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The *Dera* Paradigm:
Homecoming of the Gendered Other

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Abstract

This article engages with the idiosyncratic dwelling practices of *khwajasara*, a Pakistani gender-variant subjectivity better known as *hijre* in the larger South Asian context. As a prevalent type of *khwajasara* household, the *dera* plays a paradigmatic role in their homecoming narratives; whether as a post-home, the refuge from an unhomely natal familial house and a terrorising school environment, or as an intermediary bodily, spiritual and communal sanctuary on a journey towards one's Home after post-home. Anchored in the idea of the *dera*, and especially as intimated to me on a late September afternoon in Lahore, this article zigzags through *khwajasara*'s historical and present-day multi-local experiences of homecoming, which is posited here as both spatial and identitary journeying towards collective *thereness*. As a property of dwelling with kindred souls, I argue that *thereness* equips *khwajasara* with exploratory senses of the subject, including, at times, those of being otherworldly and nomadic. Such *thereness* disrupts the very idea of settlement and allows the *dera* and its inhabitants to not only transgress communal boundaries—such as those of gender, religion, ethnicity and language—but also to construe home as a journey, not a destination. At the same time, it reveals various *productive anxieties* about *khwajasara*'s—or, indeed, everyone's—classed, urbanised, economised and gendered home-life.

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The Dera Paradigm: Homecoming of the Gendered Other

Vanja Hamzić

‘If you live in one place for a long time’, Saima explained reclining from her cherished old divan, ‘people eventually learn how to respect you. Despite some problems that we may have had, here we all help each other’ (Hamzić 2016: 163).¹ A cigarette in her hand, the trusty puppy playing in her lap, Saima was recounting to me the merits of neighbourly solidarity surrounded by a half-dozen of her young disciples (*chele*; singular: *chela*), some of whom also considered her to be their mother (*ma’an*).² We were sitting in a simple half-open-air flat, basking in the early evening mist, amidst a busy lower-class neighbourhood in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Saima was the head of this *dera* (plural: *deray*), a type of household that the majority of *khwajasara* call their home. Indeed, Saima and her *chele* all considered themselves *khwajasara*—a gender-variant subjectivity known by many names across South Asia, of which *hijra* (plural: *hijre*) is most common.

1 This article is based on my long-term fieldwork in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan, but in particular on a very special late September afternoon in the early 2010s in Saima’s *dera*. I am grateful to her and to many other *khwajasara* who have made me feel so homely in their presence, and especially to Bindiya Rana, Chalu, Chandhi, Gangha, Hashu, Jala, Jelek, Kajol, Nariman and Neeli Rana. I thank Shadab Bano, of Aligarh Muslim University, and Abraham B. Weil, of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, for their kind assistance in securing access to some less readily available research materials. The two anonymous reviewers were exceedingly kind and supportive and I found their recommendations extremely useful. Finally, Safet HadžiMuhamedović and Marija Grujić, the co-editors of this special issue, were an absolute joy to work with, and I greatly appreciate their insightful comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are mine.

2 Note on transliteration: For the transliteration of classical Arabic and Persian sources and their historical derivatives in this text, I used the IJMES (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*) system, but I omitted the usual diacritics in personal names. Diacritics were not used for the transliteration from present-day South Asian languages. All non-English terms were pluralised in accordance with the source language’s own rules, which, in some contemporary South Asian languages, depart from their classical versions. Hence, the singular and the plural of *khwajasara* are the same. I also gave preference to the linguistic context in which a certain word had appeared, rather than always reverting to its classical version; for instance, I referred to *dergah*, not *dargāh*.

‘When people say stuff to us’, Saima continued, keeping a watchful eye on the goings-on in her *dera*, ‘I tell them: give us a better job and we won’t do what we do. We have no other way to feed ourselves’ (ibid.). *Khwajasara* were not here alone. There were children running around the rooms, some busy chasing a large and very loud rooster. Several of Saima’s *chele* were babysitting them for the neighbouring families. Some rooms were used for this purpose, some for prayer, some for cooking and social events, still some for sex work. Saima credited the success and survival of this complex enterprise to one word: *izzat* (respect) (see also Reddy 2005). Gaining respect in an urban slum was no easy feat, however, and it meant navigating, on a daily basis, the oft-violent encounters with the police, local vigilante and religious groups and countless others. It also meant negotiating intricate intra-*khwajasara* kinship, economic and political ties, which Saima light-heartedly referred to as dealing with ‘your characters in a soap opera’ (Hamzić 2016: 163).



Fig. 1. Saima in her *dera*. Photo: Vanja Hamzić.

Not all *khwajasara* live in *deray*; some *chele* marry their *giriya* (male lover and/or customer) and leave, whilst others prefer to live alone. Yet, as a quintessential *khwajasara* household, *dera* holds a paradigmatic place in *khwajasara*’s stories of homecoming, be it as a post-home—a refuge from never-quite-homely natal familial households and terrorising former school environments—or the bodily, spiritual and communal *genius loci*, signalling that a true Home might only be found in the hereafter—that is, *after* post-home. Using the idea of the *dera* as its anchor, this article meanders through *khwajasara* historical and contemporary multi-local experiences of home-

coming, understood here as both spatial and identitary journeying towards collective *thereness* (cf. Sutherland 2018). As a property of dwelling with kindred souls, I argue that *thereness* equips *khwajasara* with exploratory senses of the subject (to paraphrase Butler 2015), including, as we shall see, those of being otherworldly and nomadic (Jaffer 2017: 184). This *thereness* transgresses the very idea of settlement and allows the *dera* and its inhabitants to not only ‘blur communal boundaries’ (Khan 2017: 1290)—such as those of gender, religion, ethnicity and language—but also to construe home as a journey, not a destination.

