



**FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL: VOICES AND VISIONS OF FEMALE
ARTISTS OF PAKISTAN**

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Abstract

Art is considered a universal tool of communication, along with this, it is a medium of expression. The artists get inspiration from the society and express themselves through their art works. The art is not only a medium of converting energies positively but also contributes in terms of creating a positive impact of the society. The artists, as non-traditional story tellers, artistically present themselves through their artworks. Social, religious, economical and socio-political factors leave an everlasting impact on society. Furthermore, it also nurtures and arouse the creative abilities of the artists. Pakistani female artists are amongst the greatest contributors in terms of creating positive impact of Pakistan at national and international level. Besides their household and family obligations they perform tirelessly to play influential role in the practical fields of life. This research is an attempt of acknowledge the efforts of some Pakistani female artists through visual arts. Some of the selective female artists are being discussed in this research along with their art works. The art works created by these artists are the personification of their contribution in the field of Art. These pieces of art also reflect on the society in a polite manner. Along with this they also fulfill the aesthetic needs of the artists. Relevant information has been gathered through many primary and secondary sources like books and gathering data from the living artists by conducting interviews. These artists are the custodians of diverse cultural heritage of this region as well as the representatives of the global community. One of the the biggest challenge for them is to maintain their cultural identity through their brush strokes.

Key Words: *Art, Cultural Identity, Female Artists, Globalization, Visual Art.*



Introduction

Female artists are amongst the enormous contributors of Pakistani Artfield. These female artists are the reverberators of their surroundings in terms of presenting their feelings through artistic expressions. Art is considered as the universal tool of communication. The artists usually depict their feelings and emotions through their artistic creations. Art is not only a mean of converting one's energies positively but also a greatest source of inspiration in terms of educating the society. The artists generally get inspired from their surroundings. Socio-political, religious and cultural factors leave an everlasting impact in nurturing and upbringing of the artists. Female artists of Pakistan, as the most sensitive members of the society, contribute in terms of presenting a soft image of Pakistani society at local as well as global level. These artists belong to different genres of art. They have produced exceptional artworks in their art practices despite their household and family obligations. The efforts of some Pakistani female artists are being highlighted by the spectacle of visual arts through this research. Some of the major female contributors in Pakistani Artfield are Amrita Sher Gill, Anna Molka Ahmad, Naseem Hafeez Qazi, Zubaida Agha, Laila Shahzada, Zubaida Javed, Salima Hashmi, Mehr Afroze, Mussarat Mirza, Hajra Mansoor, Nahid Raza, Qudsia Nisar, Lubna Agha, Rahat Naveed Masood, Mussarat Nahid Imam, Naela Aamir, Sumera Jawwad, Shazia Sikandar, Faiqa Uppal and Anila Zulfiqar etc.

A noteworthy exhibition by fourteen female artists has been organized by *Indus Gallery* Karachi, which is the evident of a remarkable initiative by Ali Imam. According to the *Herald*, "Some of the most promising painters at work in Pakistan are women and not men".¹ In 1994 *Herald* further reflected that "Women artists today have an edge over their male counterparts because they have the subject and perspective which can make art live again".² These reference act as the witness of the successful efforts by these leading female artists of Pakistan. In recognition of these artists, Pakistan Post issued a Rs. 40 sheet let of 10

¹.Herald, June 1982, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/274258554/>, (accessed on June 18, 2020).

².Herald, January 1994, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/754259542/>, (accessed on June 18, 2020), 286.

reflective Pakistani Painters. These postage stamps were issued on 14 August 2006, including three female artists Anna Molka Ahmed, Zubaida Agha and Laila Shahzada.

