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Peripheral Epistemologies: Voicing the Unvoiced Oral Histories, Digital Spaces, and Marginalised Voices in the Agrarian-Feudal Societies of the Postcolonial World

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ABSTRACT

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This keynote address examines the concept of marginalised voices within the subtheme of Oral Histories, Digital Spaces, and Marginalised Voices, taking as its central text Sarmad Sultan Khoosat's film *Zindagi Tamasha* (The Circus of Life, 2019/2023). Through close reading of the film, the address argues that the figure of the social outcast — the tawaif, the eunuch, and Rahat Khawaja with his non-conformist passion for dance — participates in a long tradition of Urdu literary and cinematic moral discourse about the relationship between deviance, humanity, and social belonging. The keynote situates this analysis within a critical interrogation of the Eurocentric character of contemporary discourses on marginalised communities, arguing that the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Spivak, and the liberal democratic tradition emerged from specific historical conditions — the Industrial Revolution, the two World Wars, and the capitalist-democratic order — that do not map straightforwardly onto the agrarian-feudal social formations of the postcolonial world. Drawing on the author's published film criticism and interviews in *The Friday Times*, and on recent scholarship in postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1988; Foucault, 1980), documentary and film studies (Zafar, 2017), the sociology of development (Mody, 2023), and Urdu literary studies (Dewan, 2019; Vanita, 2016), the address proposes that the dismantling of social taboos in Pakistani and South Asian societies is most durably achieved not through the importation of Eurocentric liberal ideologies but through the structural transformation from agrarian to industrial society, of which investment in girls' education is the most critical lever.



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1. Introduction the Question of Relevance

It is a privilege and a profound responsibility to address this conference, whose theme — *Peripheral Epistemologies: Voicing the Unvoiced* — asks us to confront not only who speaks in our academic and public discourses but who determines the conditions under which speaking is possible at all. Before engaging with the primary focus of this address — the film *Zindagi Tamasha* (*The Circus of Life*, 2019/2023) by Sarmad Sultan Khoosat, and its relationship to the long tradition of Urdu literary and cinematic moral discourse — I want to raise a question that I believe we must ask at the outset of any scholarly engagement with marginalised voices. That question is: what is the relevance, here and now, of the theoretical frameworks we are using?

The discourses around marginalised communities — the concepts of subaltern knowledge, epistemic violence, power/knowledge, and the right of oppressed groups to self-representation — did not arise in a vacuum. They emerged, as I shall argue, from a specific set of historical conditions: The Industrial Revolution in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the catastrophic violence of the two World Wars in the twentieth century, and the subsequent elaboration, by European and particularly French philosophers of the 1960s and 1970s, of theoretical frameworks that sought to account for the relationship between power, knowledge, and the production of marginalised subjects. Michel Foucault is the central figure here: his analysis of how disciplinary regimes produce normalised subjects and pathologise deviation, his concept of power/knowledge as a pervasive and productive rather than merely repressive force, and his identification of what he called ‘subjugated knowledges’ — ‘a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 82) — have been foundational for subsequent scholarship on marginalised communities worldwide.

My argument is not that these frameworks are without value. They are not. But they are, as I shall demonstrate, essentially Eurocentric in origin and in some of their fundamental assumptions — and

that Eurocentrism has consequences for how we apply them in contexts such as contemporary Pakistan, which is shaped by agrarian-feudal social formations that are structurally different from the industrialised democratic societies in which these theories were developed. The critical question is not whether Foucault is right about the relationship between power and knowledge in the abstract, but whether the specific historical trajectory that produced his framework — from the French Revolution to the Paris of 1968 — is the appropriate genealogy for understanding the social and moral dynamics of Lahore’s old city in the 2010s, where Rahat Khawaja dances at a wedding and is cast out of his community.

2. The Eurocentric Genealogy of Marginalisation Discourse

2.1 *From the Industrial Revolution to the Theory of the Subaltern*

The IPBES — the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services — defines marginalised communities as peoples or populations comprising groups that endure discrimination and exclusion (social, political, and economic) due to unequal power dynamics across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. This definition encompasses people with disabilities, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, indigenous peoples, women and girls, religious minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, ethnic and racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. The definition is useful precisely because of its breadth. But it is also symptomatic: it is a definition developed within a specific institutional and intellectual framework — that of the international scientific and policy community, which is itself a product of the post-Second World War liberal democratic order — and it encodes within it assumptions about what kinds of marginality count as marginalisation that are not culturally universal.

