ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

THE POSTCOLONIAL PHALLUS: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND COLONIAL ANXIETY IN SARMAD SEHBAI'S *THE BLESSED CURSE*

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Abstract
This article analyses Sehbai's The Blessed Curse (2024) through the interlacing lenses of R.W. Connell hegemonic masculinity and Mrinalini Sinha colonial masculinity to suggest that the novel enacts Pakistani political masculinity as a structurally unstable, performative, and historically encumbered construction. Instead of making masculine authority look natural and safe, the satire of Sehbai reveals it as an offsetting project that is perpetuated by spectacle, repetition, and subjugation. The tragicomic rise of Nawabzada Noor Mohammad Ganju, from a repressed aristocratic subject to Chief Minister and finally to a grotesque phallic emblem, becomes the narrative vehicle through which the novel dramatizes masculinity's dependence on public validation, bodily symbolism, and coercive power. The article presents this argument on four dimensions that are related to each other. First, it follows the historical stratification of colonial anxiety in the family of Ganju, showing how the postcolonial masculine desire is still determined by the acquired insecurity and the memory that is influenced by the class. Second, it examines masculinity as theatrical performance indicating that political authority within the novel relies on witnessing, acting out and repetition. Third, it studies technological improvement as a compensatory measure to psychic and bodily inadequacy, exposing the ridiculous and pathological extremes of masculine authority to which the maintenance of legitimacy is extended. Fourth, it claims that the subordination of women and non-hegemonic men is not accidental to the establishment of patriarchal authority. Through synthesis of postcolonial masculinity studies and close textual analysis, the article proves that The Blessed Curse provides a critical analysis of the colonial remnants, psychological vulnerability, and gendered violence that inform the quest to attain masculine legitimacy in postcolonial Pakistan.

Keywords: *hegemonic masculinity, colonial masculinity, political satire, patriarchal power, gender performance, colonial anxiety, Pakistani anglophone fiction*

Introduction

The study of masculinity in postcolonial literary production has emerged as a vital interdisciplinary field over the past three decades, responding to what scholars have identified as a crisis of male identity in societies grappling with the legacies of colonial rule. Following R.W. Connell's foundational theorization of hegemonic masculinity (1987, 1995) and Mrinalini Sinha's ground-breaking work on colonial masculinity (1995), researchers have increasingly attended to the ways in which postcolonial texts both reproduce and subvert patriarchal norms inherited from colonial structures. This scholarly trajectory has illuminated how masculinity, far from being a natural or universal category, is historically contingent, culturally specific, and perpetually contested.

Within the specific context of Pakistani Anglophone literature, this critical conversation has gained particular urgency in the twenty-first century. Pakistan's complex history; its formation through the partition of British India in 1947, its subsequent trajectory through military dictatorships, democratic interludes, and the ongoing War on Terror, has produced a literary tradition deeply concerned with questions of identity, power, and belonging. Pakistani fiction in English, from the generation of Bapsi Sidhwa to contemporary writers like Mohsin Hamid,

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CJSSR
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Kamila Shamsie, and Nadeem Aslam, has increasingly turned its attention to the psychological and political dimensions of masculine identity formation.

Recent scholarship has documented how these texts engage with what might be termed the "masculinity question" in Pakistani society. Chaudhary and Ahmed (2019) examine how Mohsin Hamid's male protagonists navigate "the dilemma of young Pakistani men caught in the clutches of neo-colonialism," their identities "overwhelmingly tainted by the neo-colonial impacts" (p. 1). Hassan (2025) analyses the short fiction of Daniyal Mueenuddin and Jamil Ahmed, finding that "stereotypical notions regarding males and females are reinforced" through representations that position male characters in terms of "masculinity and positional superiority" (p. 1). Rahman (2023) introduces the concept of "postcolonial ecomasculinity" to describe alternative masculine performances in Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* that resist domination and violence in favour of "non-hierarchical response to the War on Terror, gender equity, and nonhuman animals" (p. 197).

Sehbai's novel, published in 2024 by Mawenzi House Publishers, traces the rise and fall of Ganju, a member of a noble family whose ancestral prestige masks humble origins as blacksmiths in colonial India. Ganju's journey from repressed husband to provincial politician to Chief Minister, and ultimately to a grotesque phallic monument that outlives his death, constitutes a satirical anatomy of power in postcolonial Pakistan. The novel's narrative arc encompasses electoral politics, religious hypocrisy, media manipulation, sexual scandal, and finally, magical realist metamorphosis, all unified by a relentless interrogation of what it means to be a "man" in a society structured by the intersecting legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, and political authoritarianism.

