

## SEXUALITY, SCANDAL AND THE GOVERNMENT OF BODIES: A FOUCAULDIAN READING OF SARMADEH SEHBAI'S *THE BLESSED CURSE*

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### **Abstract**

*This article offers a sustained Foucauldian reading of Sarmad Sehbai's *The Blessed Curse* and argues that the novel presents sexuality not as a private instinct outside politics, but as a discursive field through which bodies are regulated, moral authority is staged, and political legitimacy is manufactured. Sehbai's novel is saturated with scenes of concealment, voyeurism, masculine performance, pious mediation, and public scandal. These scenes reveal that desire in the novel does not simply oppose power. It is produced, named, circulated, and exploited by power. Drawing primarily on Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse, power/knowledge, surveillance, confession, subject formation, and governmentality, this article demonstrates how the novel links the body to feudal residue, military authority, religious symbolism, media spectacle, and commodity culture. The analysis proceeds through six interconnected sites: the haveli as a disciplinary domestic order; mirrors and militarized speech as technologies of masculine subject formation; religion and bureaucracy as joint producers of moral truth; scandal as a mode of productive visibility; women's bodies as politically managed surfaces; and halal branding as a sign of transnational governmentality. The article argues that *The Blessed Curse* is a major satirical intervention in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction because it reveals that the modern political subject is governed not merely by law or coercion, but by visibility, shame, erotic fantasy, piety and discursive circulation. Through obscenity, irony, and grotesque exaggeration, Sehbai exposes the body as one of the central archives of political power.*

**Keywords:** *sexuality, discourse, scandal, visibility, governmentality, Pakistani Anglophone fiction*

### **Introduction**

Sarmad Sehbai's *The Blessed Curse* is a disturbing and conceptually ambitious novel because it refuses the familiar partitions through which public life is normally understood. In the world of the novel, sexuality is not private, politics is not administrative, religion is not purely spiritual, and scandal is not accidental noise surrounding the real business of power. Instead, each of these domains enters the others. The body becomes the meeting place of fantasy, prestige, authority, disgust, shame, and symbolic capital. For that reason, *The Blessed Curse* should be read not merely as a satire of corruption or moral decay, but as a literary study of the ways in which power governs through discourse, visibility, and bodily regulation.

The narrative centers on Nawabzada Noor Mohammad Ganju, whose political ascent is inseparable from sexual anxiety, narcissistic self-fashioning, and public scandal. The opening line of the novel immediately announces the governing logic of the text: “Fifteen years of marriage and he never saw his wife naked” (Sehbai, 2024, p. 8). This sentence introduces the novel’s first great paradox. Sexuality is central from the very beginning, yet it appears through prohibition, delay, concealment, and partial access. Ganju’s wife is described as entering under “Layers of silk dutifully concealed her body” (Sehbai, 2024, p. 8). Desire, then, is neither transparent nor freely expressed. It is structured by regulation. What Ganju experiences is not merely personal frustration. It is an effect of a whole symbolic order in which modesty, hierarchy, sacred lineage, and social discipline organize intimate life.

That domestic order is embodied by the haveli, where “Members of the family were addressed by their positions and not by their given names” (Sehbai, 2024, p. 9). Here the subject is constituted through roles and rankings long before he becomes a formal politician. The novel’s early world is one of codes, gestures, veils, signals, and distributed authority. As the story develops, this intimate regime of discipline expands into more public networks: military culture, media spectacle, patronage, pious brokerage, and transnational halal capitalism. Each of these formations contributes to the making of Ganju as a sexual-political subject.

Michel Foucault provides the most productive framework for understanding this process. Foucault’s work on discourse, sexuality, surveillance, confession, and governmentality shows that power does not merely repress. It produces truths, identities, and subject positions through institutions and repeated forms of speech (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978/1990, 1980, 2007, 2008). His critique of the repressive hypothesis is especially useful here. Sexuality in modernity, he argues, is not simply hidden or denied. It is incited into discourse, named, classified, interpreted, and managed. Sehbai’s novel dramatizes this with remarkable force. Sexuality in *The Blessed Curse* is talked about by generals, brokers, journalists, clerics, consumers, and crowds. It becomes a language through which masculinity is measured, piety is legitimized, women are circulated, and political charisma is manufactured.

