

Cartographies of Khwaja Siras: Psychological Perspectives in Building Trans-inclusive Workspaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the Pakistani television Urdu plays *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai (God is Mine Too)* and *Alif, Allah Aur Insan (Alpha, Allah and Man)* which map the transformative itineraries of transgender individuals from occupations and roles that are “likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading” to those offering “job satisfaction, engagement and opportunity for career advancement” (Simpson et al, 2012, p. 1). In order to create a greater public awareness about transgender individuals who, like other citizens, have equal rights to dignified jobs, the plays suggest a new way of doing gender through a process of sartorial transition. As we all know, the lack of transgender rights legislation and extreme limitations in employment have pushed *khwaja siras* in Pakistan to do jobs such as beggars or entertainers, which are mostly labelled as ‘dirty work’, *khwaja siras* subjectivities are largely regarded as morally tainted and are deemed disqualified from social acceptance. While rebutting the stigma associated with transgender work, the plays suggest a process of sartorial transition, from being dressed as females (*firqa*) to being dressed as males (*Khoktki*), as a means to avail opportunities of dignified work for *khwaja siras*. I would argue that instead of suggesting ways of dealing with vulnerabilities associated with gender nonconformity, the plays continue to project *khwaja sira* subjectivities as transphobic, unless they hide their trans-identities. Therefore, in both plays – in which, through different occupational settings, the boundaries between dignified and undignified work are negotiated – the idea of ‘dirty work’ and its related stigma is only hastily shown to be replaced by Trans’ desire to ‘be themselves’.

Keywords

Khwaja siras, transgenderism, coming out, sartorial transition, dirty work, workspaces; psychological stress

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Amid the global precariousness around the Covid-19 outbreak, when the whole world is forced to practise social distancing to curb the spread of the virus, mental health experts across the globe are warning about the increasing short- and long-term psychological problems associated with social isolation. However, for Pakistani Transgender Rights Activist Julie Khan, this pandemic simply brings back familiar feelings of isolation that the transgender community in Pakistan has continued to experience for decades, due to their already shrunken support systems. According to Khan, “We are already living in isolation. This [social isolation due to Covid-19] is not new for us ... Now, everyone should feel how we have felt over the years ... [for the people in Pakistan] this is an easy war to fight, as you only have to live in isolation”. For her, the real challenge is to survive in isolation if one has to live an isolated life, with a stigmatised identity, without family, friends, education and job. Transgender community is far more “worried about” livelihood; therefore, “the problems of the transgender community are far more than coronavirus” (TCM, n.p.). This brief heartfelt interview is not only emblematic of a searing portrayal of transgender life in Pakistan but also gestures towards the ways in which the corona crisis, more than health problems, is going to have a devastating impact on the earnings of the trans community due to the closure of markets as well as the cancellation of wedding ceremonies amidst the countrywide lockdown.¹ This nexus between social isolation and livelihood draws attention to work-related challenges for transgenders in Pakistan. In other

words, more than the current pandemic crisis in terms of health and safety, Khan is concerned about the legal recognition of trans lives and rights in Pakistan, one of the significant ways to improve economic prospects for trans community in Pakistan. Without recognition of these rights, transgender individuals will continue to experience socio-economic and political alienation and end up working as beggars, entertainers or sex workers.

On 7 March 2018, Pakistan’s Parliament passed a law “The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act” that not only allowed transgender citizens to register with government offices but also prohibited organizations, private business owners and companies from discriminating against transgender citizens in the workplace. Since fair opportunities to work is a fundamental aspect of human rights as well as a means to gain dignity and self-worth, this historic decision by Parliament on transgender-inclusive non-discrimination policies will indubitably metamorphose the lives of one of the most suppressed minorities of the country in many ways. Most importantly, it will increase the public understanding of gender non-conforming persons and related paranoid ideations, fostering an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance, which is precisely what the Pakistani TV Urdu plays *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai (God is Mine Too)*, aired on HUM TV (2016-17) and *Alif Allah Aur Insan (Alpha, Allah and Man)*ⁱⁱ aired on ARY Digital (2017-18) envisaged doing, a year before the Bill was presented. Indubitably, the plays rebut the perceived difference of transgender citizens in Pakistani society through the courageous journeys of the protagonists

Noor and Shammo in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and *Alif Allah Aur Insan*, respectively, to emphasize the respect and acceptance that *khawaja siras* deserve. Nevertheless, I argue that on both the plays, transgenders, unlike other citizens, are shown to have access to dignified jobs only after compromising their internal orientation or identity.