This article argues that Sehbai's novel can be read most productively through the lens of postcolonial masculinity studies, specifically through R.W. Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity and Mrinalini Sinha's concept of colonial masculinity. Connell's framework, developed across several decades of scholarship, provides a vocabulary for understanding how masculinities are hierarchically organized and how particular configurations of gender practice come to legitimate patriarchy (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Sinha's work on colonial masculinity illuminates the specific historical processes through which colonized elites internalized and contested British imperial constructions of "manly Englishmen" and "effeminate Bengalis" (Sinha, 1995). Together, these theoretical resources enable a reading of *The Blessed Curse* as a sustained meditation on the psychic and political costs of postcolonial Pakistan's obsessive pursuit of masculine legitimacy.

Yet despite this growing body of scholarship, significant gaps remain. The satirical mode as a vehicle for anatomizing masculine pathology in Pakistani literature has received insufficient attention. Satire's capacity for exaggeration, grotesque, and moral indictment makes it particularly suited to exposing the absurdities and contradictions of hegemonic masculinity, yet most studies have focused on realist or tragic modes. The specific historical continuities between colonial constructions of masculinity and contemporary Pakistani political culture remain undertheorized. While scholars have noted the presence of colonial legacies, detailed analysis of how these legacies operate at the level of character psychology, family structure, and political institution is lacking.

Sehbai's *The Blessed Curse* presents scholars with a singularly challenging and rewarding text. The novel traces the rise and fall of Nawabzada Noor Mohammad Ganju, a member of a noble Pakistani family whose ancestral prestige masks humble origins as blacksmiths in colonial India. Ganju's journey from repressed husband to provincial politician to Chief Minister, and ultimately to a grotesque phallic monument that outlives his death, constitutes a satirical anatomy of power in postcolonial Pakistan. The novel's narrative arc encompasses electoral

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politics, religious hypocrisy, media manipulation, sexual scandal, and finally, magical realist metamorphosis, all unified by a relentless interrogation of what it means to be a "man" in a society structured by the intersecting legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, and political authoritarianism.

Despite the novel's thematic richness and literary ambition, it has received virtually no scholarly attention. This neglect is particularly striking given the novel's engagement with questions that stand at the forefront of contemporary postcolonial and gender studies. How does colonial history continue to shape masculine identity in postcolonial Pakistan? What role does performance play in the construction of political masculinity? How do men's anxieties about inadequacy drive them toward increasingly desperate and self-destructive forms of enhancement; technological, sexual, and even bestial? What are the costs of hegemonic masculinity for women, for subordinate men, and for the hegemonic males themselves?

This article addresses these questions through a sustained postcolonial masculinities analysis of *The Blessed Curse*. The central problem it investigates is the pathological nature of Pakistani political masculinity as depicted in the novel, a masculinity perpetually caught between performance and inadequacy, between the urge to dominate and the terror of exposure. Drawing on R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and Mrinalini Sinha's theorization of colonial masculinity, the article argues that Sehbai's novel reveals how postcolonial masculinity operates through what Connell terms "multiple masculinities" in constant competition, with male power requiring constant proof through performance, violence, and the domination of women. The phallus, in Sehbai's rendering, emerges not as the seat of power but as the wound that will not heal, the site where postcolonial anxiety is simultaneously concealed and exposed.

This study focuses exclusively on Sehbai's *The Blessed Curse* as its primary text. While it draws on comparative references to other Pakistani Anglophone novels, its analysis is cantered on the specific representations, characters, and narrative strategies of Sehbai's work. The theoretical framework is limited to postcolonial masculinities studies, with particular emphasis on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and Sinha's theorization of colonial masculinity. Other possible approaches, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, or eco-critical, are acknowledged but not pursued. The study does not attempt to make empirical claims about Pakistani society or politics but rather analyses the novel's representation of these domains.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Its Postcolonial Inflections

Connell's Conceptualization of Hegemonic Masculinity

R.W. Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity, first articulated in the 1980s and refined over subsequent decades, remains a cornerstone of the critical study of men and masculinities. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class hegemony, feminist theories of patriarchy, and gay liberation scholarship, Connell proposed a framework for understanding how masculinities are hierarchically organized and how particular configurations of gender practice come to legitimate unequal gender relations (Connell, 1987, 1995; Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985).

In its canonical formulation, hegemonic masculinity is defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Crucially, hegemony operates not primarily through brute force or coercion but through cultural consent, the acceptance of particular ideals of manhood as commonsense and natural. As Allen (2025) explains, drawing on Butler, hegemonic power forms "our everyday understandings of social relations that choreograph ways we consent to and reproduce unspoken and unacknowledged relations of power" (p. 3).

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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This consensual dimension makes hegemonic masculinity especially effective in perpetuating gender inequality without provoking sustained resistance.

Connell's framework emphasizes the relational character of masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities (such as homosexual masculinities) and in relation to women. The hierarchy among men is "an important part of how a patriarchal social order works" (Connell, 1987, p. 183). Hegemony does not imply total cultural dominance or the obliteration of alternatives; rather, it means "ascendancy achieved within a balance of forces, that is a state of play" (Connell, 1987, p. 184). Subordinated masculinities are not eliminated but positioned in ways that ultimately reinforce the hegemonic project.