The novel is equally preoccupied with visibility. Mirrors, ventilators, burqas, open courts, headlines, and staged performances organize what bodies can mean. Ganju does not simply possess a body. He becomes readable through the discourses that surround his body. When scandal breaks, public speech does not destroy him. Instead, it reconstitutes him through fascination, rumor, erotic myth, and repeated circulation. This is one of the text’s deepest political insights: modern authority can metabolize shame and convert it into a more sensational form of legitimacy.

This article argues that *The Blessed Curse* is a novel about the government of bodies. It contends that Sehbai reveals sexuality to be one of the principal sites through which political authority, masculine prestige, religious legitimacy, and public morality are made intelligible. Through a Foucauldian framework, the novel emerges as a profound study of how the body becomes a discursive object, a moral surface, and a political instrument within postcolonial modernity.

A further reason for adopting a Foucauldian framework is that existing approaches to novels of political satire often emphasize corruption, authoritarianism, or patriarchy as isolated themes. Such readings are useful, but they can flatten the complexity of a text like *The Blessed Curse*, where sexuality, religion, governance, and spectacle are not separate topics but mutually constitutive processes. In many readings of South Asian political fiction, sexual excess is treated

as either symbolic ornament or moral decline. Sehbai's novel demands a more precise account. Sexuality is not simply one of the themes of the text. It is one of the mechanisms through which power becomes narratable and socially meaningful.

There is also a broader gap in scholarship on contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction. While critics have extensively discussed nationalism, Islamization, violence, gender regulation, and class hierarchy, fewer studies have explored how public sexuality functions as a discourse of governance. Even where gender is addressed, the analysis often stops at patriarchy as a social structure and does not fully examine how discourse, surveillance, confession, and publicity produce the subjects who inhabit that structure. *The Blessed Curse* invites precisely this kind of reading because it shows that authority is not only enforced; it is staged, eroticized, narrated, and consumed.

This article therefore contributes to literary and cultural studies in three ways. First, it provides a detailed Foucauldian analysis of a recent Pakistani Anglophone novel that has not yet received substantial theoretical treatment. Second, it links sexuality to religion, bureaucracy, and media visibility in a single interpretive frame rather than treating them as parallel concerns. Third, it shows how postcolonial political authority may be sustained not despite scandal, but through scandal's discursive productivity. In doing so, the article positions *The Blessed Curse* as a crucial text for understanding the governance of bodies in contemporary South Asian fiction.

### Literature Review

The scholarship relevant to this study may be grouped into four broad areas: Foucauldian theories of discourse and sexuality, feminist and queer work on embodied subjectivity, studies of religion and moral regulation, and postcolonial analyses of sovereignty and public culture.

Foucault's writing remains foundational for any study of sexuality as a field of power rather than mere interior truth. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) argues that discourse is not a neutral instrument for describing reality. It produces the conditions of intelligibility through which objects become knowable. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) shifts attention to the production of docile and useful bodies through routines, partitioning, supervision, and normalization. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, he famously rejects the assumption that modern societies primarily silence sex. Instead, he argues that sexuality has been placed at the center of proliferating discourses, including confession, medicalization, pedagogy, and moral regulation (Foucault, 1978/1990). This insight is especially important for Sehbai's novel, where sexuality is repeatedly intensified through public speech rather than buried beneath silence.

Later scholarship has expanded these ideas in significant ways. Rabinow (1984) and Gordon (1991) emphasize the productive nature of modern power, while Dean (2010) and Rose (1999, 2007) develop the concept of governmentality to explain how conduct is shaped through diffuse mechanisms rather than straightforward command. Halperin (1995) and Huffer (2010) bring out the importance of Foucault for queer theory, especially his insistence that sexuality is historically produced rather than naturally given. Mills (2003) also shows the continuing value of Foucault for analyses of language, institutions, and subject formation.

Feminist and queer theorists have both used and revised Foucauldian insights. McNay (1992) argues that Foucault remains indispensable for understanding gendered subjectivity, even if feminist work must supplement him on questions of embodiment and difference. Bordo (1993) and Grosz (1994) likewise emphasize that bodies are culturally disciplined and symbolically invested. Butler (1990, 2004) extends the idea that identity is not pre-given but produced through

repeated norms. Sedgwick (1990) and Berlant and Warner (1998) demonstrate that sexuality organizes public worlds and normative belonging, not just private desire. These interventions illuminate Sehbai's fiction because the novel transforms sexuality into a public language of hierarchy, rumor, aspiration, and state-adjacent charisma.