Existing scholarship on the marginalization and performativity of *khawaja siras* in the South Asia shows that the third gender of South Asia have continued to negotiate their subjectivities across various domains of everyday life (Pamment, 2019; Hossain, 2017; Mokhtar, 2020; Khan, 2016; Aziz and Azhar, 2019; Hall, 2005; Reddy, 2005). Drawing primarily on ethnographic fieldwork, many researchers have talked about a range of concepts and processes that have resulted in the lack of social mobility and subsequent social and economic inequality of *khawaja sira* community in the South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular (Khan, 2016; Ghani, 2018; Abdullah et al, 2012). As most of third gender individuals are expelled from their homes at a very early age, they hardly get formal education. Consequently, they have little or no opportunities to respectable work, which leads to a number of debates surrounding dignified and undignified forms of labour available for *khawaja siras*. Given the scope of this paper, I am not interested in reprising the hierarchy between dirty and dignified forms of labour (Bean, 1981; Mount, 2020; Dutta, 2012; Chigateri, 2007) as a lot has been said in relation to the acceptability of *khawaja sira*'s exploitative work as well as their lack of access to socially valorized employment opportunities.

My argument in this paper is fairly straightforward: if the plays, *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (aired on HUM TV (2016-17) and *Alif Allah Aur Insan* (aired on ARY Digital (2017-18) are to be seen as interventionist in raising awareness about *khawaja sira*'s right to dignified jobs, then why, in order for transgender people to be successful in society, they have to give up their gender identification by dressing as a male member of the society. There is no denying that people doing 'dirty work' (as it is labelled in Pakistan) also deserve respect and acceptance just as much as those who can move to more dignified forms of work, and there is no justification for degradation of such workers but opportunities to dignified work should not come with compromises made on the part of intersex individuals, as highlighted in the two plays I discuss. In the plays, *khawaja siras* are shown to have right to better work which can be achieved by sartorial transition from being dressed as females (*firqa*) to being dressed as males (*Khoktki*). The play emphasizes that in order to initiate the process of their integration within the society, *khawaja siras* may initially require sartorial transition in some work places to achieve immediate practical interests. I argue that such "compromises" in the form of sartorial choices result in long-term harmful effects on transgender individuals; to discount the importance of that choice is surely to question the agency of transgendered people in performing their gender identification.

Linking the right to work with the "dignity and centrality of each human being", Pope John Paul II (1980) said, "Work forms parts of our self-identity and adds to a feeling of dignity and accomplishment" (*Encyclical Letter*

n.p.). There is no denying that unemployment or even low-paying and unstable jobs accelerate the cycle of poverty and homelessness, but there is another significant dimension related to work and that is the stigma associated with undignified work that contributes to making workspaces hostile inadvertently. To properly address this issue, many theorists have talked about the intersection of job-related stigma and social acceptability,ⁱⁱⁱ which I argue is a matter of great concern in relation to intersex people in Pakistan. I find Ruth Simpson, Natasha Slutskaya, Patricia Lewis and Heather Hopfl's idea of dirty work and its relation to social identity, explored in their phenomenal book *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities*, useful in discussing work possibilities for *khawaja siras* within Pakistan. Any workplace-related research on *khawaja siras*^{iv} in Pakistan will reveal that *khawaja sira* workers are one of the most marginalized members of our society, with truncated or slower career development. In fact, they are often pushed towards jobs, labelled as 'dirty work', which "symbolises a contravention of [the] social order – a transgression of particular boundaries – triggering a desire to avoid or remove it and stigmatising those who are involved in it" (Simpson et al, 2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, it is important to note that, for decades, the absence of any legal gender recognition in Pakistan and extreme limitations in employment have posed manifold challenges for trans people and pushed *khawaja siras* towards dirty work, and most of them end up working as beggars or dancers. This harsh reality is pointed out in *Alif Allah Aur Insan*, in which one of the workers in the hair salon, where intersex protagonist Shami works, asks him:

تم یہاں کیسے آئے؟ تم لوگ تو ایسے ناچ گانے کو اپنا پیشہ بنا تے ہو

tum yahan kaisay aagaye? tum log to waisi ziyada tar naach ganay ko apna profession banatay ho

How did you manage to come here? People of your community generally adopt singing and dancing as their profession (Episode 5).