The philosophical foundations of marginalisation discourse are rooted in Foucault’s genealogical project. In *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault argued that power is not held by a sovereign entity and exercised downwards but is rather pervasive throughout social practices, circulating through ‘the localised circuits, tactics, mechanisms and effects through which power circulates’ (Hall, 1997, p. 25). This decentralised account of power

made it possible to analyse forms of social exclusion and marginalisation that were not reducible to explicit political oppression: the disciplinary regimes of the hospital, the school, the prison, the family. Foucault's analysis of how these regimes produced 'normal' and 'abnormal' subjects — the sane and the mad, the healthy and the sick, the morally conformist and the deviant — provided the theoretical vocabulary through which scholars across the humanities and social sciences have subsequently analysed the social construction of marginalised identities.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) landmark essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' extended this Foucauldian framework into the explicitly postcolonial domain, asking whether the structurally marginalised — those located so far outside the hegemonic circuits of representation that they lack access to legitimate discourse — can ever speak on their own terms without their speech being mediated, appropriated, or overwritten by those who claim to speak for them. Spivak's central argument was that the subaltern, by definition, occupies a position outside the systems of representation that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge; and that the attempts of Western intellectuals to speak for the subaltern, however well-intentioned, risk reinscribing the very silencing they seek to remedy. As Behera (2023) has noted, Spivak's critique remains a foundational challenge for any scholarly project that claims to 'voice the unvoiced': it asks us to interrogate our own position as speakers and the institutional frameworks within which we speak.

These theoretical frameworks — Foucault's power/knowledge, Spivak's subaltern critique, the broader discourse of marginalised epistemologies — emerged from and remain most fully calibrated to the social conditions of industrialised, democratic, capitalist societies. The voices in favour of marginalised communities came into the forefront, as I noted at the outset, through a system controlled and supported by the capitalist-democratic order of the free world. That order has specific interests in promoting these discourses — interests that are not always transparent or benign. The critical thinker engaging with marginalised voices in the postcolonial world must therefore hold two things simultaneously: the genuine intellectual value and emancipatory potential of these frameworks, and a clear-eyed recognition of

the historical conditions that produced them and the institutional interests that circulate them globally.

2.2 The Digital Turn: New Platforms, Old Power Dynamics

The subtheme of this conference foregrounds digital spaces as sites of oral history and marginalised voice. This is entirely appropriate: the proliferation of social media and video-sharing platforms has genuinely transformed the political economy of speech, making it possible for individuals and communities that were previously excluded from public discourse to narrate their own histories and experiences to mass audiences without institutional mediation. As research on transnational digital communities has demonstrated, platforms such as YouTube can support marginalised communities' identity work, providing spaces for what has been called 'identity decolonisation work' — a reclamation of local and indigenous identities against the homogenising pressures of global media culture (arxiv, 2024).

The example of *Zindagi Tamasha* is instructive here. As this address will examine in detail, Sarmad Khoosat's film could not for years be released in Pakistani cinemas despite holding a valid censor certificate. It eventually reached its Pakistani audience not through formal theatrical distribution but through YouTube, where it was made available in August 2023. YouTube thus functioned as the digital space through which a marginalised cultural text — marginalised by religio-political pressure rather than by commercial failure — found its voice and its audience. The author's analysis of the film in *The Friday Times* (Zafar, 2023), published immediately after its YouTube release, and his subsequent interview with director Sarmad Khoosat (Zafar, 2023b), thus themselves constitute instances of the digital oral history that this conference addresses: a filmed conversation, a published commentary, a YouTube release — all operating in the digital public sphere to give voice to a cultural text that the institutions of Pakistani public life had sought to suppress.

Yet the digital turn does not simply resolve the problems that Spivak identified. Research on social media and marginalised communities consistently documents the duality of digital

platforms: they simultaneously enable and constrain marginalised voices, providing distribution channels while also subjecting content to algorithmic curation, censorship, copyright enforcement, and the political economies of platform capitalism (DeVito et al., 2021; arxiv, 2024). The question of who controls the digital infrastructure through which marginalised voices speak — and whose interests that infrastructure serves — is as important as the question of who speaks. In the case of *Zindagi Tamasha*, the film reached its audience through a platform owned by an American technology corporation, subject to American content policies, and generating advertising revenue for American shareholders. The emancipatory potential of the digital is real; it is also partial and structurally conditioned.

