Journal of Religion and Decoloniality
e-ISSN: 3110-1305
Vol. 2, No. 1, 2026. 55-67
https://e-journal.elkuator.com/index.php/jrd

Sacred Feminine: A Decolonial Reading of the Indus Mother Goddess and Gandhara Hariti

***Jalil Khan**
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

*Correspondence: jalilkhanacademic@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the colonial and patriarchal framing of female divinities in South Asian archaeology, using two case studies: the Indus Valley Mother deity figurines and the Gandhara deity Hariti. Both types of artifacts, which are currently housed in prominent European institutions such as the British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were often overlooked in colonial scholarship and museum catalogues. While the Mother Goddess figurines were reduced to rudimentary "fertility idols" and the Hariti sculptures were demoted to secondary mythological significance in Buddhist art, masculine figures like as the Priest-King, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas were exalted as vital to South Asian religious tradition. This interpretive hierarchy reflects the complex interplay of colonial epistemologies and patriarchal beliefs that determined how South Asian religious traditions were represented abroad. Using a decolonial feminist lens, the study reinterprets these artifacts as essential religious icons representing feminine spirituality, protection, and fertility, contesting their erasure in colonial and patriarchal narratives. The article demonstrates how decolonial feminist readings of the Indus Mother Goddess and Hariti can restore the significance of female divinities while also contributing to more inclusive interpretations of religion, heritage, and museum practice.

Keywords: Indus Valley Civilization, Gandhara, Hariti, Mother Goddess, Decolonial Haritage.

Introduction

The combination of archaeology, religion, and colonialism has profoundly influenced how South Asian material culture has been perceived, gathered, and presented. Artifacts recovered from Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and Gandhara were not only removed from their original contexts but also reframed through colonial and patriarchal epistemologies that promoted certain narratives while marginalizing others (Chakrabarti, 2003). This process, as evidenced by excavation reports, museum catalogues, and display practices, elevated male religious representations such as the so-called Priest-King or the Buddha's monumental images while relegating female figures, such as the Indus Mother Goddess and the Gandhara goddess Hariti, to the margins of scholarship. Today, these artefacts are widely dispersed in institutions such as the British Museum, the Musée Guimet, and the Metropolitan Museum

Copyright © 2026 by Author(s)
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

of Art, where they continue to embody both religious significance and the legacies of colonial epistemic violence.

The Indus Mother Goddess figurines, miniature terracotta statues associated with fertility cults, were crucial to some of the first interpretations of the Indus Valley Civilization. Early colonial archaeologists such as John Marshall (1931) and Ernest Mackay (1938) characterized these figures primarily as evidence of "fertility worship," echoing broader Western views about religious evolution, in which goddess cults were considered "primitive" or "pre-axial." These readings, which can still be found in certain museum catalogues, disregarded the figurines' intricate functions in household ritual, communal identification, and local spirituality (Kenoyer, 1998; Wright, 2010). Similarly, the Gandhara goddess Hariti, discovered in monastery and urban settings in northwestern South Asia, was formerly regarded as a subsidiary figure in Buddhist iconography. Although Hariti came to be venerated as a maternal and protective deity within Gandharan Buddhism (Péri, 1917; DeCaroli, 2004), colonial and early art historical scholarship placed greater emphasis on the monumental Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. These figures, with their Greco-Roman stylistic features, were celebrated as exemplars of "classical" aesthetics (Foucher, 1905–1922; Marshall, 1951), while female divinities such as Hariti were treated as secondary. Both examples show how colonial narratives reduced and reframed female religious leaders within patriarchal and Eurocentric frameworks.

A decolonial feminist lens opens new opportunities for reinterpreting these artifacts. Aníbal Quijano's (2000) concept of the coloniality of power emphasizes how colonialism reshaped not just political and economic institutions, but also epistemologies. Within this approach, museum depictions of South Asian objects cannot be viewed as neutral, but rather as the result of power dynamics that devalued indigenous spiritualities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) argues that colonial systems silenced subaltern voices, particularly women, while María Lugones (2010) demonstrates how patriarchy and colonialism worked together to erase non-Western female agency and spirituality. Applying these ideas to the Indus Mother Goddess and Gandhara Hariti illustrates how both were suppressed under colonial knowledge production regimes and can now be recast as important to South Asian religious traditions.