Recent scholarship has sought to clarify the concept and correct persistent misunderstandings. Lucy (2024) documents "conceptual slippage" in the application of hegemonic masculinity, particularly the tendency to equate it with "a set of personal traits" or "fixed, often toxic character types" rather than with "the political mechanics of relational legitimacy" (p. 2). Beasley (2008) similarly warns against reducing hegemonic masculinity to a "type" of man, emphasizing instead its function as a "political mechanism" that legitimates unequal gender relations. Messerschmidt (2018, 2019) has repeatedly insisted on distinguishing hegemonic masculinity from non-hegemonic dominant or dominating masculinities, which may exhibit aggressive or violent traits without necessarily legitimating patriarchy. These clarifications are essential for the present analysis, which seeks to trace not merely toxic masculine traits in *The Blessed Curse* but the specific ways in which particular configurations of masculinity work to legitimate unequal gender relations in postcolonial Pakistan.

Colonial Masculinity: Sinha's Contribution

Mrinalini Sinha's (1995) *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* provides an essential supplement to Connell's framework for understanding postcolonial contexts. Sinha argues that the figures of the "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali" were mutually constituted in the crucible of late nineteenth-century imperial politics. This binary served not only to justify colonial rule but also to structure the terms of nationalist resistance, as Bengali elites sought to refute charges of effeminacy while simultaneously contesting British domination.

Sinha traces the operation of colonial masculinity through four specific controversies in British India: the "white mutiny" against the Ilbert Bill (1883-84), which would have allowed Indian judges to try Europeans; the official response to the Native Volunteer movement (1885-86); the recommendations of the Public Service Commission (1886-87); and Indian opposition to the Age of Consent Bill (1891). In each case, questions of "manliness" and "effeminacy" became sites of political contestation, with British claims to masculine superiority deployed to justify exclusionary policies and Indian responses oscillating between appropriation and resistance.

Crucially, Sinha demonstrates that colonial masculinity was not simply imposed by the colonizer upon the colonized but was "constituted in relation to colonial Indian society as well as to some aspects of late nineteenth-century British society" (Sinha, 1995, p. 1). The emergence of the "New Woman," the remaking of the working class, the legacy of internal colonialism, and the anti-feminist backlash in Britain all shaped the construction of colonial masculinity. This insight that metropolitan and colonial gender formations are mutually constitutive has profound implications for reading postcolonial texts like *The Blessed Curse*, in which anxieties about masculinity are simultaneously local and global, historical and contemporary.

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Postcolonial Masculinities in Pakistani Literary Studies

The intersection of postcolonial theory and masculinity studies has generated rich scholarship on Pakistani literature. Rahman's (2023) analysis of Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* introduces the concept of "postcolonial ecomasculinity" to describe masculine performances that reject domination in favour of "non-hierarchical response to the War on Terror, gender equity, and nonhuman animals" (p. 197). Rahman contrasts the character Mikal, whose encounter with a snow leopard cub models "helpful rather than harmful behaviours," with the US soldier whose "hegemonic masculine desire for dominance makes it difficult for him to overcome his ethnocentrism" (p. 197). This attention to alternatives to hegemonic masculinity enriches the field, even as Sehbai's novel offers no such redemptive figures.

Chaudhary and Ahmed (2019) employ Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry to analyse male protagonists in Mohsin Hamid's novels, arguing that "both men in the process of 'mimicking' the foreign culture lose their sense of belonging, identity, home and even freedom" (p. 1). Their analysis reveals how neo-colonial pressures shape Pakistani masculine identity, producing subjects caught between cultural authenticity and cosmopolitan aspiration. Hassan's (2025) thematic analysis of Mueenuddin and Ahmed's short fiction concludes that "stereotypical notions regarding males and females are reinforced," with female characters appearing "as victim of societal norms, and male power and authority" while male characters are "represented in terms of masculinity and positional superiority" (p. 1).

These scholarly interventions establish the critical terrain for reading *The Blessed Curse*. The novel extends and complicates existing discussions by pushing masculine pathology to its logical extreme, from Ganju's secret mirror to his affair with a she-ass to his posthumous transformation into an autonomous phallus that escapes human control. In doing so, Sehbai reveals the unsustainable costs of a social order organized around the relentless pursuit of masculine legitimacy.

The Colonial Wound: Ganju's Family History and the Anxiety of Origin

From Horseshoes to Holy Blood

In the opening pages of Sarmad Sehbai's audacious novel *The Blessed Curse* (2024), the reader encounters Ganju in a moment of profound existential dislocation: "Fifteen years of marriage and he never saw his wife naked. Nawabzada Noor Mohammad Ganju's mind swelled a porcupine with erotic probes" (Sehbai, 2024, p. 8). This arresting image, of a mind transformed into a bristling, quill-covered creature of frustrated desire, serves as more than mere characterization. It functions as a synecdoche for the novel's central preoccupation: the pathological nature of masculinity in postcolonial Pakistan, a masculinity perpetually caught between performance and inadequacy, between the urge to dominate and the terror of exposure.

