

Abstract

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Khwaja Sira: Dissent, Sex/Gender Activism, and State Regulation in Pakistan

In recent years, the term “khwaja sira” has been appropriated and promoted by nonnormatively gendered Pakistanis as a politically correct identity label and a respectable alternative to the general public’s pejorative use of the term “hijra.” These attempts to empower and change the public image of gender ambiguous subjects coincided with the Pakistani Supreme Court’s decision to grant rights and privileges to “khwaja siras” in a series of rulings passed between 2009-12. While community activists were primarily engaged in public advocacy, the state sought to regulate and “mainstream” khwaja siras through legal and policy developments, and to this end, the judiciary devised a taxonomic system to manage this segment of the population. In this paper, I examine the practices of khwaja sira activists who, beyond the purview of seditious speech and action, employ forms of refusal that both circumvent and thwart state-produced sex/gender identities. In doing so, they complicate notions of dissent by engaging in a subaltern and feminist type of resistance that privileges ambiguity over certitude. Anticipating potential pitfalls, khwaja sira activists sidestep the trappings of sedition to avoid any possibility of accusation. Instead, they focus their energies on performing and perfecting acts of refusal that not only complicate normative understandings of dissent but also impede allegations of anti-nationalism.