Mughal homecomings

‘In Mughal times, *khwajasara* used to serve at the imperial courts, to educate people, to give them good manners, to teach them how to be well-behaved. That used to be their job’, maintained Saima, her face beaming with pride (Hamzić 2016: 280). For her, as for many other *khwajasara*, recalling such an illustrious past was not only a nostalgic act, but a teachable opportunity, too. ‘Back in the day, only *khwajasara* knew what it meant to have good manners’, she averred. ‘Unfortunately, nowadays, *khwajasara* are ill-mannered. They can barely help themselves, let alone teach the others’ (ibid.).

The term *khwajasara* has only recently been reclaimed, chiefly by Pakistani cohorts of the larger South Asian gender-variant *hijra* community. In Punjab, for example, *khwajasara* are also known as *khusre* (singular: *khusra*)—a name that is now thought not to command much *izzat*. Instead, harking back to a name that invokes an imperial household is the preferred—and clearly political—choice. Indeed, the guardians of the *zenana* (secluded women’s quarters) at the Mughal court were known by their Persian title, *khwajasara*, connoting the master (*khwājā*) of the palace (*sarā* or *sarā’ī*) (Nath 1995: 13–22; Hamzić 2016: 156). Many of them were male-born, often in distant lands (such as Abyssinia), and then castrated in their youth before being sold or gifted into the Mughal imperial service. Of course, the practice of acquiring, schooling and then tasking such individuals with a variety of professions predates the Mughals and was the staple of Muslim courtly life and imperial affairs probably already during the ‘Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) (Hathaway 2005: 8) and certainly since the ‘Abbāsid era (750–1258) (El Cheikh 2018). The euphemisms used to describe their bodily and gender difference or the particular profession ranged from *khāshī* (plural: *khiṣyān*), meaning the castrated one, to *ṭawāshī* (plural: *ṭawāshiyya*) and *khādīm* (plural: *khadam* and later *khuddām*), denoting elite military and domestic servitude (Ayalon 1985; Hamzić 2016: 121–123). In the later periods of the Mamlūk state (1250–1517) and in the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), terms referring to castration were almost entirely displaced by honorifics, of which the principal was *aghāwāt* (singular: *agha*, Turkish: *ağa*, mean-

ing usually sir or lord) (Marmon 1995: 41), due to their high office and awe (*hayba*) they were said to command. And yet, their bodily and gender experience was such that *aghāwāt* largely sought and formed their own societies, ‘outside of the dominant binary phantasm’ (Hamzić: 2016: 123). The idiosyncratic, *aghāwāt*-only names by which they were sometimes known, such as Yapraksız (Leafless) Ağa (Hathaway 2005: 29; 2009: 294), attested, also, their social difference.

On the Indian subcontinent, the term *khwajasara* denoted this subjectivity both within the confines of the Mughal Empire (1526–1540, 1555–1857) and in other Muslim polities. The sixteenth-century author Rizqullah Mushtaqi noted, for instance, in his *Wāqi‘āt-i-Mūshtāqi* that a *khwajasara* typically stood at the inner gate of a noble’s harem, preceded by two officers on the outer parts and followed by an older woman sitting along the wall inside of it. So, if a message was to be delivered to the secluded women, it would have to change hands at least four times (Mushtaqi 2002 [c.1570s]: 98; Bano 2009: 417).



Fig. 2. Khawas Khan, a Mughal *khwajasara*. Late seventeenth-century illumination. Courtesy of the Saeed Motamed Collection.

The specific place of *khwajasara* reflected, in a way, their positionality alongside the perceived gender-sex continuum. Yet the strict segregation of noble women was, in large part, a subcontinental practice. In the early Mughal harems in Central Asia, people of all genders (but not ranks and classes), including *khwajasara*, were allowed to mix and communicate with one another to a certain extent (ibid.: 418). Castrated individuals were also found performing a range of functions within the imperial household other than that of the harem guardian. For example, Babur (r.1526–1530), the founder of the Mughal state, had in his service a castrated superintendent (*nāzir*) named 'Ambar (Jawhar 1832 [1554]: 78, 129). Several generations later, this very title—*nāzir*—came to be synonymous with those who had undergone castration (Bano 2009: 418).

By the time of Akbar (r.1556–1605), references to notable *khwajasara* and *khwajasara*-like people abound, from Ni'amat, a guard of emperor's resting place (ibid.: 419; Lal 2018: 99), to the famous *khwajasara* I'timad Khan, whom the author of the *Akbarnāma* described as 'distinguished for sense and judgment' (Abu'l Faḥl 2010 [1590–1602]: 228) and who was, in 1576, appointed the governor of Bhakkar (Bano 2009: 420). And yet, for all their successes, *khwajasara*'s bodily and gender difference drew the ire of more conservative segments of Mughal society. Akbar's contemporary and fierce critic, 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, thus felt compelled to quote in his *Muntakhab al-tawārīkh* an alleged prophetic saying against the counsel of women, the rule of boys and the management of *khwajasara* (Bada'uni 1986 [1595]: 2:63–64), precisely in response to I'timad Khan's many important military and political roles.

Akbar was himself much concerned with sexual propriety and wanted to set an example by further segregating the 'male' and 'female' lifeworlds within his palace (Lal 2005: 140–175). However, as a consequence of this imperial agenda, the officers and subjectivities necessary to negotiate the access and communication between such lifeworlds only grew in importance. Whilst *khwajasara* may have been 'gradually withdrawn from the interiors of the harem', an office of its interior guardians fell upon 'sober and active women'—as the author of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* called them—usually of Kashmiri or Turkic origin (Bano 2009: 422; Abu'l Faḥl 1873 [c.1592–1602]: 1:46–47). As with *khwajasara*, these women's perceived gender difference did not go unnoticed in the European travelogues of the time. Writing during the tumultuous reign of Aurangzeb (r.1658–1707), the Italian author Niccolao Manucci praised them as 'highly skilled in the management of the bow and other arms' but also noted that 'these women do not veil themselves to anybody' and were in regular contact with the *nāzir* via 'a scribe who is obliged to report to the *nāzir* all that comes in or goes out, and everything that happens' (Manucci 1907 [c.1708]: 2: 332, 352). As for *khwajasara*, Manucci acknowledged their faithfulness but thought them, on the whole, deeply repugnant. Echoing the

centuries of European epistemic violence, he called them ‘eunuchs’ and left this telling description:

Among the [...] qualities of this sort of animal, one is their extreme covetousness in collecting gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls, and they are immeasurably avaricious. [...] [T]hey are anxious to appear well dressed [...]. Well may they hold themselves in such estimation, for they are the favourites of princesses, who are very liberal to them [...]. Another of their qualities is to be friendly to women and inimical to men, which may be from envy, knowing what they have been deprived of. The tongue and the hands of these baboons act together, being most licentious in examining everything, both goods and women, coming into the palace; they are foul in speech, and fond of silly stories. Among all the Mahomedans they are ordinarily the strictest observers of the faith, although I knew some who did not fail to drink their little drop, and were fond of wine. [They] are the spies for everything that goes on in secret, whereby they are always listening among the kings, princes, queens, and princesses. (ibid.: 80–81)

Manucci’s disdain for *khwajasara* was by no means an isolated example. Compiled a century earlier, the *Mir’āt-i-Sikandarī* recounts, for example, how the ruler of Gujarat ‘reproached [...] and commenced to revile’ his castrated ennobled subject, Hujjat-ul-Mulk, saying ‘O fool, what shall I say to you? If you were a man, I would have reviled you by calling you a coward; if you were a woman, I would have called you unchaste. You are neither man nor woman, but the bad qualities of both are present in you’ (Sikandar b. Muḥammad 1889 [c.1611]: 126). Such readings provide for a gloomy portrait of courtly life for many *khwajasara* and *khwajasara*-like subjectivities. Caught in a lavish but, for the most part, unhomely world of imperial intrigues, many *khwajasara* sought some form of seclusion and respite, whether through charitable activities, education or affluence. Others dedicated their lives to those whom they served, out of which amorous and sexual liaisons were often born (Kidwai 2000: 113). Still others sought to build intra-*khwajasara* networks similar to (and probably in some communication with) those of *aghāwāt*. For instance, Aurangzeb’s powerful chief castrated officer, Khwaja Talib, also known as Khidmatgar, had several *khwajasara* protégés who served other princes (Lal 2018: 105) but maintained regular contact with their mentor.

Some of *khwajasara*’s experience of unhomeliness must have also had to do with the trauma of unwanted castration (although a few submitted to it voluntarily or were born intersex; ibid.: 104) and the fact that many of them were traded as slaves from faraway lands. As a South Asian courtier and author attested in the early thirteenth century, ‘the further [slaves] are taken from their hearth, their kin and their dwellings, the more valued, pre-

cious and expensive they become’, for their natal homes would soon become but a distant memory (Fakhr-i Mudabbir 1927 [1206]: 36). Furthermore, he claimed, ‘when their hearts turn to Islam, they do not remember their homes, their place of origins or their kinsmen’ at all (ibid.). Both castration and forceful conversion were generally thought repugnant to Islamic law, and as such were performed either in non-Muslim lands or far from the eyes of Muslim rulers and their religious establishment (*‘ulamā*). Mughals were particularly uncomfortable with both of these practices. By 1582, Akbar would no longer allow himself to possess slaves, instead calling them *chele* (Bano 2002: 318)—the same designation the twenty-first-century *khwajasara* use for their disciples. In 1608, Akbar’s successor Jahangir (r.1605–1627) even issued an injunction prohibiting the practice of castration (Lal 2018: 103). He is said to have explained this, two years later, as follows: ‘I had repeatedly given orders that no one should [castrate boys] or buy or sell them, and whoever did so would be answerable as a criminal’ (Jahangir et al. 1909 [1627]: 1:168). Nonetheless, he continued to receive as gifts numerous *khwajasara*, including at least one who was intersex and, as such, not castrated (ibid.: 2:201). The trade in castrated youths also continued in a relatively uninterrupted fashion, and a notable contemporary of both Akbar and Jahangir, Sa‘id Khan Chaghata‘i, is believed to have had as many as 1,200 castrated individuals in his service (ibid.: 1:13), without much objection from the emperors.

Mughal *khwajasara* and *khwajasara*-like subjectivities thus largely lived their lives within a complex system of courtly servitude, which both delimited their choice of the homely and empowered them to assert their distinct identitary tropes. Be that as it may, it is from *this* period in the South Asian history that present-day Pakistani *khwajasara* mostly draw their strength and their collective demand for *izzat*. Some have claimed, for instance, that ‘they take their inspiration from inscriptions in the Lahore Fort’, a foremost Mughal architectural masterpiece, ‘which single out the residences of the *khwaja saras* who lived there’ (Khan 2016b: 226). However, this reliance on the Mughal past should not be misunderstood as a claim to *khwajasara* origins, which the Punjabi *khwajasara*, unlike some other sub-continental *hijra* collectives (Reddy 2005), link to the story of Madayantī or Mainandi, an ancient Indian princess said to be born *khwajasara* (Hamzić 2016: 160–161). Instead, Mughal times (*Mughalan da wela*) are invoked as an auspicious era in the *khwajasara* history that provides a blueprint of sorts for the prosperous *khwajasara* future.