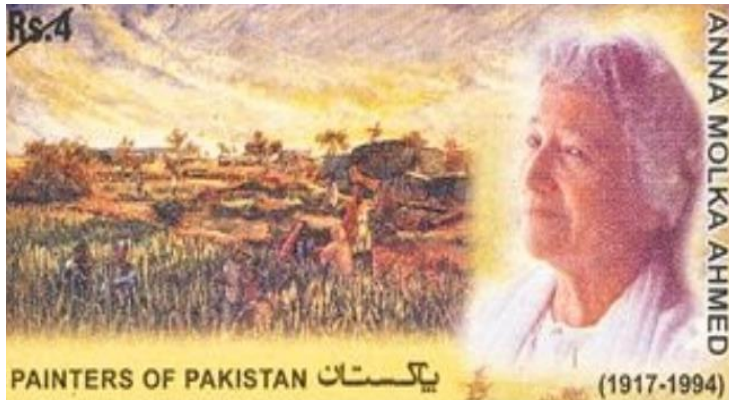


Fig: 1. Postage Stamp, Anna Molka Ahmad, 2006, Pakistan Post,
Source: <https://www.wnsstamps.post/en/stamps/PK013.06>



Fig: 2. Postage Stamp, Laila Shahzada, 2006, 58mm x 30mm,
Pakistan Post, Source:
<https://www.wnsstamps.post/en/stamps/PK017.06>.

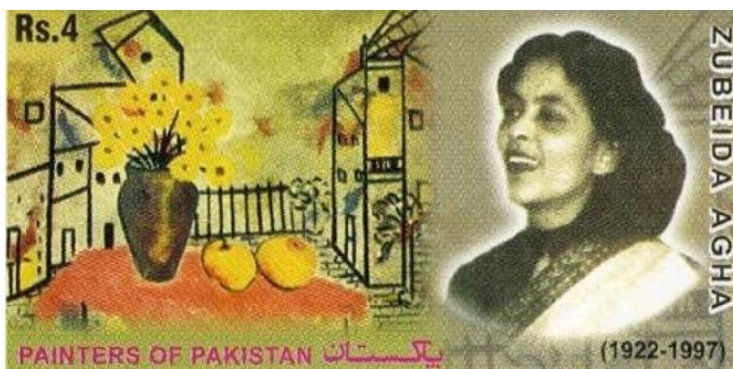


Fig: 3. Postage Stamp, Zubeida Agha, 2006, 58mm x 30mm, Pakistan
Post, Source: <https://www.wnsstamps.post/en/stamps/PK016.06>.

These postage stamps can be considered as the remuneration of noteworthy achievements of these Pakistani artists. Some of the leading female artists are also being discussed here for better comprehension of the art scene of Pakistan.

Anna Molka Ahmad (1917-1994)

Professor Emeritus Anna Molka Ahmad was a British lady, converted to Islam and married Sheikh Ahmad. After attaining her degree in art education from Royal College of Art London, she settled in Lahore. In 1940, she established the Department of Fine Arts in University of the Punjab Lahore. Promoting Art education was not only her passion but also the purpose of her life.³



Fig: 4. Anna Molka Ahmed, Source: <http://www.artnowpakistan.com/anna-molka-ahmed-one-of-pakistans-early-art-pioneers/>.

Anna Molka Ahmad inspired a huge lot of students through her teaching. She inspired the female artists of Pakistan, directly or indirectly. Those who worked under her supervision, were directly associated with her. While those, who learnt art from her students, remained under her indirect influence. She envisaged her emotions through visually perceptible and symbolic imagery, carrying in-depth meanings.⁴

Her artworks are inspired by the diversity of her adopted land. Her iconic painting *Dance of Death*, Fig. 5, is the personification of her intangible approach. She gave meaning to the immeasurably learnt philosophical concept, to be anticipated by the man, for the safe and secure future of humanity.

³. Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 647.

⁴ S. Amjad Ali, *Painters of Pakistan* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1995-2000), 101.



Fig: 5. *Dance of Death*, Anna Molka Ahmed, Oil on Canvas, 6 panels, Pakistan National Gallery of Art, Islamabad, Source: *An Artist an Institution*, 65.

She presented religious subject matter with philosophical interpretation in these panels of *Dance of Death*, Fig: 5. This mural consists of six panels, where death has been painted as a metaphor. This painting also reflects her spiritual and philosophical apprehensions of universal truths and death. She also portrayed the concern regarding the people who are lost in the trickery of mundane power. All the panels consist on outright and comprehensive compositions. Bodies of the dead on the foreground, while ignorant affluent people carelessly crushing them under their feet. They are delighted in the intoxication of their worldly power. On the contrary, blue and green skeletons bouncing and laughing around them at their ignorance.

