

Nurturing Social Justice at Punjab University Library

Faiqa Mansoor, Alia Arshad, and Muhammad Haroon Usmani

abstract: An unfair division of resources and biased treatment favoring the ruling elites have perpetuated social discrimination in the postcolonial societies in developing countries. Pakistan, one of these countries, has struggled to emerge from the legacies of colonialism. The situation demands strong support of equality, social justice, and the rule of law among youth and adolescents, including college students. Libraries can play a role in exploring these issues with students through pleasure reading.

Punjab University Library, the oldest and largest university library in Pakistan, started a book club program in January 2018 to encourage reading among its users. The Punjab University Library Book Club is now a well-recognized intellectual and social activity, and other Pakistani libraries have started similar book groups. The enthusiastic participation and comments of the scholarly community show that libraries can help build a more just society in Pakistan by sponsoring social reading activities.

Introduction

Stephen Bales defines social justice as a philosophical and trans-disciplinary concept that is usually defined in the context of the economic, cultural, religious, and historical values of a society.¹ Human rights, social equality, the common good, and fair distribution of resources, particularly economic resources, are closely related ideas. Nicole Cooke, Miriam Sweeney, and Safiya Umoja Noble explain social justice as advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for all members of society and educating ourselves and others to achieve change.²

Social Justice in South Asian Countries

Social justice is a challenge for developing and postcolonial countries. Daniel Parkins states that in Liberia, a postcolonial country, the unfair division of resources and biased attitudes of the ruling elites damaged the fabric of society and created identity-based

conflict and confusion.³ Syed Mohammad Ali expressed similar views for South Asia, where authoritarian elites exploited religion and nationalism to maintain their dominance.⁴ As a result, corruption and inequality became prominent features of these societies and aggravated their economic and administrative problems. The situation demands the inculcation of a strong sense of equality, social justice, and the rule of law among the youth in this region.

Social Justice and Academic Libraries

Miriam Sweeney and others believe that information professionals are in a unique position to advocate for social justice.⁵ Punit Dadlani and Ross Todd declare that concepts such as intellectual freedom and fair access to information for all can be effectively used for the promotion of social justice concerns.⁶ Paul Jaeger, Katie Shilton, and Jes Koepfler suggest that libraries can help social justice causes by preserving the literature of underrated groups in society.⁷

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Amelia Gibson, Renata Chancellor, Nicole Cooke, Sarah Park Dahlen, Shari Lee, and Yasmeen Shorish urge libraries to play an active role against racism.⁸ Rhonda Kauffman and Martina Anderson recommend that technical services staff be encouraged to promote the values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in library practices.⁹

Joseph Winberry and Bradley Bishop find that library and information science literature has published much research about social justice in the twenty-first century. The research shows the diversity of libraries' methods of participation on the issue. By formulating acquisition and circulation policies that advance social justice, libraries have played an indirect role to support the cause. Winberry and Bishop suggest, however, that libraries should play a more active and direct role.¹⁰ Jaeger and others describe the libraries' role in the archival preservation of documents related to social justice as direct support. Cooperating with other organizations to advance social justice in library skills instruction and collections development, on the other hand, might be characterized as indirect support.¹¹ Casira Copes suggested, based on her personal experience, that libraries can play a direct role in the promotion of social justice by offering themselves as a safe place for the underprivileged groups of society.¹²

Stephen Bales and Lea Susan Engle provided different strategies for library professionals to play their roles as educators and facilitators of the research process and to promote the community good. They suggested that critical social theory should be part of the library school curriculum and students should be encouraged to participate in informal mentoring activities.¹³

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Reading as a Social Justice Advocacy Tool

Reading, specifically book reading, plays an important role in the personal, social, and economic development of an individual. It not only provides new knowledge but also enhances people's ability to understand themselves and others. At a social level, it helps to foster empathy and curiosity about the lives of others and enables readers to connect to different experiences, cultures, and ideas, resulting in better social acceptance and understanding. Scholars advocate that reading can be a tool for highlighting social justice issues. Megan Owens indicates that reading may be used to develop moral reasoning among youth, helping to enhance their understanding of issues related to social justice.¹⁴

Johanna Kiciman, Alaina Bull, and Kari Whitney shared the experience of the University of Washington Tacoma Library Book Club. The club, known as "Real Lit[erature]," discusses social justice issues through reading fiction with those themes. The three authors declare that such book clubs help highlight marginalized voices, promote reading, foster student engagement and scholarly conversations, and model interpersonal skills. Book clubs also show the breadth of services that an academic library can provide.¹⁵ Sarah Harrington, Veronica Churchill, Lillian Curanzy, and Hollie Bellinger started a Staff Reading Group at the University of California Berkeley Library for the promotion of social justice. They proposed that libraries should introduce such reading groups to engage their staff in respectful conversations and provide ideas for how to better serve underrepresented groups.¹⁶