For this very reason, *khawaja siras* subjectivities have been regarded as morally tainted and thus disqualified from social acceptance. Against this backdrop, it would not be wrong to say that Pakistan's landmark legislation brings hope to the lives of this oppressed minority.

According to Chapter II point 3, entitled 'Recognition of Identity of Transgender Person', of the Bill,

Every Transgender Person, being a citizen of Pakistan, who has attained the age of eighteen years shall have the right to get himself or herself registered according to self-perceived gender identity with NADRA on the CNIC, CRC, Driving Licence and Passport in accordance with the provisions of the NADRA Ordinance, 2000 or any other relevant laws. (The Senate Bill 2018, point 3)

For me, the most significant part of the Bill is the right of every transgender to identify and register him/herself according to "self-perceived" gender identity. The hard truth is that, contrary to this, *khawaja siras* in Pakistan have largely performed their identities as female *khawaja siras* due to restricted work possibilities, as I have already mentioned. Due to pervasive barriers faced by intersex people, the primary

source of income for them in Pakistan has been begging, dancing and singing. And in a traditional country like Pakistan, exotic dancing is considered “a form of dirty work and that exotic dancers ‘do gender’ within socially constructed sex and stigmatised hierarchies” (Mavin and Grady 1999, p. 91). The idea of dignified or dirty work, for transgenders too, operates according to cultural codes that mark certain bodies as clean or unclean, depending upon practices that relate to a clean/ dirty divide. Building on Hughes’ (1958) theorization, Blake E. Ashforth and Glen E. Kreiner also categorize dirty work under three main headings, namely, physical taint, social taint and moral taint (1999, pp 413-34). As the very titles indicate, work associated with intersex individuals is largely defined in terms of social and moral taint as these are considered shameful, sinful or of a dubious nature. When I say that these are of a dubious nature, I mean to point to the fact that *khwaja siras* in Pakistan are judged on the basis of performance of their gender, in this case as exotic dancers, who can be conveniently stigmatized as doing dirty work without taking into consideration not only the heterogeneity of dancers, such as cultural performers versus exotic dancers but also the ways in which fair opportunities to a dignified work has been denied to them for decades.

This situation gestures towards an occupational stigma “that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of the [occupational] family” (Goffman 1997, p. 73). However, it is important to note that cultural performers at weddings and birth ceremonies in Pakistan are often invited by people to bless their children (keeping in view their spiritual connection with God), which ought to be differentiated from exotic dancers. But as Judith Butler notes, “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Butler, 1990, p. xv). If viewed from Butlerian lens, I would argue that unfortunately, based on their appearance or a peculiar stylization of the body, all *khwaja siras* are characterized as ‘dirty’ or undignified workers without acknowledging the fact that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler, 1990, p. xv). Defining performativity in terms of the metaphor of internality is therefore highly problematic and cannot be taken for granted. Gestures and desire inscribed on body’s surface due to repeated performance of acts epitomize culturally enforced performativity. People who hold stereotypes about *khwaja siras* by viewing the gendered stylization of body as internal feature or psyche, in fact, fail to understand how the materiality of trans body is constructed via cultural inscriptions. Skylar Davidson ascribes this lack of understanding to “the lack of interactional routines for people whose identity or expression transgresses the gender binary, most cisgender people lack interactional scripts with which to process these transgressors” (Davidson, 2006, p. 7). They are therefore positioned as undignified workers in society and are subject to abuse and humiliation which further complicates the prognosis for intersex people. *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and *Alif Allah Aur Insan* tend to rebut this culturally enforced

performativity of intersex people and work-associated stigma by probing the massive inequalities and behaviour patterns that inform the disadvantaged position that *khwaja siras* occupy in Pakistani social and work spaces. In so doing, the plays suggest a process of sartorial transition as I discuss.

