



## **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 observers 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.

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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

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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 phallogratic. 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

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

In spite of some gains, feminism remains globally marginalized, existing more in the margins of academia, rather than 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

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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).

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