Lucinda Juarez and Regina Rodriguez believe that democratic citizenship skills are necessary for students to challenge and cope with the unfair and unjust conditions in society. They assert that purposeful classroom literacy sessions with nonfiction and fictional texts can help in developing these skills.¹⁷ Pauline Dewan argues that pleasure reading can be a tool for social justice advocacy. Stories, she says, can inspire readers to imagine other ways of living and encourage them to fight for the collective good. Dewan stresses that libraries can play a major role in lifelong learning and reading.¹⁸

Punjab University Library

Punjab University Library is the oldest and largest university library in Pakistan. It has a print collection of more than 600,000 books and journals, along with a digital repository of 200,000 items. The library also offers access to the National Digital Library of the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan Higher Education Commission (HEC), a government body that oversees college and university education in Pakistan. The library occupies a three-story building and employs more than 100 professional and nonprofessional staff members. More than 40,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students and nearly 2,000 faculty members use the library annually. It provides blended services that include both traditional and digital elements.

Library Mission Statement

The library's mission is to manage wide, accurate, and ethical use of information through print and digital provision of resources and learning of information skills. Through



academic community engagement, the library offers a welcoming space for sharing ideas and inspires its users to become critical thinkers and active participants in society.

During the last two decades, Punjab University Library has initiated activities to expand its role in the social and intellectual development of its users, especially students. Regarding intellectual property rights and information ethics, the library is a pioneer in South Asia in the promotion of academic integrity through the use of anti-plagiarism software and training. To encourage reading habits among users, the library began to bestow an annual Book Lover Award in 2012. At the award ceremony, typically held in April on World Book Day, the library honors 10 highly engaged library-affiliated readers. A promotional banner with the names of the awardees hangs in the library's main hall for a year.

Library Book Club

In January 2018, the chief librarian of Punjab University Library, who holds a doctoral degree in Urdu literature in collaboration with a faculty member of English Department, started a library book club to promote reading habits among students. On the second Wednesday of every month, the club sponsors talks on two books, one each from the two main languages of the country—Urdu and English.¹⁹

The Punjab University Library Book Club selects books based on their content, which should be appealing and valuable for students or have a social message. Efforts are made to include books on a variety of subjects. Faculty members and other scholars are invited to introduce a book compatible with the objective of the book club.

Each program lasts two hours. A guest speaker has half an hour to introduce a book, explain the main themes, give a short biography of the author, and explain his or her personal views. Afterward, the audience, including faculty, students, and visitors, share their perspectives regarding the topic of the book. The chief librarian or associate librarian plays the role of mediator. Students' engagement in discussions is valued. See the library's website at www.pulibrary.edu.pk and its Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/PunjabUniversityLibrary/>.

Announcements of Library Book Club programs are made through official as well as personal social media accounts of the library and concerned professionals. The main auditorium of the library, with a seating capacity of nearly 250, is the venue. The book club's first program was a hit. Students and faculty members filled the auditorium, and a report of the event on a university student's weblog called it a "ray of hope." See Figure 1.

The continued positive feedback, support, and suggestions from the academic community encouraged Punjab University Library to expand the circle of book club participants. Due to administrative and security reasons, most library programs are designed only for the on-campus community. But scholars, the general public, and alumni of the university showed such a keen interest in attending the programs that provisions were made to accommodate such an audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic inspired the library to add digital access to its programs. From April 2021, it provided online links through the video conferencing platform Google Meet. To further expand community coverage, the library also started a YouTube channel in February 2021 so that the recordings of previous programs would become available for everyone. Starting an online format also provided a chance to welcome international scholars not only as listeners but also as speakers.