3. *Zindagi Tamasha*: The Marginalised and the Tradition of Urdu Moral Discourse

3.1 The Film and Its Controversy

Sarmad Sultan Khoosat's *Zindagi Tamasha* (The Circus of Life, 2019) centres on Rahat Khawaja, a middle-aged man in the narrow alleys of Lahore's old city who is devout in his Muslim faith, serves as a *naat khwa'an* (a reciter of poems in praise of the Prophet, peace be upon him), and works as a real-estate agent. He has a deep passion for dance and music — a passion that, according to the social norms of his community, is incompatible with the role of a devout Muslim and entirely unacceptable in a man who recites *naats*. The trouble begins when a video of Rahat dancing at the wedding of a friend's son goes viral. His daughter Sadaf, a television producer, is shamed by the video and confronts her father. His wife, on her deathbed, remains a constant source of support. The Imam of the local mosque, whom Rahat has privately exposed as a fund-embezzler and *bacha baaz* (paedophile), becomes his implacable enemy. At the Milad celebration for the Prophet's birthday, the Imam drives Rahat away from the tent where *naats* are being recited. When Rahat distributes his *niyaz* (devotional food) to the neighbours, nobody will accept it from his contaminated hands — until a eunuch steps forward, takes the tray, and distributes the *niyaz* to the children in the street.

As the author has argued in a published essay (Zafar, 2023), this act of the eunuch is one of the

most resonant moments in contemporary Pakistani cinema. It connects *Zindagi Tamasha* to a long tradition in Urdu literature and subcontinental cinema in which the figure of the social outcast — the *tawaif* (courtesan), the *randi* (whore), the eunuch, the dancing girl — is positioned as the most genuinely human character in a world of moral corruption and social hypocrisy. The morally labelled and socially expelled figure becomes, paradoxically, the carrier of the community's humane and generous impulses.

The film was selected for the *Un Certain Regard* section of the 24th Busan International Film Festival in 2019, where it was shown to international acclaim. It received a censor certificate from the Punjab Censorship Board. And yet it could not be released in Pakistani cinemas for over three years. The Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) declared the film disrespectful to Islam and its clerics, threats were issued against the director and cast, and the government referred the film to the Council of Islamic Ideology for review despite the existence of a valid censor certificate. The film reached its Pakistani audience only via YouTube in August 2023. This extraordinary sequence of events — international festival recognition, domestic censorship board approval, and *de facto* public ban simultaneously — is itself a parable of the condition of marginalised cultural production in contemporary Pakistan.

In an exclusive interview conducted by the present author via Skype in 2023, Khoosat articulated his artistic intention with remarkable clarity. He described the film as non-agenda-driven and independent of any foreign lobby or institutional funding — produced from the proceeds of the sale of a plot of land in Lahore. His aim was to tell the story his way: not to produce a socially reformative text by design but to present a correct representation of the multiple layers of human behaviour, trusting that when art is authentic and presents reality with nuance, community and personal reformation may sometimes be its natural outcome (Zafar, 2023b). He chose to maintain the unambiguous moral indictment of the Imam in the tent scene — declining the suggestion made by an Indian filmmaker consultant that an elderly, gentle religious character should be introduced to balance the

portrayal and widen the film's commercial appeal. Khoosat's artistic integrity was, in this instance, also a political act.

3.2 The Tradition of the Tawaif: Urdu

Literature's Marginalised Moral Conscience

To understand the full weight of the eunuch's act in *Zindagi Tamasha*, it is necessary to situate it within the long tradition of Urdu literary and cinematic engagement with the figure of the tawaif. As Saba Dewan (2019) has documented in her magisterial *Tawaifnama*, the tawaif was not simply a sex worker or an entertainer in the pre-colonial and colonial periods of South Asian history. She was, as Dewan demonstrates, a custodian of Hindustani classical music and dance, a teacher of Urdu language, poetry, and etiquette to the sons of elite families, and a socially embedded figure whose *kotha* (house) was a site of cultural production and social refinement. The colonial period — with its combination of British evangelical moralising, the Social Purity movement, and nationalist cultural reform — systematically criminalised and stigmatised the tawaif community, transforming a culturally central figure into a socially expelled one.