Studies of religion and morality also matter centrally for this article. Asad (1993, 2003) challenges secular assumptions that religion belongs only to private conviction. He shows that religious traditions are disciplinary formations that shape embodied practices, truth claims, and authority. Mahmood (2005) similarly demonstrates that piety must be understood as a mode of ethical formation rather than judged solely through liberal ideas of freedom. Fernando (2014) and Massad (2007) further complicate the relationship between religion, sexuality, and modernity by showing how secular and religious discourses jointly regulate public life. These perspectives are highly relevant to *The Blessed Curse*, where saintly lineage, blessings, nazrana, and halal branding all function as practical modes of power.

Postcolonial theory provides an additional framework for locating the novel historically and politically. Said (1978) demonstrates that power works through representational regimes, while Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994) show how colonial and postcolonial subjectivities are shaped by discourse, mimicry, hierarchy, and exclusion. Stoler (1995), importantly, extends Foucauldian analysis into colonial contexts, arguing that sexuality and domestic regulation are central to imperial forms of governance. Mbembe (2003) offers another useful line of thought by showing that postcolonial sovereignty is often spectacular, bodily, and excessive rather than simply legal-rational. *The Blessed Curse* resonates strongly with these concerns because it depicts authority as theatrical, corporeal, and dependent on symbolic display.

South Asian and Pakistani scholarship deepens this context. Gilmartin (1988) and Jalal (1995) offer important historical accounts of political authority, Muslim identity, and authoritarian formations in South Asia. Ali (2000), Saigol (1995), and Zia (2009) reveal how gender and public morality in Pakistan are shaped by legal, educational, and ideological discourses. Connell's (2005) work on masculinity also remains useful, even though it is not the primary framework here, because Sehbai's text repeatedly ties virility to rank, command, and public recognition. Ahmed (2006) and Puar (2007) further help us think about orientation, affect, and the circulation of bodies in contemporary political culture.

What remains underdeveloped in literary criticism is a sustained reading that places sexuality, scandal, religion, and visibility inside a unified analytic frame for contemporary Pakistani fiction. This article addresses that gap by reading *The Blessed Curse* as a text in which the body becomes a privileged site of governance. It shows that discourse about sex is not secondary to politics. It is one of the forms through which politics becomes emotionally legible and socially effective.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article draws primarily on five interrelated Foucauldian concepts: discourse, power/knowledge, surveillance, confession, and governmentality. Together, these concepts allow the novel to be read not as a moral allegory about one corrupt man, but as a literary anatomy of the production of modern political subjects.

Discourse, for Foucault (1972), is not merely speech. It is a set of statements, institutions, and rules that determine what can be said, by whom, and with what authority. *The Blessed Curse* repeatedly shows that bodies do not exist outside such discursive frameworks. Ganju's body becomes meaningful through moral speech, military rhetoric, media language, and the symbolic

vocabularies of piety and scandal. Sexuality is not a natural truth that discourse later describes. It is produced and interpreted through discourse from the beginning.

The concept of power/knowledge is equally central. Foucault (1980) insists that truth is not separate from power. Institutions authorize and circulate truths that make intervention possible. In Sehbai's novel, claims about modesty, saintly inheritance, virility, halal consumption, and moral duty all function as truths through which bodies are organized. Such truths are not neutral. They produce hierarchies of legitimacy and deviance.

Surveillance is the third relevant concept. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) shows that subjects are shaped by being seen, by imagining themselves as visible, and by internalizing norms through that possibility of visibility. This concept is particularly useful for a novel obsessed with looking: through ventilators, mirrors, the press, the crowd, and the calibrated transparency of the burqa. Ganju is never simply a viewer. He is also progressively turned into an object of view.

The fourth concept is confession or the incitement to discourse. Foucault (1978/1990) argues that modern societies compel speech about sex in multiple forms. Confession migrates from religion into medicine, pedagogy, law, and everyday culture. The scandal plot of *The Blessed Curse* functions in this way. Lilly's allegations, the media coverage, the gossip columns, and the public appetite for sexual detail collectively form a confessional economy through which Ganju's political identity is rewritten.

The final concept is governmentality. In his later lectures, Foucault (2007, 2008) describes modern government as the conduct of conduct, meaning the shaping of behavior, environments, desires, and self-relations through diffuse and strategic means. This concept clarifies how Sehbai's world is governed not only through law or force but through patronage, morality, image, publicity, reverence, and commodity branding. Bodies are administered by affects and narratives as much as by formal institutions.