The opening chapters of *The Blessed Curse* establish Ganju's family history as a site of originary anxiety. The family's rise from low-caste artisans to landed nobility is narrated with swift economy:

> Their father Haji Noor who, in colonial India, fixed horseshoes at the stable of the British commissioner, had gained access to his masters by spying on freedom fighters and persuading village folks to enlist their sons in the Imperial army. Allah-yar was killed in action. The British had rewarded the martyrdom by allotting Haji large chunks of land and by raising him from a horseshoer to their recruiting agent. (Sehbai, 2024, p. 41)

This passage condenses a history of colonial collaboration, class mobility, and racial anxiety. The horseshoe, an object associated with both labour and luck, becomes the family's emblem, marking their origin in manual work even as they acquire land and status. The British reward land but not honour: "For the blacksmiths, the horseshoe did bring luck but without honour"

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ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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(p. 41). Honour, in this world, requires something more than material wealth; it requires legitimacy of blood and race.

The family's solution is strategic marriage into religious nobility. Ganju's uncle Zahoor undertakes rigorous spiritual discipline, "performed chillas, the rigorous meditation, and generously spent money on lungars, the free food for the poor" (p. 41). Pir Ganju Shah, the local saint, "found in him a true believer and eventually decided to give him his daughter." The marriage "gave birth to a new genealogy that reincarnated the low-caste horseshoe-fixers into respectable Pirs and Nawabzadas" (p. 41).

This transformation, from blacksmiths to spiritual aristocrats, exemplifies what Sinha (1995) describes as the constitution of colonial masculinity through the interplay of caste, class, and racial categories. The Ganju family's pursuit of religious legitimacy represents an attempt to overcome the stigma of their labouring origins, to transform "luck without honour" into honour itself. Yet the novel repeatedly emphasizes the instability of this transformation. The family's rise is built on collaboration with colonial power; spying on freedom fighters, enlisting soldiers for the Imperial army, a foundation that continues to haunt subsequent generations.

The Mirror Stage of Postcolonial Masculinity

Ganju's obsessive relationship with mirrors throughout the novel can be read through a Lacanian lens as a repetition of the "mirror stage", the moment in infant development when the child first recognizes its reflection and begins to construct a coherent (if illusory) sense of self. But in Ganju's case, this mirroring is always already contaminated by colonial history. The Japanese hand-mirror he uses in his bath rituals becomes a technology for manufacturing an idealized masculine self:

> He flashed the mirror down to his navel. Other mirrors watched it swelling a wrist out of a thumb. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Here, I call upon Nawabzada Noor Mohammad Ganju. We award him the Tamgha-e-Khidmat in recognition of his unparalleled services for our nation." The ripples in the tub tossed up reflections of Ganju somnolently walking to the President. (Sehbai, 2024, p. 13)

The mirror multiplies Ganju, creating "a crowd of selves" (p. 12), but this multiplication signals fragmentation rather than coherence. The "swelling a wrist out of a thumb" suggests the prosthetic quality of Ganju's masculinity, something that must be artificially enlarged, repeatedly, because it is never secure.

This mirroring extends to the novel's treatment of photography, film, and media imagery. Ganju's photograph appears in newspapers, on hoardings, on television. Each image offers a version of himself he can admire from a distance: "His eyes stood on the humps of his parted knees" (p. 13). Yet these images are also sites of vulnerability. Lilly's stolen videotape becomes evidence in court, exposing Ganju's "extensions" to public view. The hoarding depicting Ganju shares space with Lilly's film poster, and "They both looked larger than life" (p. 81), suggesting the equivalence between political and cinematic fantasy.

The colonial dimensions of this mirroring emerge most clearly in Ganju's encounter with Lord Fazzle (formerly Afzal) in London. Fazzle's castle contains "huge portraits of Karl Marx and Engels. The two bearded men looked like unwanted guests in a landscape of surplus affluence" (p. 179). The presence of these revolutionary icons in a space of capitalist excess mirrors the contradictions of postcolonial identity, the persistence of anti-colonial ideologies alongside complicity with global capital. Fazzle himself embodies these contradictions: a former communist revolutionary who now runs a halal meat empire and hobnobs with British royalty. His "hedgehog haircut with calligraphy in three plain curls on the forehead, resembling the word halal" (p. 181) literalizes the branding of identity in the global marketplace.