The value of these case studies stems from their continuity and difference. Terracotta female figurines from the Indus Valley, often recovered in domestic and small ritual contexts, suggest early traditions of venerating feminine divinity linked to fertility, household protection, and community spirituality (Kenoyer, 1998). Centuries later, Hariti appeared in Gandhara as a syncretic figure representing maternal care in Buddhist mythology. Hariti described in early Buddhist narratives as a child-snatching yakṣiṇī was subsequently incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon as a protective mother, commonly shown with children and fruit offerings (Péri, 1917; DeCaroli, 2004). These images highlight the continuous presence of the divine feminine in South Asian traditions, but their colonial portrayal shattered this continuity. In institutions like the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Indus Mother Goddess figurines are shown as "fertility idols," whilst Hariti statues are labeled as "mythological companions," reflecting reductive colonial

frames (Errington, 2017). These behaviors undermine both theological intricacy and the social significance of female divinities.

The gendered hierarchy in representation is not coincidental. Feminist archaeologists such as Margaret Conkey and Joan Gero (1997) contend that female figurines are frequently read reductively as fertility symbols, ignoring their greater ritual and cosmological significance. This androcentric prejudice reflects the patriarchal ideas underlying colonial archaeology and museum practice. The marginalization of the Indus Mother Goddess and Hariti reflects both disciplinary traditions and the gendered logics of colonial power. As Lynn Meskell (1995) points out, figurines carry rich social and symbolic connotations that cannot be reduced to reproductive duties; doing so would be to mute the voices and ideals of previous communities.The methodology used in this paper blends archaeological analysis, museum studies, and feminist decolonial theory. This study examines artefacts currently housed in prominent European museums, as well as excavation reports and catalogues from the colonial period, to see how the meanings of these things were transformed under colonial authority. It then uses feminist and decolonial views to reimagine their roles in South Asian religious traditions. This dual approach, empirical and theoretical, aims to bridge the gap between material culture and critical theory by demonstrating how artifacts may become sites of contestation over gender, power, and identity.

This article relates to current discussions in religion, archaeology, and decolonial heritage studies. First, it emphasizes the importance of studying South Asian religion within the colonial and patriarchal circumstances that molded its global image. Second, it emphasizes the value of feminist methods that restore the centrality of female divinities and oppose their erasure. Finally, it suggests new curatorial strategies: museums might move beyond Eurocentric and frames by redefining characters such as the Mother Goddess and Hariti as strong religious icons rather than curiosities. Together, these case studies offer a framework for reconsidering how female divinities are positioned in religious scholarship and museum practice, promoting both feminist and decolonial approaches to legacy.

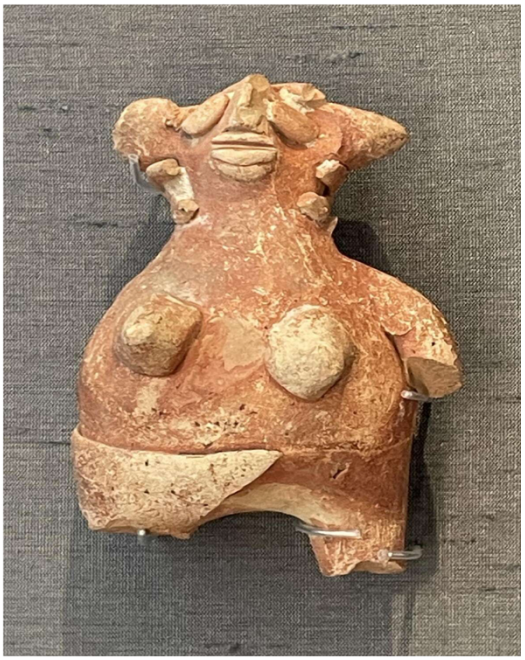
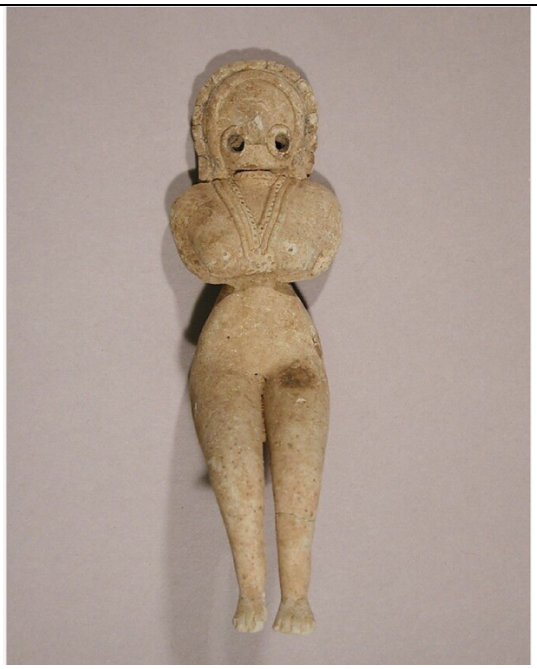
Indus Mother Goddess in Foreign Museums

The Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600-1900 BCE) produced one of the world's largest collections of terracotta sculptures, many of which were interpreted as depictions of a mother goddess. These figurines, which often depicted female bodies with exaggerated hips and breasts, rich jewelry, and headdresses, were among the most frequently discovered artifacts in Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and smaller villages (Mackay, 1938; Marshall, 1931). Their overwhelming quantity implies that they were an important part of family ceremonial life, representing fertility, household protection, and feminine power (Kenoyer 1998). Yet the ways in which these figurines were collected, catalogued, and displayed under colonial regimes shaped their modern interpretation as "fertility idols," a label that minimized their religious significance and relegated them to the margins of South Asian heritage narratives.

Many Indus figurines were moved to European museums beginning in the early twentieth century because of excavations conducted by John Marshall, Ernest Mackay, and others for the Archaeological Survey of India. Examples are currently housed in the British Museum, the Musée Guimet in Paris, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

For example, the British Museum has a terracotta female figurine (BM 1939,0619.207) from Harappa that is characterized in the catalogue as a "fertility figure" with minimal context for its ritual role (British Museum, n.d.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art also has terracotta female figurines from the Indus Valley, some from Baluchistan, that are characterized solely in terms of physical form and adornment, with little regard for their religious setting (Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). Figurines like AO 21134 are categorized as "protohistoric" in the Musée Guimet, and there is little interpretive framework to suggest their importance in Indus ritual life.

Table 1. Female Statue

British Museum	Metropolitan Museum of Art
	
2500BC-2000BC (circa)	ca. 3000–2500 BCE

The language of these catalogues reflects the colonial epistemologies that first introduced these artifacts. As Lahiri (2000) has demonstrated, colonial archaeology in India frequently reduced artefacts to indicators of "primitive" phases of civilization, understanding material culture via evolutionary hierarchies that were consistent with European intellectual frameworks. In this approach, the Indus Mother Goddess was stripped of her religious significance and categorized as anthropological evidence of early fertility cults. This interpretation echoed the intellectual environment of the early twentieth century, in which female figurines from all over the ancient world were categorized as the "Great Mother" or "Earth Mother," and were frequently dismissed as symbols of reproductive biology rather than complex theological figures (Chakrabarti, 2003; Wright, 2010).

Feminist archaeologists have long questioned this reductionist perspective. Conkey and Gero (1991) challenged the androcentric premise that female figurines could exclusively signify reproduction, suggesting that such artifacts must be contextualized within larger social

and ceremonial practices. Meskell (1995) claimed that figurines should be interpreted as polyvalent artifacts that reflect social identity, spirituality, and cosmological meaning, rather than being limited to reproduction. Sharri R. Clark's (2003) analysis of the Harappa terracotta figurines argues that they carried complex social and ritual meanings rather than serving as simple "fertility idols," a view consistent with evidence for domestic/household ritual use of figurines in the Indus tradition (Kenoyer, 1998). These ideas disrupt the long-held colonial conception of the Indus Mother Goddess as a "primitive fertility idol" and restore her as a symbol of religious and social authority.

The transfer of Indus figures to foreign museums must be viewed as an act of epistemic violence. According to Smith (1999), colonial institutions took material objects while simultaneously imposing new epistemologies that repressed indigenous understandings of those objects. In the instance of the Mother Goddess, her religious significance in Indus houses was erased and replaced with tales emphasizing her primitiveness and inferiority to the "great" masculine figures celebrated by colonial academia, such as the Priest-King. This hierarchy is obvious in museum exhibition strategies: whereas the British Museum allocates extensive interpretive space to iconic male objects, figurines of the Mother Goddess are relegated to drawers, storerooms, or the borders of galleries, where they are briefly discussed.