In contrast to the Mughal era, the colonial and post-colonial Indian and Pakistani experience is seen as entirely unhomely, abject and disastrous. As Bindiya Rana, a prominent Sindh-based *khwajasara guru* and political leader, told me,

[t]he changes started occurring once the Mughals were no longer in real power. Once the white men came to India, the pow-

ers of the Mughals were slowly finishing off. The Mughals were then forced to take customs of the white men, and to receive all sorts of orders from them [...]. By the time of India and Pakistan's partition, khwajasara were only there to dance and sing at weddings. And that was it. They were no longer perceived as valuable for the society in any other way. (ibid.: 159–160)

Indeed, *khwajasara* were one of the particular targets of the systemic legal and political oppression that accompanied the British colonial presence in India, especially during the first decades of the British Raj (1858–1947). The British, along with various domestic collaborators, sought to regulate and restrict their ‘abominable existence’ as much as they could, first by making a distinction between *khwajasara* (or *khojay*, as they would call them) who served in noble households and those who have not (described in colonial sources as *hijre* and *zenana* or, in legal contexts, as ‘eunuchs’), and then by depriving the latter category of *khwajasara* of any inheritance or property rights, by means of the infamous *Criminal Tribes Act, 1871* (Hamzić 2014: 189–193).³ Once again, the battle centred on *khwajasara* households, with those—presumably living in *deray*—who could not solicit upper-class protection all but left to ‘die out’ (Gannon 2009: 347–348). Although colonial administrators ultimately failed to do away with *khwajasara*, similar classificatory and legal violence continued to accompany this subjectivity well into Pakistan’s and India’s postcolonial statehoods. One of the tell-tale remnants of colonial oppression was the distinction some *khwajasara* still made between those who truly belong to this community (and mostly living in *deray*) and *zenana*—deemed ‘feminine males who situationally cross-dress’ (Khan 2016a: 159). Whilst, for the former, the *dera* would serve as the principal site of thereness—and, indeed, survival—it would have precisely the opposite effect on the latter, reminding them that this paradigmatic post-home was not

3 Ostensibly introduced to curtail the ‘habitual criminality’ of groups such as the Thuggees, a secretive cult devoted to Kālī whose members were often accused of committing murders and robberies, the *Criminal Tribes Act, 1871* quickly became one of the prime tools of colonial violence and control. Numerous small communities of poor, low-caste and nomadic people were subjected to forceful registration under this act, and some, such as low-status *khwajasara*, bereft of any inheritance or adoption rights. Part II of the act categorised all *khwajasara* as ‘eunuchs’, although in practice this criminal label applied only to those who were not attached to high-status households. The act introduced an array of ‘eunuch’-specific penalties—including for ‘appearing in female clothes’, ‘dancing in public or for hire’, ‘keeping [a] boy under sixteen’ and ‘kidnapping or castrating children’—and allowed for arresting ‘eunuchs’ without warrant. Although the *Criminal Tribes Act, 1871* was repealed in 1949 and the former ‘criminal tribes’ ‘denotified’ in 1952, its legacy continues to haunt some 60 million people, who are still subject to social stigma, stereotyping and economic hardship across the subcontinent.

necessarily open to all those who sought refuge from gender-biased, usually natal, households of the past.

Coming post-home

Speaking of the daily violence that permeated *khwajasara* lifeworlds in the Punjab, Nazli pointed out in a recent interview that ‘even those who have no status in their own home, feel that they can abuse and disrespect us’ (Jaffer 2017: 185). Evidently, coming post-home to a *dera* did not necessarily mean overcoming the ill-treatment most *khwajasara* continuously suffered from in a largely hostile society. Whilst significant in the make-up of *khwajasara* lives, the *dera* offered but a limited protection from the outside world and, in turn, imposed hierarchies and limitations of its own—a cautionary tale for anyone’s attempt at romanticising a post-home. And yet, there was an ideal-ity about the *dera* that, for many *khwajasara*, had to do with the trauma experienced in their natal homes.

‘I knew from my childhood that this was inside of me’, Saima told me. ‘Other kids around me, of my age or older, used to tease me because of how I was’ (Hamzić 2016: 281). And *this*, inside her, was a spiritual being. Kajol, an office clerk who was not an inhabitant of Saima’s *dera*, explained it to me: ‘We become *khwajasara* when a spirit—called *murid*—enters us [...]. Once *murid* is within oneself, one feels very special about oneself and then one can consider oneself *khwajasara*’ (ibid.: 156). That *murid* denotes both a disciple of a Sūfī teacher and a spirit sent onto *khwajasara* directly by God or through a *pir*’s (wise person’s) intercession is, of course, a testament of a deeply spiritual selfhood (ibid.: 282)—and one directly related to *khwajasara* foremost gender experience. In Kajol’s words, ‘[w]hen I was six, my sister used to dress me up as a girl and I used to feel very, very well that way’. But the abuse suffered in the hands of ‘people in the neighbourhood’ in which they lived with their natal families was commonplace to all of Saima’s *chele* (ibid.: 281). Whilst my interlocutors did not do so, *khwajasara* and *hijre* speaking to other researchers recounted numerous examples of domestic violence. A *khwajasara* in Peshawar spoke, for example, of the sense of shame she felt she had brought on her natal family, whilst several Delhi-based *hijre* reported that they had been abused by their parents or siblings. Surviving such a home was hard, and especially so when compounded by the severe violence experienced in school. Some would frequently change schools, others would drop out early—formal education was simply not a viable option for the great majority of *khwajasara* (Hahm 2010; Mazumdar 2016), nor was, indeed, their staying with their natal families. So a difficult search for a post-home would begin.



Fig. 3. Saima, some of her *chele* and the author. Photo: Vanja Hamzić.

Some were brought to a *dera*, the others would happen upon one. As Saima recalled, '[w]hen I was a kid, I'd see all these *khwajasara* being invited by other people to their homes when child was born, to give blessings. And, if a baby happened to be a *khusra*, they would take it away. They wouldn't let the baby stay in the house' (Hamzić 2016: 281). She was referring to *bad-hai*—ceremonial performances at births, weddings and other auspicious occasions that are one of *khwajasara*'s principal traditional jobs and sources of income. That they could go as far as to claim a child whom they thought to be *khwajasara* attested to an extraordinary *baraka*, or special powers, that *khwajasara* were widely believed to possess, which could be used both as a blessing and a curse. Other times a post-home seeker, ostensibly guided by her *murid*, would find and join a *khwajasara dera* of her own volition—or almost so. As Jelek, one of Saima's *chele*, explained:

I entered a khwajasara household when I was eleven. I went to a mela [a local festival; plural: mailay]. At mailay, there are always many khwajasara, who go there and dance. I used to dance with them. Eventually, they enticed me to go and live with them. So I did. Through them, I got in touch with my guru. (ibid.)