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The Persistence of Caste

The novel insists on the persistence of caste hierarchies despite the family's religious legitimacy. When Ganju's rivals seek to undermine him, they invoke his blacksmith origins: "the son of blacksmiths" (p. 92). The phrase recurs like a curse, returning the family to its pre-genealogical past. Even Ganju's own uncle, Zahoor, who orchestrated the strategic marriage into religious nobility, cannot fully escape caste suspicion. His secret marriage to a "low-class woman" produces a son, Nadir, whose existence threatens the family's carefully constructed legitimacy.

The treatment of Nadir in the novel reveals the violence that maintains caste purity. Married to Ganju's daughter Razia as a child, Nadir is described in terms that emphasize his animality: "With a putty nose and thumped eyes, Nadir, dressed in a silken achken with a red turban on his head, had sat next to Razia, her dream prince in a toad, a giant in a midget" (p. 94). His behaviour is feral: "he would piss all over the courtyard showing off his painted willy to the maids, lifting the tails of their long skirts, mounting them like a horse and farting on their faces" (p. 95). This representation pathologizes the child while obscuring the structural violence that produces him; a child born of a secret marriage, raised without parental care, inserted into a dynastic arrangement he cannot comprehend.

Razia's eventual murder of Nadir (or accidental shooting; the novel leaves it ambiguous) can be read as the culmination of this violence. The child who embodies the family's secret shame, its connection to "low-class" origins through Zahoor's unsanctioned marriage, must be eliminated. Yet the novel refuses simple moral judgment. Razia herself is a victim of the same system, married as a child to a child, her desires for love and freedom brutally suppressed. Her escape with Afzal (the same Afzal who becomes Lord Fazzle) and her subsequent disappearance from the narrative suggest the impossibility of resolution within the terms the novel establishes.

Masculinity as Performance: The Need for Witnesses

The General's Theater of Power

Throughout *The Blessed Curse*, masculinity is explicitly figured as performance requiring an audience. The General, the novel's most flamboyant exponent of hegemonic masculinity, articulates this logic with characteristic bombast: "Gentlemen, our fate is linked with our malehood and what I mean by malehood is frankly, the hood of the male... We men, draw our identity and energy from this piston of pleasure called the penis." (Sehbai, 2024, p. 160)

This reduction of male identity to the penis, and specifically to its erectile capacity, exemplifies what Connell (1995) identifies as the bodily basis of masculinity, but also its ideological construction. The "piston of pleasure" is both organ and machine, natural and technological. The General's subsequent demonstration of his French cylinder, which pumps his penis to ever-greater dimensions, literalizes this technological mediation: masculinity is not something one has but something one performs, with the aid of increasingly sophisticated props.

The General's theatricality extends to his entire mode of being. He addresses the "battalion of three people" (p. 160) as if commanding thousands. His Thursday night gatherings in Zahid's basement combine seances with drunken revelry, politics with pornography. The General's favourite story about his youth, the Saturday night ritual of masturbating with fellow cadets before a Playboy centrefold hidden behind the General's portrait, reveals the homosocial structure of masculine performance: "Ah, what timing. All of us, just in one go, would explode into a marathon orgasm. O God, what magnificent teamwork it used to be" (p. 26). Male bonding, military discipline, and sexual fantasy converge in a ritual that produces masculinity through synchronized performance.

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The Trial as Public Spectacle

The trial of Ganju for the "rape" of Lilly Khanum (who remains technically virgin despite repeated violation) stages masculinity as public spectacle. The courtroom becomes a theatre in which competing versions of male identity are performed and judged. The prosecutor's invocation of Plato to argue that Lilly's film image is "twice removed from the real world" (p. 118) while her veiled presence in court constitutes authentic personhood exemplifies the postmodern vertigo of the proceedings. Nothing is real; everything is representation.

Lilly's courtroom performance systematically dismantles Ganju's masculine persona. She reveals his "extensions"—both the prosthetic device he uses and the videotape evidence of their encounter. She exposes his hemorrhoids, transforming the "virginal blood" on the sheets into mere medical symptom. Most devastatingly, she declares: "That thing is just a pinch of flesh Milord, just a pinch" (p. 132). The novel's commentary on this moment is explicit:

> A man's reputation lies in his pants and Lilly had pulled them down in public. She had exposed his power tower. Cut to size by the razor tongue of a prostitute, Ganju had fallen from his pedestal without a leg to stand on. Wobbling without an axis, he couldn't lift his head or keep his erect posture. He was the Greek hero whose penis had become his tragic flaw. (p. 133)

This passage crystallizes the novel's central thesis: in a patriarchal order, masculinity is simultaneously the source of male power and its point of maximum vulnerability. Because male identity is so thoroughly invested in the phallus, any threat to phallic integrity, whether real (hemorrhoids, small size) or symbolic (public exposure, ridicule), threatens the entire structure of male privilege.

