

(Re)Engineering Gender Futures: Queer Aesthetics and Visual Resistance in Ali Sethi's Music Videos

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

Context: Queerness in Pakistan

In Pakistan, queer and transgender lives exist at the intersection of hyper-visibility and violent erasure. Homosexuality is criminalised under **Section 377** of the Pakistan Penal Code, with penalties ranging from two years to life imprisonment. In 2021, **87%** of Pakistanis reported viewing homosexuality as morally wrong. Despite these conditions, **visual culture** — particularly mainstream music — has emerged as a powerful site of aesthetic resistance and conceptual transformation.

Ali Sethi: Artist & Cultural Philosopher

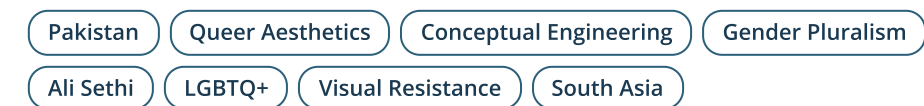
Novelist-turned-pop-star Ali Sethi frames his work as political intervention: *"This is not mere entertainment for me. This is the tool we need to undo the violence surrounding us."*

PASOORI 2022 Punjabi/Urdu + reggaeton + flamenco claps + Mughal aesthetics + drag performance references. Hailed as "a queer anthem, a protest song, and a power ballad of togetherness." **880M views.**

RUNG 2023 Centres Khawaja Sira (transgender) subjects within truck art settings and urban rooftop spaces — foregrounding joy, intimacy, and cultural belonging. **877K views.**

Research Gap & Aim

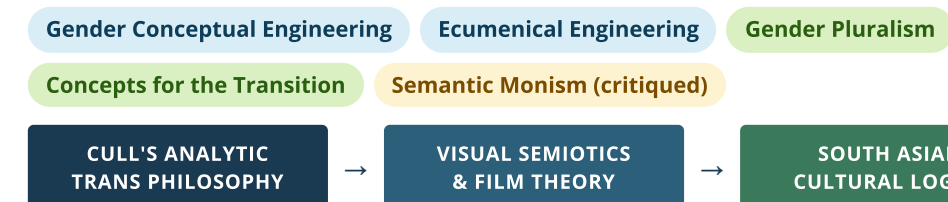
Queer studies of South Asia foreground literature and activism. *How Pakistani mainstream music videos reconfigure gender concepts* remains unexamined. This study applies Cull's (2024) analytic trans philosophy to visual analysis of *Pasoori* and *Rung* as sites of **"gender conceptual engineering."**



METHOD

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on **Matthew J. Cull's (2024)** analytic trans philosophy — the *first published qualitative study* to employ this framework for visual/media analysis.



Interdisciplinary Qualitative Approach

- Conceptual Analysis** — mapping Cull's engineering framework onto representational elements
- Visual Semiotics** — close reading of mise-en-scène, embodiment, lighting, costume, and spatial composition
- Critical Visual Studies** — queer gaze theory (Freeman 2019), phenomenological film theory (Sobchack 1991), South Asian queer aesthetics (Bhadury 2018)

Corpus

Six still frames from official music videos of *Pasoori* (2022) and *Rung* (2023), selected for semiotic density: gender nonconformity, queer intimacy, trans embodiment, and cultural iconography.

Positionality

The study foregrounds **regional particularity** — Khawaja Sira traditions, Islamic mystic aesthetics, postcolonial visibility politics — resisting universalising frameworks and the imposition of Western gender models.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Pasoori (2022) — Three Visual Interventions

FIG. 1 — ANDROGYNOUS MAKEUP & BRIDAL ICONOGRAPHY

Gold-speckled makeup on a non-binary-presenting subject destabilises bridal feminine scripts. Gold is re-engineered as a "floating signifier" of gender expansiveness — resisting Cull's "semantic monism." The direct camera gaze transforms passive viewing into mutual epistemic recognition.

FIG. 2 — MIRROR IMAGERY & REFLEXIVE SELFHOOD

A circular mirror displaces rectangular norms of selfhood, enacting queer theory's resistance to fixity. Self-adornment — makeup recoded as a tool of gender autonomy — functions as a "discursive act" reshaping how gender is perceived, practiced, and felt (Bhadury 2018).

FIG. 3 — ANDROGYNOUS COSTUMING & SPATIAL RECLAMATION

A denim vest over vibrant turquoise/yellow shorts within a traditionally decorated South Asian domestic space. Rather than evacuating cultural heritage, the queer figure occupies it — "modifying a concept's valence" by inverting negative associations into positive ones (Cull 2024).

Rung (2023) — Three Visual Interventions

FIG. 4 — QUEER INTIMACY ON THE ROOFTOP

The rooftop functions as a liminal counter-space: outside familial and state surveillance yet publicly visible. Golden-hour lighting renders queer affection affectively legible. White garments and gestural symmetry erase gendered hierarchy; touch becomes a language of recognition where speech is policed.

FIG. 5 — KHAWAJA SIRA JOY IN THE TRUCK

Khawaja Sira subjects inside a vividly painted Pakistani truck art interior radiate laughter and mutual warmth. This counter-narrative resists tragic tropes, fulfilling both an *epistemic role* (countering exclusion) and a *rhetorical role* — offering joy and dignity as frameworks of trans social life.

FIG. 6 — DIASPORIC EMBODIMENT AT TIMES SQUARE

A solitary figure in black extends arms before a rainbow heart billboard in Times Square. The muted outfit enacts "semantic pluralism" — resisting Pride imagery's corporate commodification while asserting a diasporic South Asian queer subjectivity within global LGBTQ+ space.

CONCLUSION

Pasoori and **Rung** enact "concepts for the transition" (Cull 2024) — politically urgent aesthetic infrastructures that make **livable** gender worlds imaginable within conditions that criminalise their existence.

- First qualitative study applying **Cull's analytic trans philosophy** to music video analysis
- South Asian motifs (truck art, Mughal design, Sufi mysticism) repurposed as **queer ecumenical engineering**
- Extends global queer aesthetics into a **postcolonial South Asian register**
- Challenges both **heteronormativity and homonormativity** — resisting commodified visibility
- Theorises **joy** as a diagnostic and remedial instrument for trans representation
- Popular music reframed as **cultural philosophy** — a vehicle for conceptual change

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

Future Work

Extend this framework to other South Asian artists navigating legal constraint; develop audience reception analysis; and compare with activist visual cultures in Bangladesh and India.

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