

# *Khwaja Sira* Activism

## *The Politics of Gender Ambiguity in Pakistan*

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**Abstract** This essay examines an instance of media activism by members of a Karachi-based organization run by and for nonnormatively gendered people who are known as *khwaja siras*. By providing both ethnographic analysis and a genderqueer feminist reading of the group's strategies for resisting categorization and surveillance through practices of gender ambiguity, this essay argues for the potential of *khwaja sira* politics to produce radical subjectivity.

**Keywords** *khwaja sira*, *hijra*, activism, ambiguity, resistance, genderqueer feminism, Pakistan

On a hot October Karachi evening in 2011, Payal quickly locked the office door while Shazia and I descended the three flights of stairs to the ground floor. As we exited the building through the rusty metal gate, we passed the exterior wall on which Payal had recently had one of her *chelas* (students) paint the name of their organization in a bold shade of red: Gender Solidarity Society (GSS).<sup>1</sup> Soon the three of us were comfortably seated in the shuttle sent by Wave TV, en route to the station's studio, where the activists I was accompanying had been invited to participate in a talk show. GSS had had a rather busy week of television and radio interviewing, which formed an important component of the organization's media strategy, aimed at promoting a positive public image of *khwaja siras* (a category of gender-ambiguous people). In this essay, I examine GSS's appearance on Wave TV to argue that *khwaja sira* activists practiced gender ambiguity as a form of resistance to categorization and surveillance by society and the state. I discuss the potential feminist dimensions of GSS's approach and offer a genderqueer feminist reading to suggest how *khwaja sira* politics may produce radical subjectivities.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Khwaja Siras*, Past and Present**

The term *khwaja sira* is rooted in the medieval period of South Asian history, when it served as a title for the chief eunuch of the Mughal court (Manucci 1906: 350). Castrated male eunuchs served as harem guards, army generals, and imperial

advisors, and they held many powerful administrative positions (Reddy 2005: 22). The term *khwaja sira* regained currency in the first decade of the twenty-first century when gender-ambiguous people, who differed from their medieval counterparts with respect to sex, gender, and sexuality, appropriated the appellation as an identity label to replace the pejorative term *hijra*. Despite the recent mainstreaming of the royal epithet *khwaja sira*, *hijra* nevertheless remains widely in use within the social networks of gender-ambiguous people.

In the contemporary period, *khwaja sira* serves as an umbrella term consisting of several overlapping sex and gender subcategories that, according to my research consultants, may include individuals with congenital genital irregularities (*khunsa*), feminine males who situationally cross-dress (*zennana*), and *zennanas* who excise their male genitalia and assume a more permanent feminine presentation (*hijra*). *Zennanas* and *hijras* alike consider themselves to have been endowed with a feminine soul since birth. They understand this soul not only to have driven them to be feminine in appearance and gender role but also to have shaped their sexual preference for men. *Khwaja siras* have a centuries-old system of social organization premised on the *guru-chela* (master-disciple) relationship through which gender-ambiguous people ritually forge alliances with one another. Most come from lower-class backgrounds, typically receive little or no formal education, and earn a living through singing and dancing, begging, and sex work.

Societal perceptions of *khwaja siras* both diverged from and overlapped with the structuring of identities within the social networks of gender-ambiguous people. Alongside the dominant belief that *khwaja siras* were physically inter-sexed was a widespread suspicion that they might also be considered biologically male individuals who were physically emasculated, innately feminine, gender dysphoric, and same-sex desiring. These varying understandings of *khwaja sira* not only were shaped by societal differences (e.g., disparities in class, ethnicity, religious belief, personal experience) but were also interlayered by a sense of uncertainty or ignorance about the corporeality and sexuality of gender-variant people, the mere presence of whom often evokes a sense of curiosity, anxiety, and confusion in the wider society.

Between 2009 and 2012, the Pakistani Supreme Court granted a number of rights and privileges to *khwaja siras* in a series of rulings, recognizing *khwaja sira* as a distinct sex/gender in addition to male and female.<sup>3</sup> Registrants were given the choice of entering one of three groupings for their national identity cards: male (*khwaja sira*), female (*khwaja sira*), and *khunsa-e-mushkil* (which translates roughly as a person who is born with indeterminable genitalia). Although the court did not clearly define the meaning of these official subclasses, it gave *khwaja siras* the right to self-determination in selecting their identity category of choice. In their public performances, *khwaja sira* activists availed themselves of, and

further problematized, the sociocultural and legal uncertainties surrounding their bodies and sexuality.

### Performing Ambiguity

Upon our arrival at the Wave TV studio, we were escorted to the hair and makeup department where two professional beauticians made Payal and Shazia camera-ready. After a brief conference with the show's host, a fashionably suited man in his early thirties, Payal and Shazia entrusted me with their handbags and strode onto the studio set. Activists Noor Vicky and Banno Ali joined the program remotely from Islamabad and Lahore, respectively, while I observed the live broadcast from behind the cameras.