The Audience's Role

The novel repeatedly emphasizes that masculine performance requires not just actors but audiences. Ganju's political rallies, his public appearances, his media coverage all depend on crowds who witness and validate his power. When he first addresses his constituents after his uncle's death, he struggles to speak: "He was no orator, only his uncle could sway the millions. He struggled in vain, against a tongue numb with the dead odour of his uncle's memory" (p. 60). But the crowd's chanting, "Gaanjuu! Gaanjuuu!", pumps energy into him: "A sudden jerk and the knotted tongue opened free. Standing erect, he spoke, and each word evoked passionate applause" (p. 61). The parallel between political speech and sexual erection is unmistakable: both require the stimulation of an audience to achieve potency.

This dynamic reaches its absurd culmination when Ganju, after eating the crown rooster, finds his penis growing uncontrollably during a religious address. As he preaches against "bestial passion," his "penis burst out like an angry wrist" (p. 229). The crowd's response is not horror but worship: "women tore their clothes and ran to him as if they had been shown a sign" (p. 229). They chant "Ya pir, ya pir, bachra dhe dhe" (Oh holy man, give us a child) and "started rubbing the sacred penis on their bare bellies" (p. 229). The penis has become an object of veneration precisely at the moment it escapes all control; a grotesque literalization of the phallus as religious and political symbol.

This scene echoes and inverts an earlier moment when Ganju, disguised as a commoner, visits the Hakim for treatment of his hemorrhoids. There, he glimpses "the Hakim's knee-length penis rimed by the pale light of the lamp" (p. 140), a vision that haunts him with its promise of a masculinity more endowed than his own. The Hakim's subsequent advice, to mate with a she-ass as a means of transferring animal potency to man, initiates Ganju's descent into bestiality. The parallelism between these scenes suggests that in the novel's world, masculinity is always measured against some imagined ideal, the Hakim's legendary organ, the General's pumped-up member, the mythical crown rooster, that recedes endlessly before the striving male.

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CJSSR
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Technological Masculinity: Prosthetics and Potency

The Japanese Mirror and the Secret Self

Ganju's relationship with his Japanese hand-mirror establishes the prosthetic dimension of his masculinity from the novel's opening pages. The mirror is not merely an instrument of narcissistic self-regard but a technology for manufacturing an idealized self-image: "He flashed the mirror down to his navel. Other mirrors watched it swelling a wrist out of a thumb" (p. 13). The mirror produces enlargement, "blowing him up to a size and girth more than a man could ever desire" (p. 13), but this enlargement is explicitly illusory, visible only in the mirror's "wonder" reflections.

The mirror's function is clarified when Ganju, in a moment of crisis, retrieves the General's moustache from the telephone mouthpiece and tries it on: "The mirror gave a royal smile. A repeat from the history books" (p. 17). The moustache, the General's most distinctive masculine marker, can be transferred, borrowed, appropriated. Masculinity is not essence but accessory, not being but having. This logic reaches its fullest expression in the novel's treatment of prosthetic devices.

The Phallus as Machine

The Trio's Thursday night gathering in Chapter 15 stages a veritable exhibition of technological masculinity. The General unveils his French cylinder: "This, actually, is not a real pistol... but a design effect, it's in fact a pump... the more you press the more it will rise" (p. 164). Zahid confesses to surgical implants: "surgical implants involve drastic methods which could destroy the tissues... What I have is something more sophisticated. It involves the insertion of a hydraulic device that causes a stiffening of the penis when a pump, permanently implanted in the scrotum, is activated" (p. 165). Kashif reveals his London-made "extra leg" (p. 165), obtained during a hernia operation paid for by the health ministry.

Ganju's claim to be "natural" (p. 165) is met with derisive laughter. The others strip him and pronounce judgment: "Nature is weak... it's imperfect. Man must make it perfect" (p. 166). This scene literalizes what Connell (1995) identifies as the "technologization" of masculinity in late capitalism: the transformation of male bodies through medical, surgical, and mechanical intervention. But Sehbai pushes the logic further: if masculinity is technological, then it is also reproducible, transferable, and ultimately autonomous. The crown rooster, which promises to transfer its potency to whoever eats it, represents the ultimate prosthesis; a technology so fully incorporated that it becomes indistinguishable from the organic body.

The Crown Rooster and the Fantasy of Self-Sufficiency

The search for Tajul Kharoos, the mythical crown rooster, occupies much of the novel's second half. The bird's recipe, "virginal mercury, the mother of all elements" (p. 169), promises a masculinity so potent that it transcends human limitation. The rooster itself, once captured, becomes an object of obsessive care: "It was not to touch or eat anything impure, therefore an army of sweepers walked ahead of the chosen bird. They would be followed by ambulances, emergency kits, and military police" (p. 170).