All the figures have been painted symbolically in fancy colorful cloaks. The artwork has been rendered in thick impasto technique that was the signature style of the artist. In the fifth panel, atomic explosion has been painted along with the return of man into Stone Age. It can be considered a predictable future of the modern weaponry race. This painting was created during in 1985, when the earth was being pulled by the two Super-Powers; USA and USSR. Destruction has been symbolically painted in the fifth panel, with broken sculptures of Linen and the Statue of Liberty.

She contributed for the field of art education and its promotion throughout her life. Along with this she also started a departmental magazine, *Vista*, with proliferations of artworks and articles by the staff and students of the department. She was awarded with

*Tamgha-i-Imtiaz*⁵, for her contribution in the field of fine arts. She is recognized amongst the greatest artists of Pakistan. She was the trend setter and one of the most significant female artists in Pakistan.

Zubaida Javed (1937-2015)

Zubaida Javed is one of the well-known artists and art educationists of Pakistan. She is known as an eminent conceptual landscape painter. After doing her Master's degree in Fine Arts from the Department of Fine Arts, University of the Punjab, she taught there till her retirement.

She transformed her landscapes into almost non-representational compositions, which were highly subjective too, by taking inspiration from nature. Her bold colour palette

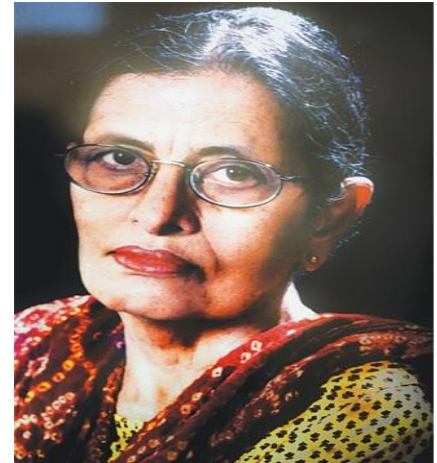


Fig: 6. Zubaida Javed, Photograph,
Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1224003>.



Fig: 7. *Murree Hills*, Zubaida Javed, Oil on Canvas, Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1224003>.

⁵.*Tamgha-i-Imtiaz* is a national award of excellence which is given to any Pakistani citizen on the basis of his/her achievements.



and vibrant strokes satisfies the aesthetic appeal of the audience. The conceptual approach of her paintings along with the use of colours as a tool of subjective approach depict the emotional involvement of the artist with the surroundings. She also selected symbols from her surroundings and employed them on her canvases through imaginative interpretations. Her cityscapes also contain the suggestive figures representations, rather than the distinguished ones.

The painting *Murree Hills*, Fig: 7, does not imitate the distinguishing landscape of the hill station, yet the true spirit of the hill point and its surroundings can be felt visibly. The landscape has been painted with the use of impasto strokes of vibrant colours. The artist has balanced the middle ground by the use of bold strokes of blues, greens, reds, yellows as well as the tones of black. The foreground has been rendered in yellow ochre. She applied bold colours with the help of pellet knife, inspired by her mentor Anna Molka Ahmad, in a unique formation. Her artistic expression was very fluent and harmonious. She successfully captured the fleeting effect of her surroundings. Zubaida Javed has introduced a new genre of painting to the coming generations. According to the statement by the artist, “The use of colour is not calculated. Nor does it have to do with the subject matter. It comes from within me on the spire of the moment when I am painting and it keeps on changing.”⁶ Thus, it can be inferred by this statement that the colour is a source of expression for the artists.

She did her first solo exhibition in Rawalpindi during 1975 and second solo show was held in Karachi during 1981. She was given the Anna Molka Award, originated by the Department of Fine Arts, University of the Punjab, in 1997. She was also awarded with the Presidential *Tamgha-i-Imtiaz*⁷ in 2004.

⁶. Quddus Mirza, *50 years of Visual Arts in Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997), 156.

⁷. Marjorie Hussain, *Homage: Remembering an art icon*, (Dawn: December 06, 2015).