### **Methodology**

The article employs close reading and qualitative textual analysis. It treats the novel not as a transparent reflection of social reality but as a literary construction that stages operations of power through imagery, dialogue, symbolic spaces, and recurring motifs. The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical. It identifies patterns of concealment, surveillance, erotic speech, pious mediation, and public scandal, and then reads these patterns through Foucauldian concepts.

The method proceeds in three stages. First, it isolates recurring textual sites where power and sexuality converge. These include the haveli, the mirror, military speech, the office of pious brokerage, scandal discourse, the open court, the burqa, and the halal marketplace. Second, it analyzes how these sites shape subjectivity and public meaning. Third, it situates these literary operations within broader theoretical debates on discourse, religion, and governmentality. The goal is not to reduce the novel to theory but to show how the novel itself thinks through the politics of the body.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **The Haveli and the Discipline of Concealed Bodies**

The haveli is the first great regulatory institution in the novel. It is not simply a family residence but a social machine that arranges bodies through etiquette, concealment, hierarchy, and inherited sacred prestige. The architecture of domesticity in *The Blessed Curse* is therefore

deeply political. The household does not stand outside power. It is one of the first places where power becomes intimate, routine, and embodied.

This is evident in the novel's description of family structure. The household is organized through rank, not individual singularity: "Members of the family were addressed by their positions and not by their given names" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 9). Even ordinary interaction is regulated through signs rather than open expression. Such a formulation recalls Foucauldian accounts of discipline, where subjects are shaped through repetition, spatial ordering, and minute codes of behavior (Foucault, 1977). The haveli teaches the body how to inhabit authority and deference long before official politics begins.

Zeenat's body is the clearest object of such regulation. She is not absent from the novel, but her presence is carefully organized through fabric, modesty, and partial revelation. Ganju's desire is structured by the very forms that conceal her. He wants to see, but what he sees is always mediated. His sexual life has been shaped by ritual darkness, indirect vision, and internalized rules of propriety. At one point he tells himself that "a woman, especially a wife should never expose her modesty" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 12). That moment is crucial because it reveals that regulation has already moved inside the subject. Ganju does not need an external censor. He has become one.

The haveli therefore demonstrates Foucault's point that sexuality is not merely prohibited from outside. It is produced through the very practices that seek to order it. Concealment generates obsession. Partial visibility incites fantasy. The body becomes desirable not because it is available, but because it is unavailable except through carefully managed fragments. The erotic economy of the novel is thus born inside discipline itself.

The later scene in which Ganju finally sees Zeenat naked after death intensifies this logic. The text describes how "All his life he had never seen her without clothes and there she was lying in front of him waiting for him to undress her for her last bath" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 81). This revelation arrives only when agency, reciprocity, and conjugal life have ended. The first complete visibility of the wife is produced through ritual washing of the corpse. The scene is painful precisely because it shows that the domestic regime of modesty did not preserve intimacy. It destroyed it through postponement. Death grants the visual access that life forbade.

This scene also reveals a specifically Foucauldian irony. The body becomes most available when it has ceased to be an active social subject. In life Zeenat was regulated through modesty. In death she is exposed through ritual necessity. The logic of power continues, but in altered form. The body remains governed, only now by mourning, washing, and the theology of death rather than by conjugal propriety.

### **Mirrors, Narcissism, and Militarized Masculinity**

If the haveli disciplines bodies through concealment, the military-political sphere reorganizes Ganju through narcissistic visibility and virility. One of the novel's most revealing lines appears when Ganju studies himself in the bathroom: "Large mirrors watched him. A thousand reflections cloned him into a crowd of selves" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 12). The formulation matters because it reverses the usual direction of looking. Ganju is not simply the one who looks. He is looked at by the mirror. His selfhood emerges through reflected scrutiny.

Foucault's theory of surveillance helps illuminate this moment. Visibility does not merely constrain; it produces subjects who monitor themselves and derive identity from that process (Foucault, 1977). Ganju's relation to his reflected body is deeply political. He learns to see himself as spectacle, office, and sign. His bodily consciousness expands alongside ceremonial

power. Salutes, security rituals, public events, and proximity to the General do not remain external honors. They become sensualized. Political elevation is felt as erotic intensity.