The enticement that Jelek suggested here might have had to do with the circumstances in which one entered a *dera*, which remained a taboo topic for many a *khwajasara*, not least because the ritual of emasculation and initiation, known as *nirban*, was thought to be a mystical experience that words could not quite capture and that an outsider was not capable of understand-

ing. It was through *nirban* that a *khwajasara* would truly *become*, whilst, with the help of her *guru*, being reminded of her *khwajasara* ancestry. As Bindiya Rana told me, '[w]henever I get a new *chela*, during the initiation ceremony, I will make [my first ancestral *guru*] her *guru* as well [...]. We even have certain documents of our *khwajasara* ancestors, when they received some tip or a reward from the Mughal emperor' (ibid.: 162). These records (*khata*) of *khwajasara* lineage were kept safe by *khwajasara* leaders. Besides, being written into the *khwajasara* kinship system also meant to *become beautiful*. According to Neeli Rana, another *khwajasara* community leader, 'whenever a *khwajasara* becomes *nirban*, she assimilates Mainandi and becomes as beautiful as she was [...]. And, on the first night when a person becomes *nirban*, Mainandi appears before her and curses her' (ibid.: 160–161). This narrative was perhaps a reminder that great beauty is born from great pain, and that the *baraka* a *khwajasara* embodied and was able to bestow upon others was a curse as much as a blessing.

Such a Manichaeian view of *khwajasara* life was reflected in the *dera's* idiosyncratic familial economy in myriad ways. When a novice was ritually initiated to the community of *khwajasara*, she was given a new name and assigned a mother (*ma'an*) and a *guru* to look after her. In return, the novice would vow never to return to her natal family's home. The *dera* thus become her home after home as well as a place of vocational training—the true school (of life) where many of her vital skills, including a new secret language, known in the Punjab as *Khwajasara Farsi*, would be learnt. The homeliness of a *dera* for the new inhabitant was gradually acquired, often through hardship and struggle. The daughter (*dhi*) and the mother did not always get along. As Jala and Gangha told me, in front of their *ma'an* Saima, sometimes this was more so 'like a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship [...]. We always fight with each other. There's always some fuss' (ibid.: 163). Some *guru* were known to be overly demanding and would threaten their *chela's* disobedience with expulsion from the *dera*. On the other hand, *chela* were at freedom to change their *guru* and, indeed, to seek and enter other *deray* or go live on their own. Also, if their *guru* had died and there were no clear candidates for her successor, some *chela* of an equal status in Peshawar could opt to live together for some time without a distinct head of the household (Hahm 2010: 30). However, in the other *deray* in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and generally in the north of the country, the household hierarchy was such that it required a separate title for the head of a *dera* (*naik*), in charge—importantly—of the household income (Ahmad 2010; Saeed et al. 2018). In contrast, the Punjabi *deray* were often described as 'more "modern" than "traditional" *hijra* families' (Jaffer 2017: 189), implying more horizontal relationships and greater financial freedom.

The *dera*, as we have seen, was a particularly complex kind of post-home with respect to the intersections of communal living and semi-domes-

tic labour. The Lahori *deray* I have been to often simultaneously dubbed as family homes, brothels (or, rather, occasional sites for home-based sex work), dance studios, ritual sanctuaries, beauty salons, local kindergartens and bank-like depositories of *khwajasara* communal money and other valuable possessions (Hamzić 2017: 199). This multiplicity of uses of a collective space redrafted but did not entirely extinguish the boundaries between the private and the public. It did, however, make an idea and the daily habituation of a *khwajasara* post-home an exceptionally difficult and contingent labour. For example, the process of distributing income (*nijra*) was often particularly complicated (Sultana and Kalyani 2012: 106) and prone to many internal disputes, whilst home-based sex work required a special kind of sensitivity to the dynamics of neighbourly relations. And yet, however unfathomable the activities the *dera* was supposed to negotiate and house, it seemed to be a labour of love and struggle as much as the other types of households in the neighbourhood. The stability of a *dera* was neither guaranteed nor denied by its structure, however idiosyncratic it may have been. Ultimately, it was a space where labours of the informal found their quotidian utterance, where they were habituated and ossified. It was a joyful centre as well as a predicament of *khwajasara*'s daily life. The *dera* provided, delimited, healed, hurt, directed and disoriented—sometimes all at once.

Besides, the *deray* I have visited were firmly a part of the larger urban slum microcosm, negotiated and built upon the neighbourly solidarity in its countless manifestations—none of which, perhaps, as essential as collective action against police brutality (Hamzić 2017: 198–199). *Khwajasara* were often the particular targets of the police, especially if found begging or doing sex work outside the *dera*. As one Punjab-based study summarised, *khwajasara* were ordinarily 'subjected to degrading treatment, torture, arbitrary arrest, detention, extortion, assault, and rape by police due to their gender nonconformity' (Alizai et al. 2017: 1226). Police raids were commonplace even to some *deray*, for an allegation that the inhabitants were running a brothel would suffice for the officers to demand and take bribe from *khwajasara* (Sultana and Kalyani 2012: 104). Sometimes no allegation of sex work was necessary for the police to engage in violence. As Almas Boby, a Rawalpindi-based *khwajasara* community leader explained, '[w]hen we would return from functions the police would stop us and taunt us and steal the money we had collected at the function. We were grateful if the police only took our money and did [not] beat us or lock us up in in the *thana* (police station)' (Khan 2017: 1296–1297). Boby documented police brutality against *khwajasara* across the country and used it to demand state responsibility and protection (ibid.: 1299). But even the cases that had ended with a fatality, such as that in which a *khwajasara* had died of her injuries whilst in police custody (Alizai et al. 2017: 1227), have not been properly investigated and no police officer was ever brought to trial. In such precarious circumstances, *kh-*

wajasara worked tirelessly to negotiate some level of community protection from the police, and to win ‘the right to be left alone, as much and whenever possible, except in times of wider “moral panic”’ (Hamzić 2017: 199). The *dera* proved to be the key element in such endeavours, offering an economic and social model of coexistence that was sufficiently cohesive and multifarious to earn *khwajasara* some substantial bargaining powers. Of course, it could not and did not afford an environment free from everyday violence—but the *dera* did make some *khwajasara* lives more liveable.