Lubna Agha (1949-2012)

Lubna Agha did her graduation from Karachi School of Art during 1967. In 1967, when she was in her early 20s, she was awarded with second prize in the National Art Exhibition of Pakistan. She is known amongst the leading female artists of Pakistan. Her colorful abstract compositions are also very popular. She acquired great recognition in 1973, due to her *White Series*. The artist used to be dressed up in white attire at that time, along with this, the paintings she displayed were also white with a few suggestive subdued colours with white.⁸



Fig: 8. Lubna Agha, Photograph, Source: http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/in_memoriam_lubna_gha_artist_in_white/

She visited Morocco and Turkey during 2004-2005. This tour made her awfully inspired by the Islamic Architecture and geometrical patterns. The interest in Islamic Architecture and elements has frequently changed her style of painting. The subject matter of her paintings was now replaced with geometric motives, arched windows, minarets, domes wooden structures and windows of mosques and palaces, instead of figurative work. According to Dr. Marcella Sirhandi, “Her art brought her closer to her heritage and gave her a sense of peace”.⁹

Her painting, *Minarets*, Fig: 9, is amongst the best representation of her interest in Islamic patterns. She differently painted the Islamic structures and incorporated the elements

⁸. Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 652.

⁹. Dr. Marcella Sirhandi, *In Memoriam: Lubna Agha-Artist in White* (Islamic Arts, 2012).



Fig 9. *Minarets*, Lubna Agha, Private Collection, Source:

http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/in_memoriam_lubna_gha_artist_in_white/

of design in her new artworks. Minarets retain profound impact in Muslim architecture. She executed the pair of six minarets. They are placed side by side in a deliberate manner. She painted them with basic and complementary colours and titled them separately. Looking from right to left first in the row of minarets is “*Shajar Minar*”¹⁰. It was designed with the leaves in the tones of green colour, while the top has been cropped in the pointed format replicating the outer edge of the leaf. Second one is the “*Gull Minar*”¹¹. It has been painted with the pattern of red petals and contains the same carved petal top. Third is the “*Par Minar*”¹². The uppermost part of this minaret suggests feather shaped design format in the tones of blue colour. Fourth in the row is “*Lalch Minar*”¹³. Painted with the variants of red colour. Fifth minaret is titled as “*Buland Minar*”¹⁴. It was designed with stairs inside and the top is also in stairs format. Sixth and the last minaret is labelled as “*Atish Minar*”¹⁵. It contains the colours of fire and its top also indicates fire flames. All six minarets have been painted against a pure black flat background, which shows her conception of forms.

¹⁰.*Shajar* means tree.

¹¹.*Gull* means flower.

¹².*Par* means feather.

¹³.*Lalach* means greed.

¹⁴.*Buland* means high.

¹⁵.*Atish* means fire.

At the peak of her carrier, she had to move to California, along with her family. She did many solo shows internationally as well as in Pakistan. She is considered amongst the pioneers of abstract and non-figurative art in Pakistan. She transformed her artworks from representational to semi abstract.

Rahat Naveed Masood (b. 1953---)

Rahat Naveed Masood graduated from Lahore College in 1974. She obtained her Master's degree in 1976 from Fine Arts Department, University of the Punjab. She started her teaching career as a lecturer in the same department. She achieved another Master's Degree in 1995 in Art and Design from the Kingston University, London. She documented that period by painting and drawing the surroundings and landscapes around her. Although she paints in realistic manner yet her artworks are teemed with conceptual imagery.

In the painting, *Beyond the Impediment*, Fig: 11, the artist has painted herself with the impediments, symbolically. The painting shows as while moving forward, she suddenly turned her head towards the viewer. As if she is trying to convince the viewers; look how I have experienced by now. She has incorporated lots of symbols to convey her feelings in the artwork. The artist has painted herself in the middle ground, dressed in suggestive patterned with blue and white. She has covered herself with white veil around her shoulders. In the background, at the ground, one can observe nine tiny people, wearing white masks at their faces. Depiction of those people indicates those who may have tried to harm her or create problems in her life. She has painted them without revealing their identities.



Fig: 10. Rahat Naveed Masood, Photograph, Source: <https://rungg.co/rahat-naveed-masud>



Fig: 11. *Beyond the Impediment*, Rahat Naveed Masood, Oil on Canvas, 48”x 36”, 2015, Source: <https://canvasgallery.net/portfolio/rahat-naveed-masud/#&gid=1&pid=2>.