The continuous use of colonial framings in museum catalogues demonstrates how deeply rooted these interpretive traditions are. Even in recent decades, descriptions frequently recycle early rhetoric that characterizes the figurines as "female fertility idols," failing to acknowledge feminist and South Asian archaeology discussions that advocate for more nuanced readings (Clark, 2003; Wright, 2010). This gap exemplifies what Mignolo (2009) refers to as the coloniality of knowledge, the long-lasting influence of colonial epistemologies on how non-Western heritage is interpreted.

Reinterpreting the Indus Mother Goddess from a decolonial feminist perspective necessitates both a critique of colonial frameworks and an engagement with alternative epistemologies. Rather of being reduced to biological fertility symbols, these figurines might be seen as expressions of the divine feminine, symbolizing protection, continuity, and social identity. Their prevalence in family situations shows that they played an important role in Indus religious life, mediating between the domestic and cosmological spheres (Kenoyer, 1998; Clark, 2003). Recognizing this calls into question the colonial narrative of elevating male divinities and colossal objects while rejecting female religious figures as primitive.

Recognizing the Mother Goddess as a religious figure encourages museums to reconsider their interpretive practices. Instead of defining these artifacts exclusively in anthropological terms, institutions may place them within larger debates of the sacred feminine in South Asian traditions, connecting them to current goddess worship activities in the subcontinent. According to Pels (1997), museums are political venues that can reproduce colonial structures or stimulate critical thought. Museums can help to shape a more inclusive and decolonial narrative of South Asian religion by redefining the Indus Mother Goddess.

The Indus Mother Goddess figures, which are scattered throughout European museums, demonstrate how colonial and patriarchal epistemologies have influenced the perception of South Asian history. Excavated under colonial supervision, separated from their settings, and reframed in Eurocentric terms, they have long been referred to as fertility

idols rather than complex religious symbols. Feminist archaeology and decolonial theory offer means for critiquing this heritage, reclaiming figurines as symbols of feminine power, domestic ritual, and cosmological significance. Their reinterpretation not only restores balance to our understanding of Indus religious life, but it also calls museums to confront the colonial prejudices that exist in their collections.

Gandhara Hariti in Foreign Museums

The goddess Hariti holds a unique position in Gandhara's religious and artistic traditions. Hariti, who first appeared in Buddhist cosmology, had a remarkable transformation: she was once feared as a demoniac who preyed on infants, but she was gradually assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon as a maternal figure who safeguarded children, fostered fertility, and represented abundance. This change exemplifies the flexibility of religious symbols in ancient South Asia, when local cults were integrated into larger theological systems. Hariti's iconography often depicts her seated in regal posture, surrounded by one or more children, and holding fruits or flowers, which represent fertility and prosperity (Foucher, 1905-1922; Peri 1917). The frequency of Hariti figures in Gandharan monastic contexts emphasizes her importance as a protector deity who bridged the gap between lay communities and the monastic realm. Despite her prominence in local Buddhist rituals, colonial excavation and museumization of Gandharan art reframed Hariti's function, marginalizing her and reinforcing patriarchal and Eurocentric interpretation hierarchies.

Colonial investigation of Gandhara began in earnest in the nineteenth century, with men like Charles Masson, Alexander Cunningham, and, subsequently, John Marshall. Their accounts emphasized the Buddha and Bodhisattva statues, which were viewed as proof of Gandhara's links to Greco-Roman art traditions (Marshall 1951). In this context, Hariti statues, despite being often unearthed in locations such as Taxila and Peshawar, were regarded as secondary. Alfred Foucher (1905-1922), whose groundbreaking study on Greco-Buddhist art influenced early Gandhara studies, saw Hariti as a peripheral, legendary figure rather than a major divinity. This interpretive hierarchy reflected colonial priorities: colossal male gods aligned with European classicism, while female divinities were demoted to supporting functions.