The General converts this emerging bodily narcissism into a doctrine of masculinity. During their exchange, he declares, “You see, manhood has to be earned, tested, and proven. Men who can’t defend their motherland have in fact lost their manhood” (Sehbai, 2024, p. 27). The statement is central to the novel because it explicitly links sexuality, nationalism, and authority. Manhood is not treated as biological fact. It is a performative achievement measured through militarized utility. The nation becomes a stage on which virility must be demonstrated.

In Foucauldian terms, this is a truth-producing discourse. The General does not merely express an ideology. He names the standard by which male bodies are to be interpreted and judged. Masculinity becomes a norm backed by the prestige of state violence and patriotic rhetoric. The body must prove itself through readiness for command, conquest, and sacrifice. Those who fail are symbolically feminized or rendered abject.

The General’s bawdy sexual anecdotes reinforce the same fusion. Erotic life is narrated through the language of attack, trenches, resistance, and domination. Sexuality is militarized at the level of metaphor itself. Sehbai thus shows that masculinity in the novel is not a stable identity but an anxious theatrical performance sustained by repetition, comparison, and symbolic validation from other men.

Zahid extends this training in a different register. His world of perfumes, erotic accessories, imported luxuries, and stylized pleasure introduces Ganju to a consumerized pedagogy of virility. Masculinity is not formed only by tradition or only by state discourse. It is also shaped by commodities and elite aesthetics. This is significant because it demonstrates that power in the novel is hybrid. Feudal codes, military rhetoric, and consumer modernity all converge in the making of the male subject.

### **Religion, Bureaucracy, and the Production of Moral Truth**

One of the most distinctive contributions of *The Blessed Curse* is its demonstration that religion and bureaucracy are not opposed systems. They overlap and reinforce one another. Juma Khan personifies this fusion. He is fixer, mediator, commission agent, and pious operator all at once. Sehbai notes that his office, for a fee, published “scientific proofs of Heaven and Hell” (2024, p. 18). The absurdity of the phrase is deliberate, but its implications are serious. Truth claims about the unseen are produced through quasi-administrative procedures. Theology becomes printable management.

This is a striking example of Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus. Religious truth in the novel is not merely believed. It is packaged, circulated, and made operational for governance (Foucault, 1980). Juma’s office is not incidental comic relief. It is a central site where morality becomes administrable. Through him, contracts, appointments, patronage, spiritual claims, and erotic access are woven into a single apparatus.

This is especially clear when Juma proposes that Ganju take another woman and says, “a single woman is never enough for a man in power” (Sehbai, 2024, p. 30). The statement is framed not simply as lustful advice but as worldly wisdom aligned with rank and precedent. The female body is made available through a discourse of benevolence, authority, and moral rationalization. In this world, exploitation rarely appears as naked coercion. It is mediated through narratives of duty, gift, and pious entitlement.

The sacred prestige of the Ganju family further intensifies this logic. Their saintly lineage allows political authority to appear as moral inheritance. Reverence does not abolish domination.

It softens and sanctifies it. Supplicants come not only to a house of office but to a site of blessing. The result is that obedience can appear as devotion. Foucault's work, especially when read alongside Asad and Mahmood, helps clarify this point: power often works most effectively when it shapes ethical truth and embodied aspiration rather than merely issuing commands.

The phrase "blessed curse" itself captures this paradox. Sacred language in the novel does not stabilize the moral order. It also returns as omen, accusation, and contamination. Religion is therefore not dismissed by the novel, but neither is it idealized. It is shown as a living discourse deeply implicated in the organization of bodies, gifts, and legitimacy.

### **Scandal, Confession, and the Productive Life of Public Sexuality**

The scandal plot is perhaps the most explicitly Foucauldian part of the novel because it demonstrates that exposure does not necessarily negate authority. Instead, exposure may create new regimes of fascination and power. Once Lilly's claims circulate, Ganju becomes the object of a vast public discourse. Yet rather than fading under shame, he is reconstituted by that discourse.

Sehbai writes that "Within days, the sex scandal had aroused public interest" and that it was discussed at "paan shops, film studios, press clubs, diplomatic dinners, funerals, wedding receptions, army messes, and Hera Mandi" (2024, p. 111). This is not just a list of places. It is a map of how discourse travels. The scandal crosses class, profession, and institutional space. Sexuality becomes a shared public vocabulary. Foucault's argument that modern societies multiply speech about sex rather than silence it is vividly realized here (Foucault, 1978/1990).