Yet the rooster repeatedly escapes human control. It flies from Juma's cooking pot after being slaughtered. It speaks to Ganju in the park, identifying itself as "the fantasy of mankind" (p. 201). It emerges from Lilly's womb to fly free. And finally, after Ganju consumes it, it transforms him into a living phallus that outlives his death. The rooster's autonomy, its refusal to be contained by any human project, suggests the ultimate failure of technological masculinity. Men may manufacture ever more sophisticated prosthetics, but they cannot manufacture the living reality those prosthetics are meant to simulate.

The Bestial Turn

Ganju's affair with Jaana the she-ass represents the logical endpoint of his quest for enhanced masculinity. The Hakim's advice, "Mating with animals is the secret, it transforms their power

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to man" (p. 144), draws on folk traditions of sympathetic magic, but also on a deeper logic: if masculinity is about potency, and if animals possess potency in its purest form, then the route to super-human masculinity must pass through the animal.

Ganju's transformation of Jaana from beast of burden to lover recapitulates the novel's larger pattern of prosthetic enhancement: "No more tents, smelly clothes, no dung and dirt but silky tail bags for her daily plops, cushioned rugs to trot upon and a large bed for her to rest" (p. 151). Jaana becomes a "glamorous puss" (p. 151) through the application of "expensive cosmetics, herbal shampoos and bubble baths" (p. 151). The boundary between human and animal, like the boundary between natural and technological, proves permeable.

This permeability cuts both ways. If Ganju can become more potent by mating with Jaana, he also becomes more bestial. The poetry he writes during this period, his celebrated collection *Bahana-e-Jaana* (All For the Pretext of Love), emerges from this bestial union. The critics who praise his verse have no idea that "the dark lady of his sonnets" (p. 152) is a donkey. When Laado, Jaana's former mate, attacks Ganju at a poetry reading, the scene literalizes the return of the repressed animality that Ganju's poetic sublimation cannot fully contain.

The Subordination of Women and Non-Hegemonic Men

Zeenat: The Unseen Wife

Ganju's wife Zeenat embodies the condition of women in a patriarchal order: unseen, unheard, unknown. The novel's opening sentence, "Fifteen years of marriage and he never saw his wife naked" (p. 8) establishes her as the negative space against which Ganju's masculine strivings are defined. She exists in the novel primarily as absence, as mystery, as the veil that conceals rather than the body that reveals.

Yet Zeenat is not merely passive victim. Her death scene reveals an inner life the novel has largely withheld:

> Her greatest passion was her embroidery. She was happy with a needle. Her fingers would come alive at the thin glare of silver weaving in and out through the plain cloth, carving patterns on it. There was no ambition in her to conquer or liberate the world. She only fought with her needles, heroically (p. 206).

This quiet heroism, the heroism of endurance, of creation within constraint, offers an alternative to the novel's dominant model of masculine striving. But it is an alternative that leads only to death. Zeenat's final moments, when she dresses in her bridal clothes and waits for a husband who never comes, encapsulate the tragedy of women whose lives are structured entirely around male desire: a desire that, in this case, never arrives.

Ganju's belated discovery of Zeenat's body, "Ganju saw his wife. Naked" (p. 209) comes too late. The final intimacy he achieves with her is post-mortem, as he performs her last bath. This scene, poignant and grotesque, suggests that the masculine gaze can only truly see women when they are no longer living subjects, when they have become objects, corpses, memories.

Razia: The Revolt of the Daughter

Razia's trajectory offers a counterpoint to her mother's silent endurance. Married as a child to a child, confined to the zenankhana, denied education and freedom, she nevertheless finds ways to resist. Her affair with Afzal, conducted through secret letters delivered by Cheemo, represents a bid for autonomous desire. Her attempt to escape the Haveli, though foiled by guards, demonstrates courage. Her eventual murder of Nadir (or accidental shooting) can be read as the violent culmination of years of pent-up rage against a system that treats daughters as property.

Yet Razia's revolt leads not to liberation but to disappearance. She flees to London, where she presumably reunites with Afzal (now Lord Fazzle), but the novel offers no account of her life there. She becomes another absence, another silence. The message she sends after her mother's death, "a condolence message appeared in a few printed words without emotions and without

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address" (p. 210) suggests the impossibility of repair. The family that treated her as a pawn cannot now become the family she mourns.

Lilly/Mano: The Evergreen Virgin

Lilly Khanum, also known as Mano, Nasreen Bano, Nussu, Tina Sheikh, and Mastani Mai, is the novel's most complex female figure. Her multiple names signal her multiple identities; prostitute, film star, mystic, virgin goddess. She is simultaneously the object of male fantasy and the subject who manipulates those fantasies for her own ends.

Lilly's courtroom declaration, "I don't have a hymn but an iron curtain" (p. 131) asserts her autonomy against the male gaze. Her claim to remain virgin despite repeated violation, "No one in this world can reach my secret veil. There's no man who's man enough to take my virginity" (p. 131) refuses the logic of masculine conquest. If men define themselves by their ability to "take" women's virginity, then the woman who cannot be taken defeats them at their own game.