The distribution of Gandharan objects during the colonial period reinforced these biases. Hariti sculptures and reliefs were transferred to Europe and included to significant institutions' collections. The British Museum houses a schist sculpture of Hariti with children (BM 1886,0611.1), which was catalogued in Zwalf's official study of Gandhara artifacts (Zwalf, 1996). The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a Gandharan roundel of Hariti and her spouse Pañcika (Met 1981.460.2), representing her role as both mother guardian and companion in Buddhist cosmology (Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford houses a remarkable relief of Hariti with children (EA1962.42) discovered in Taxila, highlighting her importance in monastic complexes (Ashmolean Museum, n.d.).

However, in these museum contexts, Hariti is frequently overlooked in terms of exhibition and explanation. Catalogue entries typically refer to her as a "mythological companion" or "fertility goddess" rather than a protector with major religious authority. This

phrase reflects colonial-era scholarship that devalued female divinities by lumping them into the category of fertility symbols, depriving them of their theological richness (Huntington, 1985). In contrast, monumental Buddha pictures were described as having both artistic refinement and broad philosophical importance. The gap reflects not only colonial epistemologies, but also deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes that positioned male figures as the primary bearers of religious significance, while relegating women and goddesses to the margins.

Table 2. Relief of Hariti with children

Ashmolean Museum

AD 100-400

Feminist study has challenged these hierarchies by recasting female figures in South Asian art as complex religious icons rather than ornamental or secondary elements. Susan Huntington (1985) underlined those female deities in Indian art frequently played major roles in religious narratives, despite their constant underrepresentation in academic discourse. According to this interpretation, Hariti's maternal imagery symbolizes her role as a community guardian, reflecting compassion, abundance, and divine authority, rather than just representing reproduction. Her presence in monastic shrines suggests that she played an important role in Buddhist practitioners' religious lives, acting as a liaison between monastic institutions and lay worshippers.

Decolonial theory sheds light on the mechanisms that led to Hariti's marginalization in scholarships and museums. According to Neha (2010), colonial archaeology reconstructed South Asian antiquities into Eurocentric frames, emphasizing classical linkages while

downplaying local cults and deities. Walter Mignolo's (2009) appeal for "epistemic disobedience" rings true here: recovering Hariti as a prominent religious figure necessitates fighting the colonial epistemologies that classed her as a lesser goddess. Smith (2006) research on Buddhist monastic practices provides more context, demonstrating that local deities such as Hariti were not incidental but deliberately interwoven into monastery ritual economies. These findings show that her marginalization in museums is due to epistemic violence perpetrated by colonial and patriarchal structures, rather than her actual importance in Gandharan Buddhism.

The problem therefore becomes how to rethink Hariti in modern study and museum practice. Recent curatorial techniques suggest some possibilities. Exhibitions like The Crossroads of Asia (Errington & Cribb, 1992) aimed to present Gandharan art in all its regional and cultural complexities, highlighting figures like Hariti as active participants in Buddhist visual culture. Scholars have begun to define Hariti not only as a maternal figure, but also as a point of negotiation between local cults and Buddhist institutions, highlighting her theological and social relevance (Peri, 1917). These techniques challenge the colonial and patriarchal narratives that have marginalized Hariti by locating her within both local traditions and larger Buddhist frameworks.

The reworking of Hariti through feminist and decolonial lenses is more than just an academic exercise; it has ramifications for museums' interactions with their public. Presenting Hariti as a protector and mother deity undermines long-held display hierarchies that favor gigantic Buddhas above female divinities. It also contributes to larger attempts to decolonize museums by recognizing the biases inherent in their collections and interpretive techniques. According to Pels (1997), museums can either reproduce or fight colonial power, depending on how objects are contextualized. Reinterpreting Hariti is epistemic disobedience, regaining her agency and reinstating her prominence in Gandharan religion.

Hariti's appearance in foreign museums exemplifies the complex interplay of colonial extraction, patriarchal marginalization, and epistemic violence. Excavated from Buddhist monastery contexts where she was revered as a protector, she was classed by colonial academics as a minor fertility figure and placed in European museums as a decorative companion to more prominent male statues. Nonetheless, feminist and decolonial study portray her as a multidimensional deity whose imagery represents community, compassion, and maternal authority. Reclaiming Hariti's significance is critical not just for gaining a better knowledge of Gandharan religion, but also for opposing the colonial and patriarchal norms that still govern museum practice today.