In both *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and *Alif Allah Aur Insan*, the *khwaja sira* individuals are expected to dress as a male to find better opportunities to work; in so doing these plays can be seen to initiate the process of sartorial transition from female-to-male *khwaja sira* with or without disclosing their transgender status. Lal Zimman terms this transition phenomenon ‘coming out’, which is not simply a process of identifying with and living as the “gender opposite the one assigned to them at birth” but also emphasizes “the social nature of living as a woman or man” (Zimman 2009, pp. 55-58). Coming out as transgender is primarily and most importantly the declaration of a gender identity, rather than disclosing a transgender past, which “must necessarily be [an] ongoing [process] throughout a person’s lifetime” (Zimman 2009, pp.55-58). I posit a nexus between the idea of sartorial transition and the stigma associated with dirty work. As I have said earlier, in Pakistan, a male-dominated country, most *khwaja siras* self-identify themselves as females due to their work as dancers / performers/ beggars, the coming out process for *khwaja siras* is largely performance as a male. This is because enacting and signifying as a male is a much safer option for them as it tends to increase an interactional tendency, since men are treated with more respect and authority than women in most (office) jobs. This is accentuated in the drama *Alif Allah Aur Insan*, in which a *khwaja sira* ‘cultural dancer’ Shammo’s declaration of transition from female performativity to male advances his career prospects. As Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull argue, transitioning to the preferred gender role via coming out “is best conceptualized as an ongoing, socially embedded, skilled management of one’s gender identity” (Stacey 2019, p. 1). This is nowhere so evident as in Shammo’s character. Although the story of *Alif Allah Aur Insan* features five main characters, in this paper I will focus on the character of Shammo, an intersex person struggling to move from undignified work to a dignified job. In the Episode 1 of the play, we see that transgender cultural performers Shammo, Nargis and Firdous, are invited at a wedding ceremony to bless the relationship of bride and groom. Bride’s sister Nazneen, an arrogant daughter of a feudal lord, insults and dehumanizes this group of transgender performers, which makes Shammo conscious of her less-than-human status and she decides to leave this dirty work. As he says to Nargis and Firdous,

تم لوگ بے شک یہیں ذلت کی زندگی گزارو۔ میں تو محنت کرونگا اور عزت کماؤں گا۔

Tum log be shak yahin zillat ki zindagi guzaaro. mein to mehnat karunga aur izzat kamaon ga

You can live this life of degradation. I will work hard and earn respect in the society. (Episode 1)

Trained by birth as a cultural performer, Shammo takes her first dignified job as a hairdresser in a local barber’s shop and then later joins a salon. Working in a posh salon in urban Lahore as a hair stylist and a make-up artist, Shammo, later

called Shami, is shown to earn more respect and authority as compared to his previous work as a dancer or a hairdresser in a local barber's shop. Shammo's coming out as a skilled male hair stylist and make-up artist, and the transition from 'dirty' to dignified work boost his social interaction with mainstream society, which was denied to him for years because of his dancing job in a visibly non-conforming gender that has also had very limited potential for growth and development. When Shami decides to hide his feminine self from public scrutiny, his 'coming out' authenticates and legitimises his highly stigmatized identity even within a conservative society, without being construed as transphobic.

As I discussed earlier, for decades, due to the lack of transgender-related employment policies, gender-nonconforming people have encountered hostile and abusive reactions from people in everyday situations. Thus, nonbinary people in Pakistan have always found it difficult to fit into society, as well as into workplaces. However, if nonbinaries affiliate with a binary gender option (a phenomenon still uncommon in Pakistan), it might begin to open up employment possibilities for them. This is precisely what is suggested in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* through the transition of another intersex character, Babli, into Babban. *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* features two central intersex individuals, Noor and Babli, who are related to each other not only by their non-conforming genders but also through Noor's transient mobility to intersex communal spaces called '*hijron ka adda*'. After adopting Noor, Babli is shown to be emotionally attached to Noor and this marks her mobility from '*hijron ka adda*' to Noor's maternal home once Mahgul decides to bring Noor back and raise him as boy, after their expulsion from Noor's paternal home. Noor is disowned by his father, Zain, who, along with his mother, Arshi, is shown to be transphobic, which is depicted in the scene when Noor and Zain go to hospital to bring their child home. On seeing the child for the first time, when Mahgul expects Zain to hold his baby in his arms, he withdraws his hands as if Noor is dirt which will contaminate not only himself but also his family honour; Zain is also reminded by his mother Arshi that he must take into consideration his father's prestige and honour in society, and thus she categorically declares that there is no space for a *hijra* child in her home: As Arshi says to Mahgul:

یہ جو نحوست تم اس گھر میں لے کے آئی ہو، یہ کبھی یہاں نہیں رہیگی۔

yeh jo nahosat tum iss ghar mein le kar aayi ho, yeh kabhi yahan nahi rehigi

This inauspiciousness that you have brought to the house is never going to stay here. (Episode 4)

Informed by socially-constructed prejudices, Arshi and Zain's unsympathetic attitude towards Noor is emblematic of the legitimized denial of *khawaja siras*' right to inheritance, prestige and the paternal home for decades in Pakistani society, as Arshi warns Zain that society will not show any respect to him or the child. As a result of this uncritical endorsement of transphobic ideas and outright condemnation of trans lives, many intersex children, raised within *khawaja sira* communal spaces and homes (*hijron ka adda*), such as Shammo, Babli and her clan in the play, are forced to work as

either beggars or dancers. Mahgul's audacious step of going against the traditions of society and taking responsibility for Noor's upbringing as a single mother (since she is left with no option except to leave her husband's home) not only marks the beginning of a new life for intersex Noor but also for marginalized Babli through the opening of gender-restrictive spaces for *khawaja siras*; after relocating Noor from *hijron ka adda* to her mother's house, Mahgul offers Babli a job as a caretaker and cook. Despite the stigma attached to *hijraism*, Mahgul creates a small world in her home that eschews trans-oppression. This is quintessentially avowed by Babli when Zain comes to her *adda* to threaten her for letting Mahgul take the child with her. Zain abuses Babli by calling her worthless and Babli responds with pride:

کوئی اوقات نہیں ہے میری۔ تیری بیوی جو کرنے جا رہی ہے اسکے بعد ہوگی ہماری اوقات

koi auqaat nahi hai meri. teri biwi jo karne ja rahi hai uskay baad ho gi hamari auqaat.

I don't hold any standing! Our worth will surely depend on what your wife is going to unleash. (Episode 6)

This is exactly what happens with Babli. Mahi's decision helps Babli to 'come out' and live a more dignified life as compared to her previous 'dirty' one but this happens only when Babli is expected to make a compromise; she is expected to perform her identity as a male instead of a *khawaja sira*. Her journey that starts with working as a caretaker and a cook at domestic level ends on working as a head chef in restaurant owned by Mahgul's son Noor called '*Noor ka Dhabba*'. Nevertheless, it is equally important to understand that "coming out also involves the social nature of living as a woman or man" (Zimman 2009, pp. 57-58). As I explain below.

According to Zimman, coming out for intersex people who are visibly transgender does not merely involve verbal transition or declaration, since their "former gender role may be revealed by their stature, hairline, or voice" (Zimman 2009, p. 60). For Zimman, this socially-situated transition process refers to two phases of coming out: declaration and disclosure. While declaration refers to the initial claiming of a transgender identity, disclosure refers to sharing one's transgender history after transition" (Zimman 2009, p. 60). Extending this idea of coming out, Patricia Gagne, Richard Tewksbury and Deanna McGaughey propose that transition or crossing over may be permanent or temporary depending upon the availability of the 'only acceptable alternative':

While identities have been created for morphological men or women who wish to dress or live as 'the other' gender, the binary gender system demands that individuals confess alternative identities and learn to present themselves in ways that convince others that they are, in fact, members of the sex category suggested by their gender. (1997, 280)