Following a set of generic introductory remarks about *khwaja siras*, the host welcomed his guests and immediately began his questioning. He traced the familiar line of inquiry I had come to associate with televised *khwaja sira* interviews. In the excerpts below, I document the host's interrogation of two distinct yet imbricated areas of public anxiety concerning *khwaja sira* sexuality and corporeality. In the first extract, the activists confront the recurrent social curiosity pertaining to the sexual preferences of gender-ambiguous people. Noteworthy here is the proficient manner in which the activists confound the host by speaking in circles about the erotic desires of *khwaja siras*, thereby sustaining ambiguity about their romantic and sexual interests.

HOST: So who are *khwaja siras* attracted to more? Men or women?

(Noor laughs nervously)

PAYAL: See, we like whoever treats us nicely, whether they are men or women.

HOST: But we were talking about the feelings of *khwaja siras*...

PAYAL: We feel for both men and women. It depends on how they treat us. . . . If there is a man who likes us . . . and if he's a good friend of ours . . . then what's wrong with that?

NOOR: Loving is not a crime.

HOST: But does this love happen with men or with women?

NOOR: Our love is for men, for women, for everyone.

HOST: This is a very confusing situation. Ms. Banno, what are your thoughts?

BANNO: Obviously, we . . . too have a heart . . . so we too like someone or another . . . whether it's our mother, our father or some friend.

The host carefully articulated his query regarding a taboo subject by using non-sexual, euphemistic language. His inability to explicitly enunciate his questions on television enabled the activists to deploy deflective patterns of speech to frustrate his line of questioning. Throughout the conversation, statements about *khwaja sira* sexual object choice were safely couched in the idiom of “love” and “feelings,” the polyvalence of which allowed the activist leaders to digress about loving relationships between parents and children, siblings, and friends. Despite being from different parts of the country and lacking a formal alliance, the activist leaders were unified in their use of verbal ambiguity to resist invasive inquiry. Their shared strategy was not so much indicative of a loose-knit coalition among activists but rather is illustrative of similarities in the subjective experiences of gender-ambiguous people from diverse Pakistani contexts.

Following this dramatic and somewhat amusing exchange, the host, now visibly frustrated, embarked on another line of questioning. His focus shifted from sexual proclivities and practices to the physical embodiments of *khwaja siras*. In the brief dialogue below, Payal responds to the host’s query about somatic alterities among *khwaja siras* by delivering a convoluted and partial explanation of the state-sanctioned *khwaja sira* identity categories.

HOST: Can you discreetly explain to me the difference between male *khwaja sira*, female *khwaja sira*, and *khunsa khwaja sira*?

PAYAL: See, our relationship is with our soul. Often you hear that there was a girl but she used to . . . behave like a boy. And then later on when they did her medical test, they discovered that she was a boy from within. We have a similar condition. So *khwaja siras* will select the box [for their ID cards] that applies to them. But we have been given several options since we are neither complete men nor complete women.

Payal’s intentionally obscure response about *khwaja sira* anatomies, though partially attributable to the host’s request for her to be discreet, intended to evoke multiple interpretations among diverse viewers. She begins by describing *khwaja siras* as individuals who possess a soul that influences their gender performance. She then immediately offers a seemingly contradictory explanation by suggesting that the state of being a *khwaja sira* was comparable to medically verifiable sex/gender conditions. What remains unclear in her next polysemous statement, “she was a boy from within,” is whether Payal was commenting on gender, genital, or hormonal ambiguities. Importantly, at no point does she explicitly describe the physiological characteristics of *khwaja siras*. Through her carefully crafted utterances, Payal successfully manages to perpetuate a veil of ambiguity surrounding the sex, gender, and sexuality of the groups she represents.

On our ride back to the GSS office from the studio, I asked Payal about her reluctance to answer some of the host's questions, to which she responded by referencing what Stephen Murray describes as the "common Islamic ethos of avoidance in acknowledging sex and sexualities" (1997: 14). She emphasized the impropriety of an open admission of one's sexual proclivities and practices by stating, "Pakistan is an Islamic country, and we cannot talk about these things on television." After a moment's pause, she added, "And why should we have to talk about our sex when ordinary men and women don't have to." On the one hand, Payal demonstrates her socially conditioned discomfort with discussing culturally licentious topics in a public forum. On the other hand, she expresses her principled stance against the injustice of singling out, interrogating, and coercing minorities to declare private details in a public forum when dominant groups are not subjected to the same standard of transparency.

### Reading Realities and Potentialities

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan caution that "we cannot think of sexual subjects as purely oppositional or resistant to dominant institutions" (2001: 670). Likewise, Evelyn Blackwood notes that Western queer scholars cannot "demand that all forms of queer sexuality adhere to the same strategies and representations of sexuality" (2010: 117), disregarding the historical and cultural specificities through which activism transpires in various geographical contexts. That the *khwaja sira* practice of perpetuating ambiguity does not conform to the overt strategies of resistance that are generally assumed and asserted within US queer and trans politics should not, however, disqualify it from being understood as a form of genderqueer activism.<sup>4</sup> As I have demonstrated, *khwaja sira* activist strategies of obfuscation are culturally informed gestures of resistance, which have both practical political value and theoretical significance.