Yet Lilly's power is purchased at tremendous cost. Her face is burned by the inspector who loved her. She is kidnapped, raped, exploited. Her final appearance in the novel, as a guest on the angels' television show, with "a soft face of hoori now" (p. 249) suggests an afterlife that is also a form of death. She has become pure image, pure simulation, a face restored by "Triplex the makeup department of Heaven" (p. 249). The novel offers no easy judgment on whether this constitutes victory or defeat.

Taimur and the Rejection of Hegemonic Masculinity

Ganju's son Taimur represents the possibility of rejecting hegemonic masculinity altogether. Returning from the United States with a beard and traditional Muslim attire, speaking of doomsday and repentance, Taimur embodies a different model of manhood: one based on religious devotion rather than political power, on submission to God rather than domination of others.

Yet the novel treats Taimur's alternative with considerable ambivalence. His religious fervor is described as possession: "He recited in an aggressive tone as if he were possessed" (p. 208). His followers are "orphan children dressed in white caps" (p. 207) figures of vulnerability and dependency. His message, "the world is coming to an end. We must pray to God to forgive our sins" (p. 211) offers no program for social transformation, only apocalyptic resignation.

Taimur's encounter with the gravedigger, who initiates him into a network of anti-state resistance, suggests the possibility of political action grounded in religious faith. But the gravedigger's teachings, "We have to destroy all images of idolatry, all those false gods who deceive us with false answers" (p. 239) echo the rhetoric of militant Islamism. The novel leaves ambiguous whether Taimur's path leads to genuine liberation or merely to another form of domination.

Conclusion

The novel's title, *The Blessed Curse*, names the paradox at its heart. The "blessed curse" that Pir the Invisible repeatedly sends to Ganju is simultaneously gift and affliction, opportunity and doom. Masculinity itself, in Sehbai's rendering, is a blessed curse; the source of male power and privilege, but also of endless anxiety, performance, and inadequacy.

The novel's final image, the Doomsday Caller flying through space while angels discuss it on television, extends this paradox to planetary scale. The phallus that was supposed to guarantee male power has become autonomous, escaping all human control. The "proxy of a man" (p. 236) outlives the man himself, becoming a weapon of mass destruction that threatens the entire world. This apocalyptic vision suggests that hegemonic masculinity, pushed to its logical extreme, becomes self-annihilating. The pursuit of ever-greater potency, ever-more-sophisticated prosthetics, ever-more-complete domination leads not to fulfillment but to dissolution.

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ISSN P: 3006-1458
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Connell's (1995) framework helps us understand this trajectory. Hegemonic masculinity is not a stable achievement but an endless process of struggle, a "state of play" (Connell, 1987, p. 184) in which particular configurations of gender practice vie for ascendancy. The Trio's frantic pursuit of the crown rooster, their willingness to sacrifice anything and anyone for enhanced potency, exemplifies this endless striving. But the novel also reveals what Connell's framework perhaps underemphasizes: the sheer cost of this striving, not only for women and subordinated men but for the hegemonic males themselves. Ganju ends as a disembodied phallus, the General as a corpse in a helicopter wreck, Kashif and Zahid as impotent spectators of their own destruction.

Sinha's (1995) concept of colonial masculinity illuminates the historical specificity of this pathology. The Ganju family's rise from colonial collaborators to postcolonial aristocrats, their anxious pursuit of religious legitimacy to mask caste origins, their obsessive concern with honour and reputation, all reflect the particular pressures of a society structured by colonial history. The "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali" continue to haunt postcolonial Pakistan, even when their names have changed.

Recent scholarship on postcolonial masculinities in Pakistani literature has traced similar dynamics in other texts. Hassan (2025) finds that contemporary Pakistani fiction often reinforces "stereotypical notions regarding males and females" (p. 1). Chaudhary and Ahmed (2019) document how Hamid's male protagonists lose "their sense of belonging, identity, home and even freedom" in the process of "mimicking" foreign culture (p. 1). Rahman (2023) identifies in Aslam's work an alternative model of "postcolonial ecomasculinity" that "reject[s] domination and violence" (p. 197). Sehbai's novel, with its unrelenting critique and its refusal of redemptive alternatives, occupies a distinctive position in this field, closer to tragedy than to hope.

Yet even tragedy can instruct. *The Blessed Curse* anatomizes the costs of hegemonic masculinity with such precision and ferocity that it becomes, paradoxically, a kind of diagnosis. By showing us the endpoint of the path Pakistan's political class has chosen, the novel warns against continuing in that direction. The blessed curse of masculinity may be inescapable, the novel offers no vision of a world beyond gender, but its particular form in postcolonial Pakistan is not inevitable. Other configurations are possible, other histories imaginable. Whether they will be realized is a question the novel leaves to its readers.

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ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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