The line that follows is equally revealing: "the mix masala of politics and sex had spiced the dull lives of the masses" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 111). The scandal is not morally contained. It becomes pleasurable public consumption. Sexuality here functions as affective stimulation for the political sphere. The public does not receive information and then judge. It enjoys, circulates, and embellishes that information. Discourse itself becomes a source of social energy.

Ganju's image is transformed accordingly. He becomes "a fantasy figure" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 111), and public curiosity extends to the minute details of his body and styling. The media investigate "his background, his height and weight, his waistline, his moustache, his clothes, his deodorant and aftershave lotion" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 111). Power becomes sensualized through information. The sexualized body is no longer hidden. It is turned into a catalogued object of public attention. This is a secular confessional economy. Truth about the body is produced through incessant reporting and interpretation.

The most devastating formulation in this section is Sehbai's observation that "The reputation that it's not the head of the Chief Minister but his genitals that took decisions, gave Ganju an extra mile" (2024, p. 112). The line brilliantly captures the conversion of public office into sexual mythology. Politics is no longer read through administrative competence or policy. It is read through virility. The bodily sign becomes the principle of governance. Scandal thus does not merely reveal the leader. It rewrites the very language in which leadership is evaluated.

Soon afterward, Ganju becomes "a potent symbol of ultimate malehood, the pinnacle of masculinity" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 112). The scandal therefore produces not the fall of masculinity but its inflation. This is one of the novel's strongest critiques of patriarchal public culture. The sexually exposed male leader may become more desirable and more authoritative because public discourse translates transgression into proof of potency.

### **Female Bodies and the Politics of Managed Visibility**

A Foucauldian reading of the novel must also account for how women's bodies are regulated, displayed, and narrativized. Although Ganju occupies the center of public scandal, women in the novel are not merely secondary figures around him. Their bodies become the surfaces on which the moral contradictions of the social order are written.

Zeenat's body is governed through modesty and domestic invisibility, yet her desires are not absent. The novel makes clear that she too longed for mutual bodily recognition, fantasized about stripping naked, and wanted to see her husband as fully as he wanted to see her (Sehbai, 2024, p. 79). This is important because it punctures the patriarchal fantasy that modesty erases female desire. What the social order suppresses is not desire itself but its acknowledged reciprocity.

Mano and Lilly occupy different but related positions. They become readable within a masculine economy of exchange, entertainment, and scandal. Their bodies circulate through rumor, patronage, professional performance, and moral judgment. Yet the novel also allows them moments of speech that disrupt the elite control of narrative. In that sense, women are not merely objects in the novel's field of discourse. They are also producers of discourse. Their speech does not necessarily liberate them, but it destabilizes the hierarchy through which they are consumed.

The burqa sequence during Ganju's scandal is especially revealing. Sehbai notes the rise of "a new burqa design" with "a double cover for the face; a thick layer overlapping a transparent muslin" (2024, p. 111). This detail is crucial because it shows that modesty is not the opposite of visibility. It is one of the technologies through which visibility is strategically managed. Women approaching Ganju's open court flip layers and stage a controlled nearness. The veil becomes an instrument of partial revelation. In Foucauldian terms, this is not withdrawal from the visual field but recalibration within it.

This is why a simple binary of veiled versus unveiled fails to explain the novel. Sehbai is more interested in how social power organizes the terms under which bodies become legible. Some bodies are hidden to sanctify them. Some are displayed to commodify them. Some are scandalized to make them publicly consumable. Women move across these positions according to class, respectability, political usefulness, and narrative control. Their visibility is not fixed. It is regulated.

Thus, the novel suggests that political culture depends on the differentiated management of female bodies. Respectable domestic femininity, eroticized public femininity, and veiled petitioning femininity are all produced by discourse. They are not natural categories but roles created within a larger patriarchal economy of signs.

### **Halal Branding and Transnational Governmentality**

The London episodes extend the novel's analysis beyond domestic and national structures into a transnational moral economy. In this setting, Sehbai shows that the governance of bodies through discourse continues within diaspora capitalism. The most memorable sign of this is the proliferation of halal branding. Ganju observes that "Whatever was edible carried the imprint of the word halal in crescent-like calligraphy" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 179). The halal label appears on bread, butter, soup, jelly, toothpicks, shampoo, oils, and soap. The body is surrounded by moral signs.

This scene is humorous, but it is also conceptually rich. Halal has become more than a theological category. It is an infrastructure of trust, consumption, and belonging. Moral legitimacy is no longer confined to ritual observance. It is built into the commodity form.