Post-home diffusions

Whilst living in a *dera* also meant participating in the kind of resistance a particular lower-class neighbourhood had assumed in order to keep the state and its violent law-enforcement agents at bay to the extent possible, such modes of public engagement presented a challenge for *khwajasara*. The neighbourly defiance often took the form of what James C. Scott called ‘the infrapolitics of the powerless’, which he described as ‘the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril’ (Scott 1990: xiii, 199). For Scott, this form was mainly discursive, relying on the ‘hidden transcript’ that such subjects developed through speeches, gestures and other practices as ‘a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant’ (ibid.: xii). As the existence of *Khwasara Farsi*—which vested certain common words in a local language (in Lahore, this would be mostly Punjabi) with special meaning, known only to *khwajasara* and their allies—shows in no uncertain terms, *khwajasara* were veritable masters of the hidden transcript. It also enabled them to move subversively between different types of local solidarity and togetherness, choosing, for instance, between ‘male’ and ‘female’ attire to achieve different social, political and spiritual goals. Their resistance to oppressive mainstay legalities, be they of Muslim, colonial or post-colonial origin, also rested on an ability to claim, along with their neighbours, what I called an *alegal* space (Hamzić 2017), where law’s public force, reliant as always on the legal-illegal dyad, could be gradually displaced by an altogether less violent and much more ambiguous normativity.

But the *khwajasara* bodily and gender difference was such that it could never quite fully benefit from or count on the domain of the infrapolitical. In fact, an entire set of bodily gestures, sounds and sartorial choices, sometimes described as *hijrapan* (*hijra*-ness) or *hijraism* (Hinchy 2019: 82; Pamment 2010), have been for a very long time associated with *khwajasara* subjectivity and their performance of gender. Subversive to the extent that they made *khwajasara* the recognisable agents for social and political change, these traits enabled, for example, the Pakistani collectives of *khwajasara* to lead numerous peaceful demonstrations on issues of importance for lower and working classes (Hamzić 2016: 168) and to spearhead the wave of momen-

tous legal change, which included an official recognition of ‘third-gender’ communities in Pakistan and led to the state legislation aimed at protection of transgender persons (ibid.: 2016: 166–169; Hamzić 2019: 424–427, 432; Redding 2015). The public visibility of *khwajasara*, a source of both daily violence and *khwajasara*’s complex social interactions with the wider world, meant that at least from the early 2010s—which saw the rise of formidable media-savvy *khwajasara* organisations—the distinction between infra-politics and politics was no longer tenable. Faced with a global appetite for the type of activism that would fit the larger developmental and identity schemes and an ambiguous reaction of the Pakistani civil society (Hamzić 2012; Hamzić 2019), the newly formed *khwajasara* associations sought to carve out an idiosyncratic space for themselves. Or, as Shahnaz Khan has claimed, ‘[r]efusing to be contained within static traditional space, *khwaja sara* articulate[d] political society in ways that both challenge[d] civil society and embrace[d] it at the same time’ (Khan 2017: 1302).



Fig. 4. Nayaab Ali, a *khwajasara* politician who contested the Pakistani general elections in 2018, and Neeli Rana, a *khwajasara* community leader, celebrate the first Trans Pride driven through Lahore on a horse buggy. Photo: *Dareecha*.

For instance, when *khwajasara* organised and led the very first Trans Pride March on 29 December 2018, they came out on the streets of Lahore in their festive traditional clothes, some driven on ornate horse buggies, waving both Pakistani and trans pride flags (Malik 2018; Imtiaz 2018; Mehmood 2018). There was a cake with stripes in the colours of transnational trans solidarity, but also an abundance of symbols of traditional celebrations. It was as if *khwajasara* activists brought out to the public some of the celebratory and

heart-warming manifestations of their *dera* life and their traditional *badhai* performances—albeit for the purposes of demanding their newly affirmed legal rights. This blend of the tried out and the experimental, of the familial and the public, of an intersectional solidarity, may have been surprising to some but it fits quite well the interstitial politics that in the past decade or so has become the staple of *khwajasara* activism in Pakistan. This has been, no doubt, an out-of-*dera* process, where the skills and practices of belonging, solidarity and collective action had been honed first, only to be brought to the new—and larger—social and political contexts.

What did this mean for *khwajasara*'s post-home-coming? That their post-homes were nearly always diffusive and could not be contained within the bounds of a single dwelling practice. And also, conversely, that the *dera*, as a key model of communal life, extended into the ever-expanding *khwajasara* spaces of social and political intervention. These were both unifying and deeply unsettling forces.