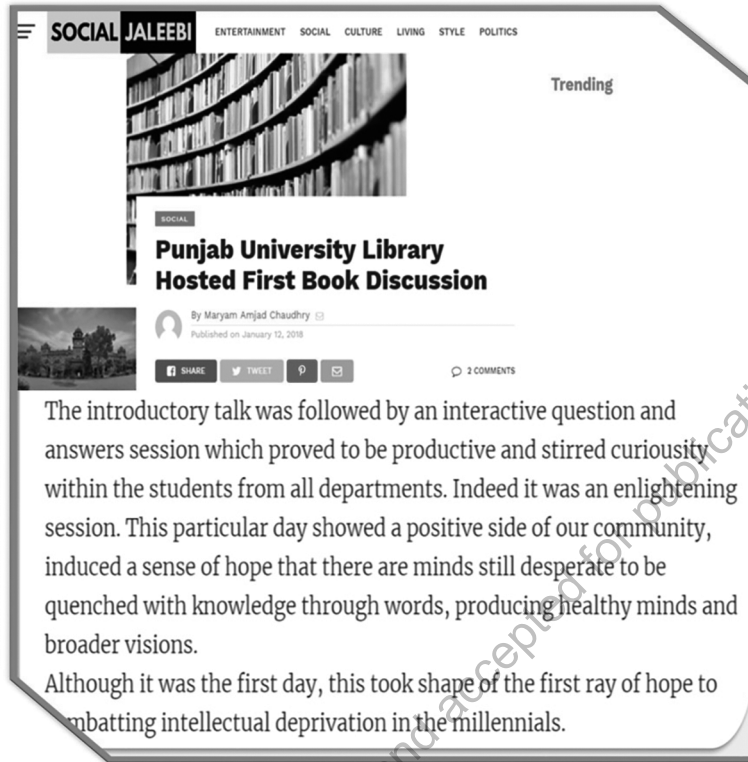


Figure 1. A student’s blog describing the first program of the Punjab University Library Book Club.

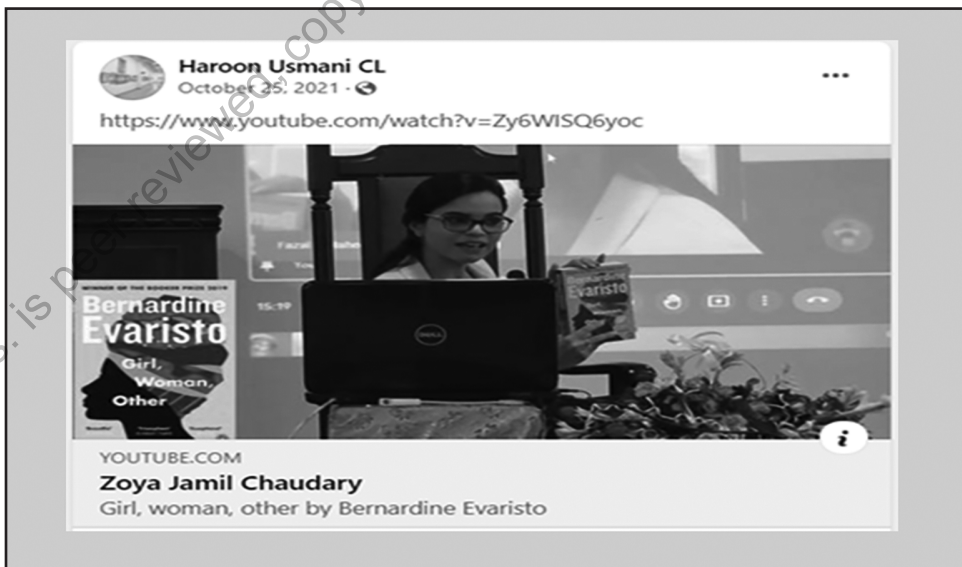


Figure 2. An advertisement on Facebook about recordings of Punjab University Library Book Club programs available on YouTube.

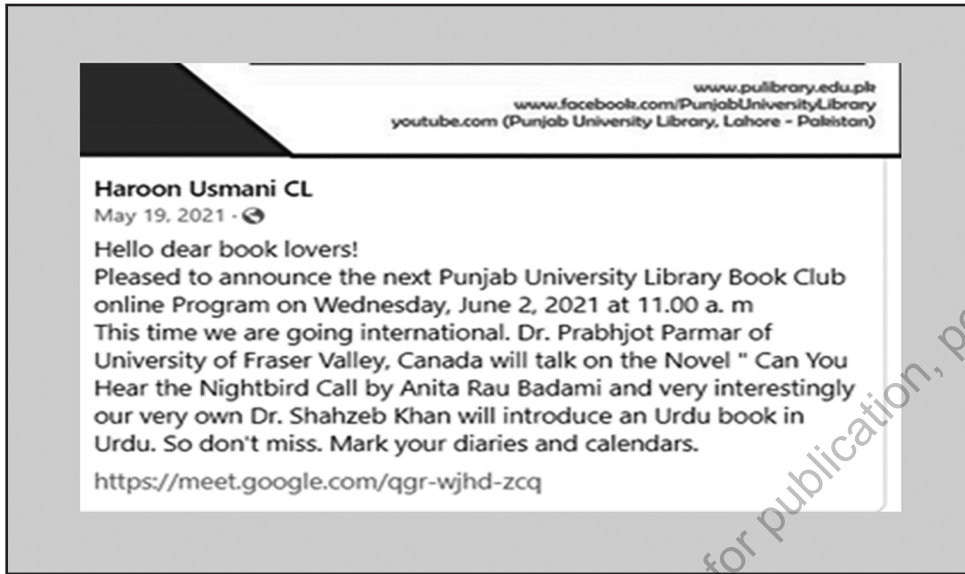


Figure 3. An announcement of an online book club program on the Facebook page of the Punjab University Library.

