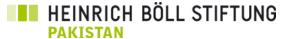


The Khusra: Challenging Gender Boundaries and More

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Modern terms such as transvestite, transexual, cross dresser, homosexual etc

simply miss the mark, when it comes to describing the khusra in Pakistan and other

parts of South Asia. To give a biological description to the khusra is to reduce the

spectrum of meaning of what these individuals represent in their cultural and

spiritual contexts. The need of the modern western(ized) gaze to reduce the khusra

to a biological simplification reflects the observors own, simplistic, almost infantile

assumptions about gender, religion, sexuality and culture. By and large, this gaze

cannot comprehend the complex and mythic connotations of the khusra. Marta

Ramoneda's photographs are remarkable exception.

For centuries khusras had a specific social space and role in South Asian

culture. Neither stigmatized nor marginalized, they were an established and

traditional presence at family festivities particularly at marriages and the birth of a

child. It was the norm to see khusras at such occasions, where they would either be

asked, or more often would just turn up, to sing, dance and entertain families and

communities at such occasions. They were, and in many rural parts of South Asia still

are, regarded as fertility symbols. To this day, even in urban centers, few dare turn

away khusras who arrive at a marriage or birth festivity. Whether they perform or

not, some sort of monetary compensation must be given to them. Not to do so, is to

risk being cursed, a bad omen at an auspicious occasion.

The *khusra*, thus, is thought to have special power(s). S/he is a representation

of a transcendent ideal, a notion of divinity that at one level is equally 'gendered'

between male and female and simultaneously neither. S/he is an embodiment of

unity. Defying biological categorizations of genital or hormonal 'imbalance', the

khusra alerts us to see sexuality and gender as a shifting spectrum, encompassing

and reflecting not only the body but more so the psychological and spiritual as

represented through the symbol of the hermaphrodite. Certain Hindu deities are

images of this ancient and powerful archetype. A profound psycho-spiritual symbol,

the hermaphrodite is a universal feature in all religious mysticisms. In this

psychological and spiritual context, 'masculine' and 'feminine' have nothing to do

with our genitals but about different perspectives, attitudes, styles of consciousness

which are potentially available to all humans irrespective of biology.

The etymology of 'hermaphrodite' hints at these psycho-spiritual dynamics.

Hermaphroditos was the son of Hermes and Aphrodite the goddess of love and

beauty. Hermes was the herald of the Greek gods, the winged messenger of Zeus

who 'connected' heaven and earth and thus, patron and inspirer of special

communication skills such as the arts and eloquent speech. Also known as Hermes

Mercurious, this mythical figure also appears as the 'trickster' archetype in all

religions and cultures. He represents the transformative potential in our psyches,

representing connection and communication between the divine and human,

conscious and unconscious. Like its namesake, the element mercury, this figure

cannot be pinned down, fixed, having a slippery, elusive, quicksilver quality – hence

'the trickster'. Hermes's insignia is a staff with wings and two serpents twined about

it, symbolizing duality at many levels, physical, psychological, moral. As such, he was

considered a mediator, peace maker and stood for conciliation, tolerance, peace and

unity. Hermes' insignia is still evident in the symbol of the medical profession. The

ancient medical adage, 'the thing that harms is the thing that heals' sums up this very

different world view in which different opposites are not seen as 'contradictions', of

either/or right/wrong, but rather as complementary, conciliatory and healing

potentialities within an all embracing, transcendent Unity.

The fact that till today, most people will not risk being cursed by a khusra

indicates how these invisible dimensions still shimmer in the cultural

(un)consciousness of Pakistanis. Shimmering is the interplay of both darkness and

light. If the khusra has the power to curse, s/he also has the power to heal and bless.

In certain communities mothers still may take ailing babies to the local khusras for

spiritual healing. Their presence at festivities is also linked to the notion of blessing

and abundance.

Western modernity has changed the world. There is much substance to the

ecofeminist critique which sees modernity and globalization as an expression of a

disembodied patriarchy which is hyper masculine, logocentric and phallocratic. If the

khusra is a symbolic figure of the traditional ideal of unit-in-diversity,

(physical/spiritual/psychological, mind/body/soul etc); the eco feminist view of the

mythic 'figure' behind modernity is the exclusively masculine, macho hero:

perpetually youthful male intent on conquest whether of Nature or Woman. In such

a world view, there is no space for a feminist/feminine consciousness.

Inspite of some gains, feminism remains globally marginalized, existing more

in the margins of academia, rather then as a socio-cultural consciousness based on

an alternative, androgynous vision of what it means to be human. It is self evident

that till today, no society is free from violence of some sort against women. North or

South, the issue of violence and the status of women is a question of degree and

proportion, and there is no doubt that in Pakistan, women largely remain

unacknowledged, silenced, abused and marginalized by patriarchy, whether in the

name of religion or modernity.

For the khusra, modernity has meant a loss of symbolic status and being

viewed in increasingly literal ways. Today, to call someone a khusra is considered

derogatory. Simultaneously, the rise of literalist religion which is cut off from its

cultural roots has also contributed to the khusra being regarded with macho

contempt: at worse a sinful aberration, at best a circus freak. The result is that

increasingly khusras are being reduced to begging or prostitution. More often than

not, the begging is usually aggressive, at times sinister. And for fear of being cursed,

most people still give money. The darkness shimmers darker. But even as they are

pushed towards marginalization, in villages, towns and inner cities, khusras continue

to bring laughter, song and dance. They still entertain at weddings and births. The

women enjoy their presence/performance. Men usually are vaguely embarrassed,

mystified, awkward, less at ease in the presence of a *khusra* than a woman.

In a global and local culture increasingly dominated by the heroic machismo of

modern militarism and the misogyny of militant religious extremism, the khusra

offers a contrasting (con)template: In a sense a real hero, receiving the mystified

gaze of the (male) observer with a nonchalance that is simultaneously cavalier and

seductive invitation. A sense of irony prevails as the khusra mocks the machismo of

phallocratic modern man, religious or secular. Presenting an exaggeration and

caricature of woman, the khusra simultaneously carries and re-presents an

unacknowledged pathos: the un-dignified burden of the forgotten sex (woman) with

grace, humour and liberative song and dance. Reminiscent of the archetypal clown,

in repose and without 'make up', the tragic is visible. Made up as myth, the khusra

presents a microcosm of our psyche in which ultimately gender becomes

meaningless and only the experience of being-human remains.

In so far as men and women are physically different, the image 'speaks' to

both, reminding us that each is just half of a much larger Ideal and that ultimately,

He is encompassed and contained in the unity of S(he).