Foucault's concept of governmentality helps explain this development. Rule does not only prohibit or punish. It organizes the environment through which subjects choose, consume, and recognize themselves (Foucault, 2007, 2008; Dean, 2010). The halal marketplace in the novel governs by saturating ordinary life with ethical signs.

Fazzle makes this explicit when he calls the slaughterhouse "my identity, my shrine" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 185). The phrase collapses economy, faith, and selfhood. Commerce becomes sanctuary. The business site becomes the place where diasporic legitimacy is anchored. Sehbai's satire is sharp because it does not simply mock this identification. It shows its historical logic. In a world of displacement, capital, and racialization, commodities may indeed become the architecture of belonging. But they do so by turning ethical life into branded circulation.

This transnational setting also reinforces the novel's broader argument that religion and modernity are not opposites. Piety can be logistical, market-driven, and globally mobile without ceasing to be affectively powerful. The moral body is now governed not only through modesty or scandal, but through labels, retail systems, and consumer habits. The governance of sexuality and identity thus extends into commodity culture.

### Discussion

A Foucauldian reading reveals that *The Blessed Curse* is not a loose satire of vice but a tightly organized study of how power works through the body. Its major institutions are not only parliament, army, shrine, and market. They are also the bedroom, the mirror, the newspaper headline, the burqa, the gift, and the rumor. Power in the novel is diffuse, sensual, and productive. It shapes subjects through moral codes, fantasies, anxieties, and public circulation.

One of the novel's strongest insights is that sexuality is not naturally opposed to authority. In many liberal narratives, sexual revelation appears as a force that exposes hypocrisy and therefore weakens power. Sehbai's novel shows something more disturbing. Under patriarchal conditions, scandal may intensify authority by converting transgression into mythic masculinity. This makes *The Blessed Curse* particularly important for studying media-saturated political cultures where notoriety can function as capital.

The novel also complicates any simple distinction between tradition and modernity. Feudal decorum, military nationalism, pious brokerage, tabloid media, and halal branding are all modern in their own ways. They are linked by the common problem of regulating bodies and producing legitimacy. Foucault is especially useful here because his framework does not require power to appear in a single institutional form. It allows us to read a dispersed network of practices that shape how bodies are seen, desired, and governed.

In addition, the novel demonstrates that religion cannot be reduced to private belief or cynical cover. It is a practical discourse that produces moral truth, symbolic distinction, and embodied conduct. Yet Sehbai insists that this discourse is vulnerable to capture by patronage, commerce, and erotic hierarchy. That ambivalence gives the novel its complexity. It critiques religiousized power without flattening religion into caricature.

Finally, the novel's treatment of women makes clear that visibility is always stratified. Bodies are never simply visible or invisible. They are selectively arranged within political, sexual, and moral economies. Respectable concealment, erotic display, and scandalized narration are all regulatory positions. This insight underscores the value of a Foucauldian method for literary analysis: it allows us to see that the novel's many excesses are connected through a coherent politics of the body.

## Conclusion

*The Blessed Curse* is a major literary meditation on the ways in which sexuality becomes a discourse of power. Through Ganju's journey from frustrated husband to scandalized political icon, Sehbai shows that the body is governed by far more than law or force. It is shaped by domestic discipline, militarized rhetoric, saintly prestige, bureaucratic mediation, public rumor, media scrutiny, and commodity piety. A Foucauldian framework clarifies that these formations are not separate themes but interconnected technologies of subject production.

The novel begins with concealment and ends in spectacular visibility, but both conditions belong to the same broad regime of regulation. The hidden wife, the self-watching politician, the pious broker, the scandalized leader, and the halal-branded diaspora capitalist are all part of a world in which bodies become meaningful through discourse. Sehbai's satire is therefore not superficial irreverence. It is a serious political diagnosis. The truth of authority in the novel is written on the body, yet that body is never natural, transparent, or innocent. It is always already interpreted, arranged, moralized, and circulated.

For literary studies, the novel expands the field of Pakistani Anglophone fiction by showing that sexuality is not a side theme in political narrative but one of the privileged sites through which politics itself becomes sensible. For theory, the novel confirms the continuing value of Foucault for reading postcolonial texts in which religion, masculinity, scandal, and consumer modernity converge. *The Blessed Curse* reminds us that modern power is most effective not only when it punishes bodies, but when it makes them visible, desirable, speakable, and governable.

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