Following Zimman's, as well as Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey's, theorization of coming out and crossing over, I will show that all three intersex characters, Babli, Shammo and Noor, were bound to perform their identities as male workers instead of female workers as this is 'the only acceptable alternative' for them in male-dominated Pakistani society. In *Alif Allah Aur Insaan*, when Shammo offers his services to lower-class clients at a local barber's shop, he is

expected to appear in men's *shalwar* and *kameez* to conform to societally expected gender role. Likewise, when he starts working in an urban elite-class parlour in the city of Lahore, he is expected to wear jeans, trousers, tea-shirts and earrings, which are markers of modern dressing style in Pakistani society. It would not be wrong to say that in a society like Pakistan, *khwaja sira* identitarian politics depends on the availability of choices governed by the dominant gender, i.e. the male gender. This predominantly male authority in cultural norms and the whole range of prevailing assumptions inform the construction of a performance. With the way Shami's success as a skilled worker is furthered by his masculine performativity, Babli, who initially serves as a female caretaker and cook at Mahgul's house, feels compelled to reframe her identity within a range of potential social options. Based on similar pressures to conform to masculine identity as 'the only acceptable alternative' in her given circumstances, Babli dresses as a male cook and caretaker. Babli's feminine performativity poses a challenge to the upbringing of Noor (also a *khwaja sira*) as a masculine member of society. In episode 8, we see that Savera, Mahgul's mother, warns Mahgul about the repercussions of her child being raised by a visibly transgender individual:

کیا نور کا بابلی کے ہاتھوں میں پالنا نور کے لیے اچھا انفلوئنس ہے؟ نور شاید وہ ناہن سکے جو تم چاہتی ہو۔

kya noor ka babli ke hathon mein palna noor ke liye acha influence hai? noor shayad woh na ban sakay jo tum chahti ho.

Do you think that Babli is a good influence for Noor? If Babli nurtures Noor, he might not become what you want him to be. (Episode 8)

Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey flag up this problem, "Those who start out challenging the dominant gender system by enacting gender in ways that are comfortable for themselves but disturbing to others often end up by redefining their identities in ways that conform to hegemonic belief systems and institutional demands" (1997, 479). This is why when Babli overhears the conversation between Savera and Mahgul, she realizes that she will have to conceal her transgenderism and be masculine at all times if she wants to remain Noor's caretaker. Living androgynously between genders, she is most likely to be ridiculed and stigmatized. Therefore, she aligns herself with a new potential identity, in her case a masculine identity. Given the pressures of a traditional heteronormative society, it is understandable why Babli decides to cross gender as 'male' gender category. In a heart-breaking scene, she cuts her hair, breaks her bangles and wipes off her makeup and dresses in men's *shalwar kameez*, she appears before everyone as "Babban Miyan" (Episode 9). It is important to understand that while Babli is shown to be extremely happy and comfortable with her role as a female caretaker, her female performativity is presented as disturbing for Mahgul and her mother from the perspective of Noor's career prospects, which forces Babli to perform her identity as Babban Miyan. However, this new identity and transition which gives meaning to his 'worthless' life, depends on performativity that "can fill voids of meaning but [subject] must do so as part of 'compulsory modes of identification'"

(Jo Bogaerts 2009, p. 407). After sartorial transition, Babban Miyan's identity is not shown to be wrapped in the language of transgenderism. He lives as male self because he becomes another person who is desirable. Babli's and Shammo's transition corroborates what Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey describe as "one's own aspirations for individual identity and ability to blend socially" (1997, p. 502). It is only social transitioning which helps Shammo and Babli evade the social stigma attached to gender non-conformity.

The most transformative moment foregrounded in the plays is a sense of community among the "vast majority of transgenderists that facilitated a desire to work with others and to contribute to the developmental processes of other community members" (1997, p. 502). Babli's sartorial transition is also an expression of her "keen ambition to contribute to the psychological, social, and physical development of other transgendered community members" (1997, p. 502), in this case for another transgender, Noor. I tend to agree with Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey that "[h]elping others transform appears to be an important final 'step' in the transformation process" (1997, p. 502). Interestingly, post-transition, all the three protagonists in both the plays are committed to serving oppressed transgender groups who remain below the radar no matter where they work. For example, Babli's transition as a male member aims at the transformation of Noor's status in society and we finally watch Noor establishing his name as one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the country, who wins the youngest businessman of the country award. Similarly, after establishing his name as a successful entrepreneur, Noor plans to open trans-friendly schools and shelter homes not only for intersex children but also for adults so as to make other trans community feel safe. In a meeting with his potential business partners, when his idea of opening schools and shelter homes for transgenders is flaunted as sheer idealism and a joke, he responds:

کل یہ (میکائل) میرا وسیلہ بنے گا۔ آج میں لوگوں کا وسیلہ بننا چاہتا ہوں

kal yeh (Mikael) mera waseela banay. aaj mein logon ka waseela bana chahta hon

Earlier he (Mikael) ensured my sustenance, now I want to extend this to other people. (Episode 18)

Indubitably, Noor's obsession with the welfare of transgender community is also informed by his desire to contribute to the developmental processes of his trans community members. Likewise, situating himself within the larger web of inequality, Shami too returns to his *khwaja sira* family with a larger conception of serving others. He not only supports his family financially but also begs them to quit the undignified work of dancing and singing.