On the one hand, *khwajasara* entered the whirlwind of transnational debates on gender and sexuality, described recently as a trans-in-Asia and Asia-in-trans dynamic in which, mindful of the epistemic and political dangers associated with 'immediate assumptions about the universality of transgender experiences', the subjectivities such as *khwajasara* could help 'provincialize, decolonize, de-Cold War, and/or decolorize the category and practice of trans' (Chiang et al. 2018: 299). According to one author, there could be a role for *khwajasara* to play in answering the larger question of what it would 'mean to hybridize the term *transgender*', so that it becomes homelier to their lives and politics (Chatterjee 2018: 317). Related to this effort would also be the task of challenging 'the India-centricity in hijra studies' so as to reach 'new epistemological and analytical possibilities in terms of how the hijras are conceived and interpreted' (Hossain 2018: 321). Interestingly, an example used to propose this turn was a *hijra* sex worker in Bangladesh who, after work, 'returns to this room, changes into masculine sartoriality and then heads back to her heterosexual household' (ibid.: 323). Was this a kind of infrapolitics, or a 'mere' manifestation of social conformity, or even a challenge to the *dera* as the dominant model of *hijra* dwelling and identity practices? In Saima's *dera*, for example, her *chele* showed me the wedding photograph of a wife and a husband. But, as I found out, both of them were, in fact, *khwajasara* and each of them sometimes wore 'men's' and 'women's' clothes (Hamzić 2016: 163). This ambiguity and plurality of gender expressions, so central to so many *khwajasara* and their *deray*, should not be lost on those seeking to situate anew *khwajasara*'s lives and politics. The *dera*, in that sense, could be understood as a hermeneutical (post-)homing device that re-centres both the locality of where one is writing from and where/who one is writing about.

On the other hand, an increasing exposure to transnational funding (Chatterjee 2018: 311–312) and different (however limited) domestic sources of financial and organisational aid revealed and perhaps even caused certain, primarily class-based, fissures within the *khwajasara* community. This might have been an inevitable consequence of some *khwajasara* representatives further ascending to and walking the halls of power in a deeply neoliberal post-colonial state—a road, sadly, well-travelled by some notable national feminist organisations (Hamzić 2019). But it has shown, too, that a small number of *khwajasara* non-governmental collectives had not necessarily arisen in congruence with the wishes of local *khwajasara* communities. As a non-governmental worker amidst such turmoil told me, there were moments when local, mostly middle-class, *men* would come up and say, ‘[l]et’s assemble a group of *hijre* and call it a CBO [community-based organisation]’ (Hamzić 2016: 283). Connected to all this were complaints that some *khwajasara* had made, to me and other researchers, that some of those ‘conference-hopping’ individuals were not necessarily their true representatives. Once again, one’s distance from the *dera*—as a source of kinship or, better, ‘feeling of belongingness’ (*apnapan*) (Mazumdar 2016: 26)—may have been the deciding factor in whether one could *still* embody and represent the kind of sociality and politics that the majority of *khwajasara* subscribed to in their post-home lifeworlds.

However, the spatial and identitary formations provided by the *dera* were not static or sedentary *per se*. Rather, they presumed a type of constant journeying towards thereness—in gender, in spirit, in the body—along with fellow travellers. This thereness could not be simply construed as *hijrapan*, precisely because it transgressed the spectacle (*tamasha*)—so ordinarily associated with *khwajasara*—and reached deep into the performativity beyond the public act and the actuality of post-home-coming unfettered by a spatial or identitary destination. And, as we shall see, such thereness was manifest *especially* when a *khwajasara*—guided by her *murid*, her *pir* and an other-worldly sense of the Self—began an ascetic journey towards her Home in the hereafter.

After post-home

Jala was squatting on the floor next to Saima’s divan. By now the dusk had fallen and the last call for the evening prayer (*ṣalāt al-maghrib*, *maghrib namaaz*) still echoed in the distance. She was a Christian and Saima’s *chela*. Still, she was holding in her hand a picture of her *pir*. ‘I often go to his *dergah* [shrine],’ she told me. ‘We go there and pray for ourselves and for our families. We dance there and join our hands in prayer’. Saima, a Muslim, explained, ‘[w]hen one becomes a disciple of a *pir* [...] one is taught how to become a better person, how to immerse oneself in [*ṣalāt*]’ (Hamzić 2016: 164). *Khwa-*

jasara's spiritual journeys placed little emphasis on nominal religious differences and their common hieropraxis was intimately linked with frequent visits to the *dergah* of their *pir*, where they immersed themselves in various devotional practices—some of which they led, some of which they followed (Jaffer 2017: 177). Dotted throughout the country as a testament to South Asia's never-faltering Ṣūfī spiritual geographies, these bustling shrines offered *khwajasara* a threshold (this, too, is the literal meaning of *dergah*) to the hereafter, a palpable sense of an eternal home after post-home in which they and their inner *murid* would eventually join their *pir* and their God. Journeying towards a *dergah* was, at times, an ascetic experience, where a *khwajasara* would renounce all relations and possessions to become a *faqir* (from Arabic: *faqīr*, poor person; plural: *fuqarā'*), the spiritual seeker depending solely upon the divine mercy and guidance. This sort of devotion would, however, culminate at the *dergah* in the state of *mast*, a sense of being intoxicated by one's love for God—and, by extension, one's love for one's fellow spiritual and human co-travellers—that made one 'completely and genuinely consumed in divine pleasure such that nothing else matters' (ibid.: 186).



Fig. 5. Community kitchen (*langar*) adjacent to Madho Lal Hussain's *dergah* in Lahore.
Photo: Sameer Shafi Warraich.

The *dergah* was also a place of gender transience. Saima's *pir*, for example, was Shah Hussain, a sixteenth-century Punjabi Ṣūfī poet whose love for a young beardless Brahmin named Madho Lal has led to Hussain himself becoming known as Madho Lal Hussain. Many Pakistani *khwajasara* have told me they believed that Madho Lal was, in fact, also a *khwajasara*. Besides, the spiritual oneness of the poet and his beloved transgressed the earthly genders and, for that matter, sexualities, too (Kugle 2000; Kidwai 2000; Kugle 2007). A Mughal-time Ṣūfī poet—such as the famous Bulleh Shah—would often switch to the female first person voice (and sometimes attire), as a result,