To date, the library has arranged more than 37 discussions in the book club series and has presented works with multidimensional perspectives on social issues. The books discussed included literary classics like *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar; books with rich social satire such as کامیابی کا مٹھانہ (*The Illusion of Success*) by Atif Hussain; works by the Urdu writer Mushtaq Ahmad Yusufi; and English and Urdu fiction like *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak. Writings on liberalism (*Why Liberalism Failed* by Patrick Deneen) and capitalism (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff) were explored, providing students the opportunity to read multidimensional perspectives on these concepts and critically evaluate them. Books describing historical events included *Exterminate All the Brutes* by Sven Lindqvist, about European colonialism in Africa, and *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* by Shashi Tharoor. Other topics discussed were the caste system (*Why I Am Not a Hindu* by Kancha Ilaiah), sensitive issues of gender (*Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo), and the views of a Pakistani political scientist (*Eqbal Ahmed: Critical Outsider in a Turbulent Age* by Stuart Schaar). Some books on purely scientific subjects, such as *Molecules That Changed the World* by K. C. Nicolaou and Tamsyn Montagnon, were included. The Appendix provides a list of book titles discussed.

Since 2018, the library has received encouraging feedback on the book club programs from the academic and literary community, both in personal meetings and via social media platforms. Although the number of participants for each program varies, a group of regular listeners has formed, and online access has grown, which indicates acceptance at the university and in society. The library has decided to create a special page on its website for information on upcoming activities of the book club as well as for the record of previous programs.



Figure 4. Feedback from the academic and literary community about Punjab University Library Book Club programs.

The success of the Punjab University Library Book Club encouraged other libraries to start similar activities. One example is the GCU (Government College University) Book Club in Lahore, Pakistan, which was established in 2021. See its Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/gcubookclub/>.

The impact of such activities cannot be directly measured because of their unseen effects on the intellect of their listeners and societies. However, the success of such programs indicates that libraries can play a role in social justice promotion via reading groups.

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Plans and Recommendations

Punjab University Library has taken another step to motivate and involve young professionals in information science. This year, the library, as an assignment, asked each of its internship students to give a talk about his or her favorite book in a special program, similar to the presentations of the book club. The students found the activity fruitful not only for their communication and intellectual skills but also in strengthening their relationship with books and increasing their understanding of social behaviors. The authors of this article believe that this program will increase awareness on social justice issues.

One reason for the decline in reading habits might be that people associate reading and books with academic degree requirements, rather than viewing reading as a source of knowledge or happiness. Therefore, the authors of this article recommend that libraries take similar initiatives to promote book reading, knowledge, intellectualism, and social awareness.

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Appendix

Books discussed at Punjab University Library Book Club

Month	English book	Urdu book
January 2018	<i>The Forty Rules of Love</i> by Elif Shafak	دیوار گریہ کے آس پاس: اسرائیل کا سفرنامہ از کاشف مصطفیٰ
February 2018	<i>Eqbal Ahmad: Critical Outsider in a Turbulent Age</i> by Stuart Schaar	پارسا بی بی کا بگھار از ذکیہ مشدی
March 2018	<i>Sociology Themes and Perspectives</i> by Muhammad Zakria Zakar and <i>Perspectives on Gender: Reader</i> by Muhammad Zakria Zakar	
April 2018	<i>Mr. and Mrs. Jinnah: The Marriage That Shook India</i> by Sheela Reddy	انارکلی (ناول) از فرزا حامد بیگ
May 2018	<i>Noor</i> by Sorayya Khan	مجموعہ بلونت سنگھ (افسانے) از جمیل اختر
June 2018	<i>Guilt and Other Plays</i> by Usman Ali	رات ڈھلتی نہیں از ایوب ندیم
September 2018	<i>An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India</i> by Shashi Tharoor	نیلی بار از طاہرہ اقبال
October 2018	<i>The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex</i> by Murray Gell-Mann	مادھولال حسین: لاپور دی ویل از نین سکھ
November 2018	<i>Molecules That Changed the World</i> by K. C. Nicolaou and Tamsyn Montagnon	مشتاق احمد یوسفی (مجموعہ)
December 2018	<i>Splinterlands</i> by John Feffer	ی مور نی دلا لالچ انالوم یونٹم
January 2019	<i>Ghazal Cosmopolitan: Ghazals and Essays on the Culture and Craft of the Ghazal</i> by Shadab Zeeft Hashmi	اپنی تلاش میں از قاسم علی شاہ
February 2019	<i>The Conference of the Birds</i> by Farid ud-Din Attar	اجے قیامت نہیں آتی از منو بھائی
March 2019	<i>Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth</i> by Audrey Truschke	راکھ سے لکھی گئی کتاب از ناصر عباس نیر
May 2019	<i>Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time</i> by Karen Armstrong	الرحیق المختوم از مولانا صفی الرحمن مبارکپوری
September 2019	<i>Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind</i> by Yuval Noah Harari	کامیابی کامغالطہ از عاطف حسین
October 2019	<i>Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research</i> by John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark	چٹکیاں از ڈاکٹر ذوالفقار علی
November 2019	<i>The Life of Muhammad (PBUH)</i> by Abdul Hameed Siddiqui	بادی عالم از مولانا محمد ولی رازی
December 2019	<i>Astrophysics for People in a Hurry</i> by Neil deGrasse Tyson	کلیات مجید امجد از خواجہ محمد زکریا
January 2020	<i>Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life</i> by Nassim Nicholas Taleb	لاپور آوارگی از مستنصر حسین تارڑ