Nevertheless, at this point it is important to discuss how social divisions in Pakistani society govern work choices for *khwaja siras*. Like Shami and Babban, a similar principle of socially-acceptable alternative crossing over can be seen to work in the life of an elite class intersex child, Noor. Irrespective of his class privilege, Noor has been raised by Mahgul as a male child instead of a female one. As Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey argue,

Expressions of gender that fall ‘outside’ the dominant gender system make social presentations of gender undecipherable. Frequently, those who fall outside or between the gender binary are encouraged to conform to the dominant system. Those who cannot or will not conform may be counseled to alter their bodies or encouraged to perfect a new gender presentation so that they may ‘pass’ as the ‘other sex’. (1997, p. 579)

Envisaging the dictates of the same dominant system, Mahi prefers to raise Noor as a male, which strengthens his career advancement. However, unlike Babli or Shammo, Noor by virtue of being born into an elite class family has had more business opportunities because Noor’s guardian, Mikael, is a multi-billionaire businessman and Mahgul is a top-notch journalist, who both live in a posh urban area of Lahore. In a country like Pakistan with complicated social divisions, class adds another layer to the hierarchal arrangement of dignified and undignified work. For children born into the elite class, the chances of getting involved in dirty work are comparatively fewer than those who are born into lower- or middle-class families. Arguably, “work involving dirt or defined as ‘dirty’ is often undertaken by those at the lower levels of the hierarchy, that is, those at the margins of society” (Simpson et al, 2012, p. 2). This is why, unlike Shammo with constrained earning opportunities, Noor is shown to have more rational alternatives. He does not have to struggle for dignified work as he was raised by Mikael and Mahgul (both mainstream privileged members of society) instead of Babli (at the margins of society) in *hijron ka adda*. From a very early age Mikael involves Noor in his business decisions, which provides Noor with an opportunity to receive entrepreneurial training denied to those on the margins. When Mikael offers Noor the chance to completely take over his business, Noor expresses his desire to set up a different business (though funded by Mikael). Therefore, Noor establishes his own restaurant called ‘*Noor Ka Dhabba*’, employing Babban Miyan as head chef, an alarming prospect for someone from the margins. Noor becomes so successful in his business that he opens world-wide franchises, which leads him to become an award-winning entrepreneur. In the case of Noor, dignified work “not only signifies the absence of proximity to dirt, but routinely offers intrinsic rewards such as job satisfaction, engagement and opportunity for career advancement” (Simpson et al, 2012, p.2.). Noor’s journey, on account of the social class he belongs to, seems far less difficult in comparison to Shami or Babban, who have far more complex and multilayered challenges to face. Overall, the desire of *khwaja siras* to place themselves in ‘male’ positions, irrespective of social divisions, is emblematic of the struggle to gain social respect and economic independence; in other words, it becomes a societal compulsion for trans individuals instead of a personal choice. For example, when Shammo leaves her guru Nargis’ house to find dignified work, Jamal, the barber, allows Shammo to work as a junior barber in his work space on condition that Shammo changes her feminine attire. Jamal asserts that this girly attire won’t do and asks her to come after getting a haircut to look more masculine. Similarly, Babli, having realised blatantly sexist behaviours of

the society, does not hesitate to come out as Babban Miyan. Both the characters successfully create their own desirable spaces within ‘binary gendered spaces’ on account of their ‘male’ positions.

