, and mutual respect across nations.

Collectively, these findings affirm that *Virsa Veil* embodies fashion as activism, heritage as future, and design as discourse.

6. Conclusion

Virsa Veil redefines fashion as a living archive; a site where memory, identity, and artistry converge. By foregrounding the courage of Swabi women and the vitality of their craft, the project reclaims fashion as a form of cultural authorship. Within postcolonial and feminist frameworks, the veil becomes not a symbol of silence but of strength, its folds containing histories of resistance and renewal.

The study concludes that heritage fashion can function as both scholarship and activism. Through sustainable practices, participatory design, and theoretical reflexivity, projects like *Virsa Veil* bridge past and present, local and global, material and symbolic realms. This synthesis not only preserves intangible cultural heritage but also offers an alternative model for future fashion systems; one rooted in ethics, empathy, and ecological consciousness. Future research could extend this inquiry through longitudinal studies assessing the socioeconomic impact of such initiatives on artisan communities, or through comparative analyses with other postcolonial fashion projects across South Asia and Africa. Ultimately, *Virsa Veil* affirms that when design engages with history and humanity, it transcends commerce to become a language of continuity, care, and courage.

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