Appendix, cont.

Month	English book	Urdu book
February 2020	<i>Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow</i> by Yuval Noah Harari	اخلاق و فلسفہ اخلاق از مولانا محمد حفظ الرحمن سیوہاروی
March 2020	<i>The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment</i> by Eckhart Tolle	ماحولیاتی تنقید : نظریہ اور عمل از ڈاکٹر اورنگ زیب نیازی
February 2021	<i>The Age of Surveillance Capitalism</i> by Shoshana Zuboff	یار سرائے از شاہد ملک
March 2021	<i>Why I Am Not a Hindu</i> by Kancha Ilaiah	مقالات شمس تبریزی از شمس الدین تبریزی
April 2021	<i>Why Liberalism Failed</i> by Patrick J. Deneen	پریاں اتری ہیں از وحید احمد
June 2021	<i>Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?</i> by Anita Rau Badami	جدیدیت اور نوابادیت از ناصر عباسنیر
July 2021	<i>Pakistan: The Politics of the Misgoverned</i> by Azhar Hassan Nadeem	خوبصورت مساجد از فقیر اللہ خان
August 2021	<i>Exterminate All the Brutes</i> by Sven Lindqvist	چاند گو گل کریں تو ہم جانیں از اسامہ صدیق
September 2021	<i>Red Birds</i> by Mohammed Hanif	گلستان سعدی از شیخ سعدی شیرازی
October 2021	<i>Girl, Woman, Other</i> by Bernardine Evaristo	لاہور ایک شہر بے مثال از احمد سعید
November 2021	<i>The Leadership of Muhammad</i> by John Adair	حیات رسول امی از علامہ خالد مقصود
December 2021	<i>Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance</i> by George Saliba	اللہ میاں کا کارخانہ از محسن خان
March 2022	<i>Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300</i> by Romila Thapar	(ناول) تمک کا جیون گھر از رفعت عباس
April 2022	<i>The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam</i> by Muhammad Iqbal	کلیات اقبال
June 2022	<i>Of Strangers and Bees: A Hayy ibn Yaqzan Tale</i> by Hamid Ismailov	منہ ول کعبہ شریف (سفر نامہ حج) از مستنصر حسین تارڑ
July 2022	<i>Numbercaste</i> by Yudhanjaya Wijeratne	فریب نظر : علمی ادب سے انتخاب از سید سعید نقوی
August 2022	<i>Climate Change</i> by Mike Hulme	کہروڑ پکا کی نیلماں از محمد اقبال دیوان
October 2022	<i>The Last White Man</i> by Mohsin Hamid	پردے سے پارلیمنٹ تک از شاہ نستہ سہروردی اکرام اللہ

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Notes

1. Stephen Bales, *Social Justice and Library Work: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Chandos, 2018), 189.
2. Nicole A. Cooke, Miriam E. Sweeney, and Safiya Umoja Noble, "Social Justice as Topic and Tool: An Attempt to Transform an LIS Curriculum and Culture," *Library Quarterly* 86, 1 (2016): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.1086/684147>.
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19. In Pakistan, the English language is considered the language of the elite because of its association with colonial rulers. The national and local languages have lower status, and the scholars and others who use those languages are often considered less important and valuable.

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