The entire discussion leads to a few important questions: Does coming out and crossing over in a society like Pakistan mean negation of the (self-identified) transgender self? If this is not the case, then why are transgenders compelled to cross-dress in socially acceptable attire? While making a ‘declaration’ for a dignified life, why are transgenders not encouraged to disclose their past? In response to these questions, I argue that *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* although seems to have initiated the process of shifting attitudes towards intersex people, it does in certain ways questions the agency of *khwaja siras* by compelling them to make certain sartorial choices which deconstructs the emphatic statement the plays aims to make on behalf of all transgenders: the best thing that all transgenders can do is to be themselves, to present themselves in a way that they are comfortable with. This is illustrated in a convenient manner towards the end of the play through Noor’s speech on receiving the best entrepreneur award. I will go back to Zimman’s conceptualisation of the socially-situated transition process of coming out, namely, declaration and disclosure. While declaration, according to Zimman, is the initial claiming of a transgender identity (which none of the *khwaja sira* characters are shown to embrace in the plays), disclosure refers to sharing one’s transgender history after transition. I would argue that it is only this second phase of coming out that is courageously revealed by Noor when he publicly embraces his transgenderism without shame. We all know that given the marginalization and silencing of intersex people within public and work spaces, not every transgender person wishes to be openly transgender. Noor only towards the end of the play publicly declares not only the authenticity of his self-identified gender but also discloses the gender he was assigned at birth. In so doing, Noor shatters the myth of desirability and alternative identities that transgenders are expected to perform in order to present themselves in ways that convince others. By raising a pertinent question, ‘why is there no third-gender option on birth certificates or any other forms?’ (last episode), Noor rejects identitarian politics of manipulation and the concealment of *khwaja sira* subjectivities. While most transgenders avoid questions pertaining to their identities, Noor courageously answers ‘unmasked’ questions on behalf of all those who are othered by society. He discloses openly that he is neither male nor female. He makes a point: if Noor can be an achiever, why can other transgenders not be successful in life? Despite all the differences from gender-conforming persons, Noor asserts that trans people are also human beings and have the right to live and be happy. They are not born to sing and dance. If they are considered human beings, they can also contribute towards the betterment of society, giving the play a dramatic and positive ending.

However, despite Noor’s coming out which is superficially sympathetic, the new approach of doing gender in the plays that is somehow “success-oriented” is rather the unfortunate lived reality of many trans folks who are forced to

conform to avoid discrimination, marginalization, violence, or even death. Most importantly, one cannot deny the fact that without changing the idiom in which non-conforming individuals are perceived and resultant alternative gender identities are achieved, it is highly unlikely that the identities of non-conforming individuals can be normalized, without situating them back within a binary. As Marvia Malik, a transgender news anchor, says, "Society should start accepting transgenders for who they are" (2018, n.p.). Pakistan's historic 'The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018' has initiated this process of the legal recognition of trans lives and rights, which gestures towards the fact that these are also "bodies that matter" and carry distinct "social burdens and promises" (Butler 1993; Butler 2004).

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NOTES

ⁱ This is because generally *khwaja siras* in Pakistan are either beggars or invited or uninvited performers on certain occasions such as weddings or the birth of a child. So, the closure of markets has had a direct impact on their livelihood.

ⁱⁱ Since I am working on Urdu TV plays and dialogues have been taken from the videos of the plays available on Youtube, the dialogues used in this paper have been self-translated. For Urdu to roman transliteration, I have used ijunoon transliteration services. I have provided URL for both the plays that can be used to access all the episodes available on YouTube, 43 episodes of *Alif, Allah Aur Insan (Alpha, Allah and Man)* and 26 episodes of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai (God is Mine Too)*. The first episode of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* was aired on 22 October 2016 and of *Alif Allah Aur Insan* was aired on 25 April 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ For details, see Sharon C Bolton, 'Women's Work, Dirty Work: The Gynaecology Nurse as 'Other'', *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol XII, no 2 (2005), pp. 169-186.

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^{iv} In Pakistan, the most common title used for transgenders is 'hijra' or 'khusra', which are derogatory terms used to show our feeling of disgust towards this community. I use the term *khwaja siras*, considering the fact that it was a title bestowed on 'eunuch chieftain' (See, Reddy, 2005, p. 116) among intersex persons as part of special honour and respect for serving the Mughal Empire in 1600s. Another reason for using the term *khwaja sira* is to differentiate it from 'transgender' which is an umbrella term for different identities, such as LGBT, gender variants, cross dresser, gender queer etc, which are not the focus of my paper.