Ruth Vanita's (2016) study *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans of Bombay Cinema* traces how the tawaif figured in Hindi and Urdu cinema as a site of moral interrogation: films centred on the tawaif consistently asked whether a woman who has been socially expelled can be morally superior to the 'respectable' society that expelled her. The answer, in the greatest of these films, was consistently yes. Guru Dutt's *Gulabo* in *Pyaasa* (1957) saves the protagonist's manuscript and, ultimately, his life. Rosie Marco in Vijay Anand's *Guide* (1965) achieves a kind of secular sainthood through her willingness to dance for the rains. Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* (1971) and Hasan Tariq's *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1972, Pakistan) present tawaif protagonists whose inner lives are incomparably richer and more spiritually refined than those of the 'respectable' world that condemns them. The moral logic is consistent across these texts: the tawaif is born into a label she cannot escape, but she inhabits that label with a dignity and humanity that exposes the moral poverty of the society that applied it.

This tradition also runs through the literature of the Partition. As the author observed in his

keynote (Zafar, 2024), Krishna Baldev Vaid's novel *The Broken Mirror*, set in the Punjab town of Lala Musa during the Partition violence, presents Mumtaz Shanti, the randi frequented by Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims alike, as the only sane and humane character in a town that has succumbed to communal madness. The old friends who once dined, partied, and visited the *kotha* together now cut each other's throats — but the randi remains outside the categories of religious identity that drive the killing. She is the moral witness to the catastrophe precisely because she has always been outside the respectable community that destroyed itself.

The recent scholarship of Sachdeva Jha (2022) has begun to recover the tawaif's role as a vernacular poet and cultural producer within the Indo-Muslim literary tradition, demonstrating that the tawaifs of the nineteenth century were not merely the passive objects of male literary imagination but active participants in the production of Urdu literary culture. The travelling tawaif, as recent work published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JRAS, 2025/26) has documented, was a figure of considerable cultural and social mobility, whose performance practices connected the courts, cities, and cultural centres of northern India in networks of musical and literary transmission. The colonial and nationalist stigmatisation of the tawaif was thus simultaneously a cultural dispossession: it erased a tradition of female creative and intellectual agency from the historical record.

Rahat Khawaja's situation in *Zindagi Tamasha* belongs to this tradition, and the film's power derives from its recognition of that genealogy. Like the tawaif, Rahat is born with a label — not of sexual deviance but of gender non-conformity — from which he cannot escape. Like the tawaif, he inhabits his label with an unselfconscious dignity that his persecutors lack. And like the tawaif at her best in Urdu literature, he becomes the moral centre of a text that indicts the community surrounding him. The eunuch who distributes his *niyaz* is not a symbol of transgression; the eunuch is the film's figure of grace.

4. Why Foucault Cannot Fully Explain Lahore: The Agrarian-Feudal Society and Social Taboo

4.1 The Structural Difference

The discourse of marginalised voices, as I noted at the outset, emerged from the historical experience of European industrialisation and its aftermath. The social formations in which Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power was developed — the hospital, the asylum, the prison, the school, the factory — are the characteristic institutions of industrial capitalist society. The normalisation of social behaviour that Foucault identifies as the product of these disciplinary regimes is specifically the normalisation produced by industrial modernity: the regularisation of labour time, the medicalisation of deviance, the bureaucratisation of social life.

The Pakistani society depicted in *Zindagi Tamasha* is not an industrial society. It is an agrarian-feudal society — a society structured by kinship, religious authority, honour, and shame rather than by the bureaucratic and medical disciplines that Foucault analysed. In Lahore's old city, the narrowness of the alleys is not merely a topographical fact; it is a social one. Rahat Khawaja cannot escape his community because the boundaries of that community are also the boundaries of his social existence. The Imam's power over him is not the anonymous, dispersed disciplinary power of a modern institution; it is the concentrated, personal, and community-endorsed power of a religious authority in a face-to-face social world. The closing of niyaz tray on Rahat is not a bureaucratic sanction; it is the withdrawal of communal recognition — the most devastating form of social death in a society organised around collective rather than individual identity.