Comparative Reflections

The Indus Mother Goddess and the Gandhara goddess Hariti, despite being separated by more than a millennium and rooted in diverse cultural and theological traditions, show significant similarities in their functions and colonial afterlives. The Indus figurines formed in domestic situations, signifying feminine power at the home level, whereas Hariti grew into a monastery guardian, embodying maternal care at the intersection of lay communities and Buddhist institutions. When taken together, they show how the holy feminine remains vital to South Asian religious traditions. However, colonial and patriarchal paradigms devalued

both, recasting them as ancillary to "serious" religious activity. The comparison of these two case studies not only illustrates the similarities and differences in the roles of female divinities but also reveals how coloniality and gender interact to shape the global perception of South Asian heritage.

The Indus Mother Goddess was central to family religion. Small clay figurines were common in Harappan villages, demonstrating that they were more than just decorative artifacts; they were integral to societies' daily spiritual lives. Scholars have underlined that these figures were most likely associated with fertility, protection, and continuity rituals, and that they played an active role in household spirituality. In contrast, Hariti was mostly associated with monastic Buddhism in Gandhara. Her metamorphosis from child-snatching demoness to protective mother goddess exemplifies the adaptability of Buddhist traditions, which frequently incorporated local cults into broader religious cosmologies (Péri, 1917; DeCaroli, 2004). In this context, Hariti's maternal imagery emphasized the monastery's protective duty while also representing the incorporation of local lay concerns, fertility, health, and children's well-being into the monastic sphere.

Despite their contrasts in stature and context, the two figures represent the divine feminine as a source of both protection and reproduction. Both demonstrate the extent to which South Asian communities valued divine representations of motherhood and maternal power as essential to religious practice. However, in colonial interpretations, these functions were continuously reduced. Colonial archaeologists interpreted the Indus figurines as rudimentary fertility idols, representing an unsophisticated period of religious development. European scholarship portrayed Hariti as a mythological supporting character in the grand story of Greco-Buddhist art. In both situations, the androcentric prism of colonial academia favored male figures whether the Priest-King or gigantic Buddhas while pushing female divinities to the fringes.

Museum activities supported this gender hierarchy. Catalogue descriptions at institutions such as the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art refer to the Mother Goddess figurines as "fertility figures," with the religious and cultural importance hidden by primitivism's anthropological jargon. Even when shown in reliefs or roundels, Hariti is frequently identified as a "companion figure" to male divinities rather than a goddess in her own right. This gap indicates how colonial epistemologies influenced both scholarship and curation, resulting in a warped picture of South Asian religion in which the sacred feminine was routinely trivialized.

A comparison interpretation of the two case studies reveals the greater methodological challenges of researching female divinities in South Asian archaeology. Archaeological interpretation has generally favored colossal constructions and male images, while ignoring smaller-scale and domestic artifacts that represent ordinary religion. This prejudice is obvious in the handling of both the Indus figurines and the Hariti, whose significance was veiled not by a lack of archaeological data, but by interpretive frameworks that undervalued their contributions. A feminist and decolonial approach necessitate not only examining these objects but also reconsidering the hierarchies of evidence and value that drive archaeological practice itself.

Bringing the Indus Mother Goddess and Hariti into discourse allows for a more comprehensive knowledge of South Asian religious traditions. Both personalities demonstrate that the divine feminine was not marginal, but rather fundamental, shaping spiritual life from household settings to monastic institutions. Their analysis indicates that the reduction of female divinities to reproductive symbols or secondary mythical characters is a result of colonial and patriarchal knowledge systems, not inherent in the artefacts. Recognizing this allows for more inclusive museum practices and interpretive tactics that emphasize the agency and complexity of female divinities.

Finally, the comparative analysis of the Indus Mother Goddess and Hariti demonstrates how colonialism and patriarchy influenced the global reception of South Asian religion by marginalizing the holy feminine. Despite their contrasts in context, one anchored in domestic ritual and the other in Buddhist monasticism, both represent mother power, fertility, and protection. Both were also relocated to foreign museums, where their meanings were reframed through Eurocentric and androcentric perspectives. Comparing them reveals not only a continuity of feminine divinity across South Asian history, but also the colonial dynamics that continue to influence their interpretation.