She conveyed her message by depicting them as anonymous creatures. Two barriers can also be seen in blue and white. A pile of stones and unfinished brick walls and are also the indicators of hurdles in her life. Consequently, the positive signs of hope, success and optimism can also be observed in the painting. Ladder, in a symbolic manner, indicates her achievements. Red rose in her hand represents that she firmly grips her loved ones in this journey. Dove, the universal symbol of peace, is flying at her head. Presence of fresh green leaves also indicate positivity in her life. The painting is full of symbolic imagery which successfully conveys its message to the viewers.

Shahida Manzoor (b. 1960---

Shahida Manzoor is also amongst the most prominent practicing female artists and researchers of Pakistan. She completed her master's degree from University of the Punjab in 1987. Later, she joined the same department in 1989. She completed her Ph.D. degree from Ohio University, USA. Several solo and group shows are also at her credit. Her journey consists of struggle, devotion, hard work, dedication and determination throughout her life. She sets up an example for the evolving artists that hard work always pays back and rewarded. She is living evidence of the phrase 'Allah help those who help themselves'.



Fig 12. Dr. Shahida Manzoor,
Photograph. Source: Artist.

Shahida Manzoor's paintings contains the spiritual nostalgia with nature as a whole. The main source of inspiration for her is nature; it is evident in her every artwork. One can experience the fusion of visual and aesthetic expressions in her artworks. Which are created with deep observation of nature. *Freedom III*, Fig.13, depicts the feelings of ecstasy. There is a famous quote by Khalil Gibran that. "Life without liberty is like a body without spirit"¹⁶. It is quite true for freedom, as it is one of our fundamental rights; everyone amongst us wants the liberty in every aspect of life. Whether it is physical or emotional, it should be preserved according to certain terms and conditions.

It can be related to freedom of physical self of the humans but the painting, *Freedom-III*, reflects the highest rung of the ladder¹⁷, which is Freedom in its truest sense. As described by Maulana Rumi, the different ranks of spiritual elevation. This artwork contains the

¹⁶. Quotes.net, STANDS4 LLC, 2020. "Khalil Gibran Quotes." (Accessed February 20, 2020). <https://www.quotes.net/quote/2773>.

¹⁷ Highest rank in the spiritual development.



Fig.13: *Freedom III*, Shahida Manzoor, Acrylic on Canvas,
Source: Artist.

transcendent inclination of freedom. The swirling motion created by the brush strokes, pushes the creatures to a semi-conscious state of mind. It ultimately leads the viewers towards spiritual experience. The central semi-abstract figure in the artwork is rendered in the hues of blue. In the foreground of the painting, Flamingos also symbolize human strains to get freedom from everyday' perceptibility. The central figure is representing spirit, as if it is linked with Allah. Human spirit is connected to Allah, according to Islamic beliefs. Swirling waves remind us the circumambulation movement during the *Tawaaqf*¹⁸, with tears washing out the souls. The soul thus becomes purified during the act of circumambulation; it is also symbolic to get exquisite cleanliness. These droplets of tears have been painted in three stages. It may

¹⁸ *Tawaaqf* is a ritual in Islam, it involves seven anti-clockwise circumambulations of the Holy Ka'aba.

indicate three major stages of the humans as a child, young man and elderly person, or else the stages of spiritual elevation. The highest level of spiritual development- is *Nafs-i-Safia wa Kamila*¹⁹.

Strokes of red and green are complementing each other. Vertical lines have been added in the background which are suggesting tree trunks. Furthermore, they are creating movement in the composition. Diagonal lines at the fore-ground are creating depth in the artwork. Rhythmic splashes show purity of the souls. As a whole, the painting is harmonized and balanced which nurtures our imagination.

Faiqa Uppal (b. 1969---)

Faiqa Uppal is also a distinguished contemporary female artist of Pakistan. She completed her Masters with distinction from University of the Punjab, Lahore. Her artworks explore the relationship between life and colours; along with feelings and expressions. She paints in conceptual approach to portray her emotions. Most of her artworks are rendered in fresh and bright water-based mediums. It adds fluidity in her art. She produces contrasting hues and textures with this medium.