The social taboos that structure Pakistani society — the taboo against men's dance, the taboo against gender non-conformity in a religious role, the taboo against challenging clerical authority — are not produced by the disciplinary regimes of industrial modernity. They are products of the agrarian-feudal social order: of a society in which the household is the primary unit of production, in which women's sexuality is the repository of family and community honour, in which religious authority provides the ideological legitimisation of social hierarchy, and in which deviation from communal norms threatens the social fabric on which all members of the community depend for their survival. This does not make the taboos just;

it means that the framework we use to analyse and challenge them must account for the structural conditions that produce and sustain them.

4.2 Industrialisation, Education, and the Structural Transformation of Taboo

The key insight here is provided by Ashoka Mody's (2023) study *India Is Broken: A People Betrayed, Independence to Today*. Comparing the trajectories of China and India over the past several decades, Mody demonstrates that China's dramatically faster progress on gender equality and social modernisation is directly attributable to its sustained investment in girls' education and women's incorporation into the formal industrial workforce. The education of girls and their participation in industrial labour is not merely a welfare measure; it is the structural mechanism through which agrarian-feudal social formations are transformed. When women enter the industrial labour market in large numbers, the household loses its character as the primary unit of production, the kinship network loses its character as the primary social security system, and the social taboos that protect these agrarian structures — including the taboos around gender conformity, sexual morality, and female mobility — begin to lose their structural basis.

This argument has direct implications for Pakistan. As recent data demonstrates, 68% of Pakistani female workers are employed in agriculture, compared to only 28% of men (Labour Force Survey, 2020-21). Pakistan's female employment in services is the lowest in South Asia — 17% compared to 47% in Sri Lanka and 27% in Bangladesh (World Bank, 2022). The social taboos that exclude figures like Rahat Khawaja from community recognition, and that confined the tawaif to the kotha and then stigmatised her when the kotha was destroyed, are not arbitrary cultural preferences that can be dissolved by intellectual critique alone. They are structurally embedded in the agrarian-feudal organisation of Pakistani society, and they will be most durably dismantled — as Mody's comparative evidence suggests — through the structural transformation of that society via industrial development and, above all, through investment in girls' education.

This does not mean that cultural and intellectual critique has no role to play. *Zindagi Tamasha* does

meaningful and important work: it makes visible what the community has rendered invisible, it restores humanity to those who have been dehumanised, and it creates the conditions for the kind of public conversation that social transformation requires. The author's published criticism and interview (Zafar, 2023; 2023b) participate in this same project. But cultural critique cannot substitute for structural change, and the discourse of marginalised voices will remain — as Khoosat's film itself remained for years — available only to a cosmopolitan minority unless the structural conditions that produce the marginalisation are addressed.

4.3 The Limits of Imported Discourse

There is a further dimension to the Eurocentrism of marginalisation discourse that this address has only gestured towards but that deserves direct statement. The discourse of LGBTQ+ rights, non-binary gender identity, and the individual's right to self-identify has developed within a specific cultural and philosophical framework — one that is rooted in the Enlightenment valorisation of individual autonomy, the post-industrial dissolution of the family as economic unit, and the particular trajectory of Western liberal democracy. The author's essay 'From Feminism to Cat-Self' (Zafar, 2023c) explored the *reductio ad absurdum* of this trajectory: the case of the schoolgirl in East Sussex who identified as a cat, and the legal and institutional frameworks that made this identification a matter of protected rights.

The point is not to mock this case or to dismiss the serious questions about gender identity and trans rights that inform contemporary Western legal frameworks. The point is that these frameworks, when transplanted wholesale into the social context of Pakistani or other agrarian-feudal societies, lose their genealogical specificity and acquire a different character: they become, as the Western democratic narrative's most pointed critics have argued, instruments of cultural imperialism, imposing on non-Western societies a conception of individual identity that conflicts with the collectivist, kinship-based, and religiously grounded social formations of those societies. The resistance that these frameworks encounter in Pakistan, India, and other Muslim-majority and agrarian societies is not simply the

resistance of prejudice or ignorance; it is, in significant part, the resistance of social formations that have their own deep logic, however imperfect and however in need of transformation.