presumably, of the state of *mast* (Jaffer 2017: 185). *Khwajasara*'s hieropraxis was similarly gender-variant. So, just like some mosques, churches and other shrines in the Punjab, Madho Lal Hussain's *dergah* in Lahore was a sacred place that *khwajasara* visited both in their 'female' and 'male' clothes (Hamzić 2016: 164–165). In so doing, they saw themselves as an embodiment of *barzakh*, the mystical isthmus that God has placed between the two seas (Qur'ān 55: 19–21) signifying, in *khwajasara* cosmology, an interworld between the two genders (Hamzić 2016: 272; Corbin 1993: 213; Fakhri 2004 [1970]: 308; Hussaini 2012). Researchers therefore have proposed that *khwajasara* occupied a liminal space that was 'neither here nor there' with respect to the binary vision of either sex or gender, and that this was an expression of their 'spiritual gender identity' (Jaffer 2017: 175, 182–183; Hussaini 2012). But I would suggest that, as an interworld proper, *khwajasara* saw *barzakh*—and, by extension, the *dergah* and other spiritual loci—as manifest of (a higher) thereness, where one's spatial and identitary journey could reach the threshold of the Unity of Being (in Sūfī metaphysics: *wahdat al-wujūd*) so as to return to One Self. That threshold could be experienced and embodied in this life in various fashions, but it could not be crossed, for to do so would mean to enter (forever) one's true Home in One Self in the hereafter.

Such *khwajasara* journeys were neither limited to Pakistan nor, indeed, South Asia. South Asian borders seemed wondrously porous for this subjectivity, with a number of *hijre* regularly crossing between countries—sometimes even 'without a visa and passport' (Hossain 2018: 325)—for the reasons of trade, communal dispute resolution (or other intra-*hijre* affairs) and, indeed, pilgrimage. Some have completed the *hajj* or the *'umra* (the main and the lesser Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca) and claimed that they had seen *aghāwāt* there and thought them to be just like themselves. Such journeys were often indicative of what Ratna Kapur described as 'another way of being in the world, where freedom is addressed not as an explicit, imposed process but as a modality of self-transformation that functions as a catalyst for external emancipation' (Kapur 2018: 239). Freedom, in other words, was primarily in thereness, whether experienced in a post-home or in one's pilgrimage as/to the threshold to one's Home after post-home. In meeting *aghāwāt* on such a journey *khwajasara* may have completed a trans-historical cycle of gender-variant thereness, across spaces and times. This certainly would not be unusual for *khwajasara* metaphysics, so geared towards exploratory senses of the subject, including that subject's gender and bodily/spatial identities.

Conclusion

The critical phases in a *khwajasara* life path I have endeavoured to engage with in this article are, of course, at best an approximation, a brief sketch of *khwajasara* identitary and material dwelling practices, which, in reality, did

not always cohere. Some *khwajasara* felt alienated by the explicit and implicit community hierarchies; some bore the brunt of Pakistan's dominant narratives of belonging and habituation to such an extent that they felt orphaned both within and without their post-homes; still some saw an opportunity for 'upward mobility' in the country's entertainment, news or non-governmental industries that presumed severing all but essential ties with their former *de-
ray*. Even the *dera*, as the key model of *khwajasara* social occupancy, provided a type of homeliness that had to be constantly negotiated through and depended upon numerous domestic and non-domestic relations. And yet, the affective and habitual ties produced in and by the *dera* so directed a great many *khwajasara* that journeying *from* it, whether into the new social and political realities of *khwajasara*'s public life or towards one's Home after post-home, still felt as a form of thereness (political, spiritual and so on) and, therefore, open to individual and communal experimentation.

It was this resilient, exploratory spirit that seems to have sustained *khwajasara* lifeworlds the most, often against all odds. Its latest iteration, manifest in the Pakistani *khwajasara*'s strong identitary claim on the Mughal past, sought both to decolonise their communal common ground and to conjure up the visions of a dignified and less violent future. As we have seen, there is much in this eventful past that the *khwajasara* history of today could build on, but also some cautionary tales of never-quite-perfect homecoming. Similarly, the recent *khwajasara* public activism is not without its pitfalls. Careful though it may be to foreground an essentially intersectional politics—akin, perhaps, to the demands of transfeminist collectives elsewhere (Stryker and Bettcher 2016)—it nonetheless may have inadvertently exacerbated certain class-based fissures within the *khwajasara* community. It is, therefore, all the more regrettable that the political ties between *khwajasara* and Pakistani feminist movements are still far and few between (Hamzić 2019), though there are some signals that this could change. The class divisions befalling Pakistan's civil society are still a major obstacle, as is the stereotyping of *khwajasara* as the gendered other.

To be sure, such othering is still perpetuated in academic research, too. A cursory glance at recent works on *khwajasara* reveals, for example, studies accusing them of 'femaling males' or of 'socially constructed kinlessness' (Sultana and Kalyani 2012; Taparia 2011), whilst *dera* is routinely described as 'pseudo-household' (Alizai et al. 2017: 1217). Such research follows the long trajectory of colonial and post-colonial 'scientific' works, which sought to exoticise and pathologise *khwajasara* and, in some extreme examples, do away with them altogether. Against the background of such violence, *khwajasara* immersed themselves fully in South Asia's bustling spiritual geographies and crafted an interworld of their own, capable of both containing and communicating with the protean concepts—and spaces—of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'.

It would, therefore, be a mistake to perceive *khwajasara*'s lifeworlds, largely framed by and in *deray*, as abject or inconsequential to the other Pakistani 'ways of living'. My proposal is, rather, that the dynamics of identity and spatial journeying within and throughout the *khwajasara* dwelling strata reveal what one could term as *productive anxieties* about their—or, indeed, everyone's—classed, urbanised, economised and gendered home-life. These anxieties seem to me productive inasmuch as they signal a set of one's collectively and individually acquired life skills that unsettle the affective and material 'truths' and 'commonplaces' about one's self and the other as well as the spatialities such knowledge habituates. For *khwajasara*, at least, homecoming has meant, for a very long time, a struggle for a homeliness that is ultimately contingent on a loss of the homeland's prescriptive forms of dwelling in the world.

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