This obfuscation transpires precisely at the intersection of an indigenous mode of seeking justice and equal rights with the widespread Islamic cultural practice of circumventing public disclosure of private sexuality. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Blackwood has suggested that there are pleasures and powers associated with normativity, just as there are social and material losses and rewards attached to nonnormativity (2010: 24). Situated between the poles of normativity and queerness, gender ambiguity offers a form of productive power over mainstream society by preserving the mysterious aura of *khwaja siras*.

How, if at all, might a *khwaja sira* politics of ambiguity parallel or advance queer feminist agendas? The activist work described herein was not consciously performed in the name of genderqueer feminism. In fact, given their lack of access to education and resources, few of the *khwaja siras* I worked with were familiar with feminist concepts, ideologies, and praxis, or even with the term *feminism* itself. And

yet their media advocacy conveys a feminist sensibility, exemplified by resistance to corporeal disciplining, sexual surveillance, biopolitical categorization, and heteronormalization. Importantly, this activism has the potential to inform genderqueer feminist politics in South Asia and beyond. Others may find the *khawaja sira* performance of ambiguity applicable to and operable within their own unique sociocultural and political circumstances. Although I do not suggest that *khawaja sira* activism is inevitably feminist, I assert that it resonates with genderqueer feminism precisely due to its potential for social and political transformation.

If the liberation of all nonnormatively gendered people is the end goal of genderqueer feminism, then empowerment may be sought in escaping the shackles of classification that bind people into fixed taxonomic categories. This approach aims to destabilize essentialist and binary assumptions about gender and sexuality that categorically thwart nonheteronormativities from taking shape. In sustaining ambiguity, *khawaja sira* activism may be understood as going beyond the articulation of multiple subject positions to abjuring categories altogether. By this logic, liberation rests in repositioning ambiguity from the margins to the center—that is, in celebrating it as a norm rather than an exception. This form of gender and sexuality activism, instead of demanding inclusion of nonnormative subjectivities into the nation’s fabric, aims to collapse all sense of knowable types by obdurately reveling in and championing ambiguity in defiance of being rendered socially and legally legible. This manner of ceaselessly queering the queer is reminiscent of Geeta Patel’s call to “hybridize” the center such that “queerness no longer sit[s] in for ‘otherness’” but becomes a process of unsettling the self, preventing it from becoming a static and stable category (1997: 134, 138). Here, *khawaja sira*, *genderqueer*, and *trans* signal a perpetual state of indistinctness beyond mere traversal, transformation, and transition. Hence, from a genderqueer feminist stance, the act of sustaining ambiguity may be interpreted as a radical politics of unbecoming.

In his study of queer and black self-making in Cuba, Jafari Allen describes the politics of his project as one that “insists on recording the real while also mining those spaces for moments, experiences, and roadmaps toward freedom” (2011: 3). Allen’s approach has informed my own supplementary reading of *khawaja sira* politics. In providing both an emic and genderqueer feminist reading of an activist practice, I have attempted to resolve the tension between ethnography and theory. In addition to demonstrating what the politics of ambiguity currently accomplishes for *khawaja siras*, I have used a genderqueer feminist perspective to reflect on how this technique may be further developed to create radical subjectivity. In presenting a subject position that is always in flux and never fully knowable, *khawaja sira* activists perform a mode of resistance characterized by functional efficacy, resonance with feminist and queer values, and radical transformative potential.

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### Notes

1. I have replaced the names of people and the organization with pseudonyms in order to prevent them from being identified with the activist strategies detailed in this essay. Revealing the name of the organization I discuss may negatively impact not only the credibility of its members but also the efficacy of their techniques. I have, however, made up a pseudonym (i.e., GSS) that evokes a likeness in meaning to the actual name of the organization, particularly its emphasis on the relationship between genders.
2. I employ the term *genderqueer* as opposed to *trans* or *transgender*, since the former encompasses a greater diversity of gender nonnormativities and is therefore more suitable for discussing non-Euro-US subjectivities, such as *khwaja sira*. Moreover, calling *khwaja sira*s “trans” may be seen as an imperialist imposition that misrepresents the experience of being a gender-nonnormative Pakistani.
3. I use *sex/gender* to indicate, as Gayle Rubin (1975) does, the link between bodies and gender attributes, particularly the lack of analytical distinction between the two categories in the Pakistani context.
4. Importantly, in their discussion of US trans politics, some theorists, such as Talia Bettcher, have endorsed “gender deception” as a “laudable tactic” while emphatically denying that “honesty is [always] the best policy” (2007: 60).

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