This does not license the refusal of transformation. The tawaif deserved better than the colonial and nationalist stigmatisation she received. Rahat Khawaja deserves better than the social death his community inflicts upon him. Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in Pakistan deserve legal protection and human dignity. But the path to those outcomes in Pakistani society runs not only through the adoption of Eurocentric theoretical frameworks but through the structural economic and educational changes that Mody identifies: changes that will transform the agrarian-feudal basis of Pakistani social life from within, rather than imposing liberal democratic norms from without.

5. Oral Histories, Digital Spaces, and the Conditions of Voice

This address began with the question of relevance. It ends with the question of conditions. The conference subtheme — Oral Histories, Digital Spaces, and Marginalised Voices — correctly identifies digital platforms as significant new sites for the articulation and preservation of marginalised voices. As the example of *Zindagi Tamasha* demonstrates, digital distribution can circumvent institutional gatekeeping: a film banned from cinema screens by religio-political pressure found its audience through YouTube. Digital oral history projects, as Oza (2020) has documented in the case of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, can give durable form to the testimonies of communities whose knowledge systems are oral rather than written, and whose histories have been systematically excluded from formal archives.

Yet the conditions of voice in digital spaces are not simply given by the availability of the technology. They are shaped by the power relations that Foucault identified as operating through all social practices, including the apparently liberatory practices of digital self-expression. The algorithmic architectures of YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram — which determine what content is recommended, amplified, or suppressed — encode their own norms of the sayable and the unsayable. The

capital structures of platform corporations — which determine which data is harvested, which advertisers are served, and which governments' censorship requests are honoured — constitute a new form of disciplinary power that Foucault could not have anticipated but that his analytical framework illuminates.

Within the Pakistani context specifically, the digital public sphere is not a free space of subaltern self-expression. It is a contested terrain on which religio-political actors like the TLP, the state apparatus, and individual filmmakers, journalists, and scholars contend for the power to determine what can be said about Pakistani society, culture, and identity. The three-year suppression of *Zindagi Tamasha* is a case in point: a film that passed institutional censorship was effectively silenced by the exercise of extra-institutional religio-political power — power that operated through social media mobilisation, the threat of violence, and the government's capitulation to these pressures. The digital space that eventually gave the film its audience — YouTube — was also the space through which the TLP mobilised opposition to it. Voice and silencing are simultaneously enabled by the same digital infrastructure.

The scholar engaged in the project of voicing the unvoiced must therefore hold a double awareness: of the genuine emancipatory potential of digital spaces for marginalised communities, and of the power relations that structure those spaces and that can, in certain conditions, transform platforms of liberation into instruments of suppression. This double awareness is not a counsel of despair; it is the condition of genuine critical engagement. Spivak's (1988) challenge — the challenge to think carefully about who speaks, under what conditions, and in whose interests — is as urgent in the age of social media as it was in the age of the colonial archive.

6. Conclusion: The Third World War Question — And Its Partial Answer

I began this address with the question of relevance: whether the theoretical frameworks that have structured our understanding of marginalised voices — frameworks rooted in the Industrial Revolution, the two World Wars, and the liberal democratic order — will remain relevant in a world whose geopolitical character is

once again rapidly changing. I want to conclude by returning to that question, which I do not think can be answered with confidence, but which I believe must be asked with insistence.

The discourses of marginalised identity, LGBTQ+ rights, feminist theory, and subaltern epistemology are already under serious pressure in the Global North from which they emerged. The political movements that contest them — from European nationalism to American MAGA politics to the religious conservatism of the Global South — are not fringe phenomena. They are mainstream political forces, and they are winning elections. If, as the author asked at the outset, a major geopolitical rupture was to shift the centres of global power and the dominant intellectual frameworks through which human social life is understood and evaluated, it is at least an open question whether the theoretical vocabulary of peripheral epistemologies would survive that shift, or whether it would be revealed as the product of a specific and now-passing historical moment.

What the author could not have anticipated in April 2024 — though he was already alerting his audience to the possibility — was how rapidly, and from within the liberal democratic order itself, this shift would begin to materialise. This postscript, added in 2025, documents what happened within nine months of the address being delivered.