Fig.14: FaiqaUppal, Source: Artist.

She moved from Pakistan to United Kingdom, which not only revolutionized her artworks but also gave her opportunities to display her artworks at global level. Consequently, social, cultural and atmospheric changes introduced new dimensions in her arts. Her earlier artworks, consist of Mughal inspired dancing figures. Later, they replaced by European ballet dancers and flora and fauna. It caused a fresh breeze like a new wave of change, which further

¹⁹ *Nafs-i-Safia wa Kamila*, refers to the "Soul that is Pure and Perfect.



Fig.15: *Harmony*, Acrylic on Canvas, Private Collection.

added coherence in her artworks. European ballet dancers and landscapes were transformed into floral paintings. Her painting *Harmony*, Fig.15, is a radiant example of her spontaneity.

The painting *Harmony*, is a quite soothing and captivating piece of art. The flow of line of the swan and the female figure reminds the researcher, the 'S' shaped figures from the caves of Ajanta. The figures were rendered with counter in S shaped manner, with the twists of upper and lower body. The gentle tones of blue and white hues are forming very smooth and harmonized effect. White colour of the swan creates harmonized look, along with the white flowers, around the head of female figure. The rhythm of music creates a flow which dominates the whole surroundings. The gesture of lady while playing flute, is filling the air with the spirits of delight and meditation. The overall environment created in the artwork is painted with lyrical quality, like a poetic manner. Linear approach and flow of the artwork create a feeling of serenity.

She creates her painting in such a way that form and colours become very important part of the artwork. She describes her paintings as 'Expression with a touch of Impression'.²⁰

20. FaiqaUppal, *Rang BaatainKarain* (Lahore: Hamail Art Gallery,2020).

A very dominant character of her artworks is the depiction of aesthetic pleasure. Her work rotates around life, colours, feelings and emotions. Her artwork unifies the eastern and western traditions with uniquely blended compositions. She magnificently justified with this medium which shows her association with the eastern traditions.

Anila Zulfiqar (b. 1975---

Anila Zulfiqar is also another influential Lahore based female artist. She portrays conceptual ideas through different mediums. She also writes regularly, for several Urdu and English magazines. Like other eminent Pakistani artists, Anila has also contributed in creating soft image of Pakistan, globally.

The above mentioned art work, *Nostalgic Expressions*, Fig. 17, is part of her *Nostalgic Series*. She associates this series with her childhood memories, belonged to her grandmother's home, situated in the walled city of



Fig 16: Anila Zulfiqar, Photograph, Source: Artist.



Fig.17. *Nostalgic Expressions*, Anila Zulfiqar, Mix Media, Source: Artist.



Lahore. The artist created this collage with an unconventional material. She has used fabric rolls, as her medium of expression. The artist conveyed her vision through a unique pattern. Variation of fabric rolls in vibrant colours against a dark background create an illusion of iconography. Along with this, they also create movement in her painting. The artwork reflects a suggestive cityscape. The colorful night life of Lahore mirrors the cultural and artistic life of the city.

During an in-person interview, the artist states about her work, “In my work vibrant colours and irregular shapes create noise and chaos. I have used fabric as medium of my expression.”²¹ Besides painting, she also created video installations. After observing her art works, it can be inferred that Anila has depicted symbolic representation of her feelings in her creation. Like many other artists, she adopted colours, as a tool of emotional expressions. Through the basic elements of art, she tried to express her nostalgia of childhood experiences and memories of Lahore in a distinctive and innovative manner.

CONCLUSION

The artworks of Pakistani female artists can be considered as the personification of various aspects for example socio-economic and cultural environment, physical environment, gender, religion and psychological implications. These artists express their feelings through their artworks, which are the global means of communication. They represent their culture and identity of Pakistani females at global level. Along with this they are also contributing in institutional development of Pakistan. These artists absorb their cultural norms from their environments and consciously or unconsciously adopt and express themselves through their art. Female artists of Pakistan along with their male counterparts are also creating positive impact of Pakistan, through their art and ideology, nationally and internationally. These artists are not only the representative of global society but also the representatives of cultural identity of Pakistan.

²¹ Anila Zulfiqar, Interview by Author, College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab Lahore, September 29, 2025.



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