Conclusion

The study of the Indus Mother Goddess and the Gandhara goddess Hariti indicates that female divinities have historically played an important role in South Asian religious life, but their significance has been systematically degraded by colonial and patriarchal interpretations. This essay has used a comparative analysis to demonstrate how these personalities, despite being separated by large historical and cultural settings, have been subjected to comparable processes of marginalization. Colonial archaeologists and museum catalogues demoted the Indus Mother Goddess figurines, which were discovered in residential settings and represented family spirituality, to the rank of primordial fertility symbols. Hariti, a powerful maternal guardian in Buddhist cosmology, was reframed in European collections as a supporting character rather than a divinity in her own right. These interpretive maneuvers reflect not only colonial epistemic frameworks, but also patriarchal beliefs that have historically undervalued the sacred feminine in study and curation.

These findings are significant because they contribute to a better understanding of how colonialism influenced the global reception of South Asian religious traditions. The colonial encounter involved not only the removal of artifacts from their original surroundings, but also the imposition of interpretive frameworks that altered their meaning. Colonial academia constructed a hierarchy by elevating male figures like the Priest-King or massive Buddhas, dismissing feminine divinities as biologically reductive or mythologically subordinate. This order was replicated in museum exhibits, where the Mother Goddess figures and Hariti sculptures were frequently portrayed in superficial terms, shorn of their spiritual significance. Such behaviors not only misrepresented the past but also helped to foster views of South Asian religion as primitive, derivative, or incomplete.

A decolonial feminist perspective challenges these narratives by reclaiming the voices and roles of female divinities in religious practice. Rather of being viewed as static objects of fertility, the Indus figurines might be interpreted as symbols of household ritual, community

identity, and cosmological balance. Hariti, too, might be identified as a deity whose transformation from demoness to guardian exemplifies the adaptability and inclusion of Buddhist traditions. These reinterpretations are not speculative embellishments but rather based on a comprehensive examination of archeological evidence, textual traditions, and cultural context. By emphasizing female divinities, feminist research advocates for a more inclusive view of the past that takes into consideration the complete range of religious experience.

The consequences of this work go beyond academic archaeology. Museums, as institutions that bridge the gap between the past and the present, play an important role in shaping perspectives of global faiths and heritage. To continue presenting the Indus Mother Goddess as a fertility idol or Hariti as a legendary companion is to perpetuate old colonial stereotypes. Instead, museums might adopt curatorial practices that acknowledge their collections' prejudices while repositioning these individuals as vital to South Asian spirituality. This necessitates not only updating catalogue entries but also revamping shows to emphasize the agency of female deities. Displays could, for example, place the Mother Goddess figurines in the context of home ritual practices, or show Hariti with textual sources and comparable instances that highlight her importance as a protector and mother figure. Such approaches would be consistent with larger changes in museum practice that seek to decolonize collections and provide more inclusive narratives (Karp, 2012).

The contrast between the Mother Goddess and Hariti emphasizes the significance of multidisciplinary research in heritage studies. Archaeology, art history, and religious studies cannot adequately express the significance of these figures on their own. A comprehensive approach that includes material evidence, textual analysis, feminist theory, and decolonial critique enable richer interpretations that challenge the silences imposed by colonial knowledge systems. Future research might expand on this basis by looking at other female divinities in South Asia, such as Durga, Tara, and local village goddesses, to trace the continuities and transformations of the holy feminine. Such research has the potential to transform our understanding of South Asian religion while also contributing to worldwide discussions regarding the role of gender in shaping religious traditions.

Furthermore, these case studies encourage consideration on the ethics of collecting and displaying cultural material. The relocation of the Mother Goddess figures and Hariti sculptures to Western museums involves issues of ownership, repatriation, and epistemic justice. While the physical return of these things is unlikely in many circumstances, joint scholarship with South Asian cultures can help to re-center their intellectual and cultural significance. Decolonial praxis necessitates not only critique, but also the development of new frameworks that empower local voices and challenge Western institutions' dominance (Simpson, 2009). Collaborating with descendant groups, museums and scholars may ensure that the tales recounted about these artifacts reflect the viewpoints of those most related to their traditions.

Finally, the comparative study of the Indus Mother Goddess and Hariti requires a rethinking of how we approach the past. It reminds us that religious traditions are not static, but rather dynamic, formed by the interactions of communities, symbols, and rituals across time. It also demonstrates that the categories we use to explain the past, fertility idols,

mythological companions, and primal cult are the result of historical power dynamics that can and must be challenged. Using feminist and decolonial views, we may begin to deconstruct these categories and recover more inclusive narratives that restore the agency of female divinities.