On 20 January 2025, President Donald Trump commenced his second term by signing a wave of executive orders that constituted the most comprehensive institutional assault on DEI and LGBTQ+ rights protections in American history. He rescinded 78 executive orders signed by his predecessor Joe Biden, among them at least a dozen measures supporting racial equity and combating discrimination against gay and transgender people (Reuters, 2025). An order entitled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” declared the official policy of the United States to be that there are “only two sexes.” A companion order, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programmes and Preferencing,” directed all federal agencies to close their DEI offices, place DEI staff on paid administrative leave, and

eliminate all DEI-related contracts and funding. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth declared “no more DEI at the Department of Defense: no exceptions,” purging nearly 400 books from the Naval Academy’s library, banning recognition of Black History Month and other “identity months” from official military functions, and removing transgender service members from the armed forces (KFF, 2025; Emerald, 2025). Major corporations including Walmart, McDonald’s, and Meta had already, in anticipation, quietly dismantled their own DEI programmes (Emerald, 2025).

The Los Angeles wildfires of January 2025 provided a vivid illustration of how the anti-DEI discourse had entered the political mainstream. As fires devastated entire neighbourhoods, prominent conservative commentators — and Elon Musk, by then directing the administration’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) — blamed the catastrophe on the Los Angeles Fire Department’s diversity hiring. Musk wrote on X that “DEI means people DIE.” The claim was rapidly demonstrated to be false: DEI-related spending comprised 0.3% of the LAFD’s \$819 million budget, and fire experts attributed the devastation to extreme winds and climate conditions (PolitiFact, 2025). But the episode revealed with clarifying force how thoroughly the anti-DEI agenda had been normalised in American public discourse, and how readily marginalised communities — and the institutional frameworks designed to protect them — could be blamed for structural failures rooted elsewhere.

The global consequences were most acute in the shuttering of USAID. Executive Order 14169, signed on 20 January 2025, placed an immediate halt on all US foreign aid, and by March 2025 the State Department had confirmed the termination of 83% of USAID’s 6,300 global initiatives — a record 23% cut in American foreign aid (OECD, 2025). USAID had disbursed roughly \$68 billion in foreign aid annually, representing over 40% of total global development assistance. The impact on marginalised communities worldwide was immediate: HIV clinics closed in South Africa; women-led health organisations in Afghanistan — already operating under Taliban restrictions — lost their sole operational support; reproductive health services for rural women in Zimbabwe were shuttered without notice; cholera deaths in

the Democratic Republic of Congo surged 361% as clean water programmes collapsed. The Gates Foundation estimated 200,000 additional child deaths in 2025 attributable directly to the aid cuts, while a Lancet study (2026) projected a possible 9.4 million additional preventable deaths by 2030 if the funding trajectory continued (Bond, 2026; Oxfam, 2025; Refugees International, 2026; CNN, 2026). The administration of the liberal democratic order had, within months of returning to power, dismantled the very institutional infrastructure through which that order had supported marginalised women, girls, and communities across the Global South.

The question posed at the UMT conference in April 2024 — whether a major geopolitical shift might render the discourses of peripheral epistemologies irrelevant — received, within a year, not a theoretical but a material answer. The discourses did not become irrelevant; the institutional and financial infrastructure that had sustained them was systematically dismantled, and that dismantling happened not from outside the liberal democratic world but from within its most powerful state. This makes the argument of this address — that the defence of marginalised voices must ultimately rest on grounds more durable than any particular geopolitical order — more urgent, not less. I raise this not to counsel intellectual paralysis but to insist on the importance of grounding our scholarly commitments in something more durable than the fashions of a particular theoretical moment. The case for the humanity and dignity of figures like Rahat Khawaja, the tawaif, the eunuch, and the marginalised communities they represent does not ultimately rest on Foucault or Spivak. It rests on the same grounds on which Guru Dutt made Gulabo the moral centre of Pyaasa in 1957, on which Sarmad Khoosat made Rahat Khawaja the moral centre of Zindagi Tamasha in 2019, and on which the eunuch in the street of Lahore’s old city distributed the *niyaz* that the community refused. These are not Eurocentric arguments. They are arguments from human experience, from the tradition of Urdu moral discourse, and from the long history of the subcontinent’s engagement with the question of what it means to be human in a world that is always already organised to exclude someone.

The work of this conference — of voicing the

unvoiced, of recovering peripheral epistemologies, of attending to oral histories and digital spaces as sites of marginalised self-

expression — participates in that same long tradition. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to contribute to it.

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