This conclusion confirms that the study of religion and decolonization must continue to pay attention to the intersections of gender, power, and legacy. The Mother Goddess and Hariti demonstrate the holy feminine's survival in South Asian religious traditions, even though their meanings have been clouded by colonial and patriarchal structures. Recognizing their relevance not only corrects the historical record but also calls into question the knowledge frameworks that continue to define our understanding of history. Such undertaking is both intellectual and ethical, forcing us to address colonial legacies while also envisioning new ways to engage with cultural heritage. In doing so, we get closer to a vision of archaeology and museum practice that values the diversity of religious experience and elevates voices that have too often been ignored.

Bibliography

Ashmolean Museum. (n.d.). *Relief Plaque Depicting the Goddess Hariti* (EA1962.42). Ashmolean Museum Collections Online. https://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/4/6739/6746/11144

British Museum. (n.d.). *Fragmentary Terracotta Figure of a Female (Perhaps a Pregnant Woman)* (Museum no. 1939,0619.207). British Museum Collection Online. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1939-0619-207

Chakrabarti, D. K. (2003). *Archaeology in the Third World: A history of Indian Archaeology Since 1947*. D.K. Printworld.

Clark, S. R. (2003). Representing the Indus Body: Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and the Anthropomorphic Terracotta Figurines from Harappa. *Asian Perspectives, 42*(2), 304–328.

Conkey, M., & Gero, J. (1991). Programme to Practice: Gender and Feminism in Archaeology. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 20*, 411–437.

DeCaroli, R. (2004). *Haunting the Buddha: Indian popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.

Errington, E. (2017). *The Charles Masson Archive: British Library and British Museum Studies in Archaeology, 8*. British Museum.

Errington, E., & Cribb, J. (1992). *The Crossroads of Asia: Transformation in Image and Symbol in the art of Ancient Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Ancient India and Iran Trust.

Foucher, A. (1905–1922). *L'art Gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra* (Vols. 1–3). Imprimerie Nationale.

Gupta, N. (2010). Colonial archaeology in South Asia: The Legacy of Sir Mortimer Wheeler. *European Journal of Archaeology, 13*(1), 135–137. https://doi.org/10.1179/eja.2010.13.1.135

Huntington, S. L. (1985). *The art of ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. Weatherhill.

Karp, I. (2012). *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*. Smithsonian Institution Press.

Kenoyer, J. M. (1998). *Ancient cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*. Oxford University Press.

Lahiri, N. (2000). Archaeology and identity in Colonial India. *Antiquity, 74*, 687–692.

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia, 25*(4), 742–759. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x
Mackay, E. J. H. (1938). *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*. Government of India Press.
Marshall, J. (1931). *Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization* (Vols. 1–3). Arthur Probsthain.
Marshall, J. (1951). *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried out at Taxila*. Cambridge University Press.
Meskell, L. (1995). Goddesses, Gimbutas, and "New Age" archaeology. *Antiquity, 69*(262), 74–86. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00064310
Metropolitan Museum of Art. (n.d.). *Seated Mother Goddess*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/61085
Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-colonial freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society, 26*(7–8), 159–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275
Pels, P. (1997). The Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History, and the Emergence of Western Governmentality. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 26*, 163–183.
Péri, N. (1917). Hârîtî, la Mère-de-démons. *Bulletin de L'École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 17*, 1–102.
Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South, 1*(3), 533–580.
Simpson, M. (2009). Museums and Restorative Justice: Heritage, Repatriation and Cultural Education. *Museum International, 61*(1–2), 121–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0033.2009.01669.x
Smith, F. M. (2006). Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India—By Gregory Schopen. *Religious Studies Review, 32*(1), 65. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-0922.2006.00047_1.x
Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books.
Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
Vidale, M. (2000). *The Archaeology of Indus Crafts: Indus Craftspeople and Why We Study Them*. IsIAO.
Wright, R. P. (2010). *The Ancient Indus: Urbanism, Economy, and Society*. Cambridge University Press.
Zwalf, W. (1996). *A Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum* (Vols. 1–2). British Museum Press.