

## The Poetics and Politics of Pakistani Queer

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### Abstract

*The present research aims to theorize the evolution of queer desire and poetics in Pakistan and also trace the metamorphosis of the oriental Hijra into a cosmopolitan drag queen/king. The lives and works of diasporic Pakistani queer, the poet Ifthi Nasim, and the late controversial poet Fahmida Riaz illustrate the ways queer poetics and politics have been adopted, appropriated and indigenized. In an attempt to explore and deconstruct the complexity of their existence, exoticism and exile, this research borrows and contextualizes Judith Butler's conception of drag—a quintessential queer art. The drag comes to exhibit a distrust of heteronormativity, gender roles, and bodily organization. In the sexually conservative South Asia, drag presents an alternate world view. It not only questions existing political structures but also attempts to challenge major philosophical and religious conceptions. Associated with the polymorphous existence of Butler's drag queen/king is the Deleuze and Guattari's Body—without—Organs which is deterritorialized in that it is a site of opposing forces, rather than a stable entity. In its avowal to a gender other than the one biologically assigned, the drag queen/king proposes a rhizomatic self. Its imitation of a gender which is not originally his/her the drag king/queen embodies physical and gendered transgression. The queer especially in the South Asian context is also a cultural deterritorialization. Its transformation from parochial Hijra (Transgender) performance to a more radical and cultured drag lends it a cosmopolitan outlook. The south Asian/Pakistani-Muslim drag asks for a more inclusive and non-hegemonic LGBTQ representation which marks the beginning of a decolonized and multiracial queer group.*

**Key words:** Rhizomatic, body without Organs, queer, deterritorialization

### Introduction

The journey of South Asian queer and their involvement in politics is a tradition whose history can be traced to the status and position of eunuchs in Mughal India and other Islamic empires. In a series of Mughal history written by the Venetian traveler Niccolao Manucci, and translated by William Irvine *Storia Do Mogor* or *Mogul India* (1653-1708), Manucci records the various ways the Eunuchs participated in all things domestic as well as political. Many eunuchs or *Khawaja Saras*, as they were called, rose to important positions of *Nazirs* and *Mansabdars* demonstrating their social acceptance and their integral role in governance. From domestic custodians to army generals, court advisors and royal teachers, the *Khawaja sara* community wielded enormous power, respect and wealth. With the decline of the Mughal Empire however, things for the transgender community began to change. Under laws introduced by the British government which identified, recognized and registered only two genders, male and female, eunuchs were included under the category of dangerous outlaws. This dehumanization deprived eunuchs of financial support and patronage which pushed them to destitution and social exclusion. Once out of favour and out of court, the Mughal eunuchs were further divided into two or often multiple categories. It was around this colonial period that *Khawaja saras* and *Hijras* were considered two distinct types of eunuchs where the former were regarded as affluent and influential

while the latter were illiterate, corrupt and economically marginal (Hinchy 20) . It was further argued that while Khawaja saras embodied “noble masculinity”, hijras adopted feminine clothing and names. Deprived of royal patronage and further reduced to invisibility because of the colonial laws, these eunuchs were forced to live off alms they received from performing at weddings, fairs and childbirths. This performance consisted of obscene, bawdy gestures and sexual overtures. The theatricality of this cross dressed eunuch made him a creature suitable for entertainment only. The involvement of this eunuch, the *hijra*, within the Indian household became minimum, and his participation in state politics nonexistent. Followed by this effacement was also the systematic othering of the hijra community. In colonial India, a sexist ethnographic detailing of the community helped define, describe and classify the hijra as one belonging to the ‘criminal caste’. This classification criminalized anyone who “appeared, dressed, ornamented like a woman” when he was not, and “danced or played music” (Reddy 26-27) in public or private gathering. This promulgation clearly manifested the ways conservative Victorian colonists sought to control, regulate and obstruct both the body and the labour of the community. Hijra invisibility however was not easy to achieve. Forced to abandon their traditional livelihood, hijra mendicants became a common sight. In their effort to secure alms, the hijra resorted to his customary attire and habits. Their cross dressing became an important symbol of resistance. Their exodus from the intimate interiors of the Mughal household forced them to a life of eternal mobility. What began as an effort to erase and criminalize the hijra community, became their strength and fortitude. Their everyday presence on streets challenged the erasure they were threatened with. All efforts to limit the mobility and existence of the community resulted in their endemic appearance. An important aspect of the Hijra visibility was a reminder of the discursive nature of gender. Against the construction of colonial hypermasculinity, and the Indian effeminacy, the cross dressed hijra signified the instability of gender values and norms. While the colonialists believed in upholding the masculine code, the hijra repudiated it through an androgynous dissidence. Despite strict English laws, the hermaphrodite in India continued to persist. Post-independence politics that operated on similar notions of masculinity and marginal/domesticated femininity continued to demonize the community as an abjection.

The focus of this research therefore is to explore the politics and aesthetics of contemporary hijra performance. The argument entails making a connection between the hijra and the drag for which the research intends to draw an axis between Butler’s notion of the drag king/queen and Deleuzian concepts of ‘assemblage’, ‘Body Without Organs’, and ‘becoming and sensation’. Through this union of the Deleuzian theory to the drag performance the research seeks to establish drag as a practice that liberates the body. The Deleuzian lens will also be employed to investigate how drag as a practice aids the body to extend, transform, break gender contradictions and become something different. In the context of Pakistan, the drag viewed through the Deleuzian perspective makes a significant statement. Eschewed both for his/her body and identity, the queer in Pakistan take various forms in a bid to be recognized and accepted. The contemporary face of Pakistani educated queer, the drag queens, is the most recent phenomenon whereby the traditional hijra has been reincarnated with a political consciousness. Alongside cultural metamorphosis, from hijra to drag, the Pakistani drag is also a deterritorialised subject. From gender dysphoria to exile, the Pakistani-Muslim drag embodies cultural values that are at one end historically rooted in the subcontinent and on the other hand in western-urban club culture. This association of the Pakistani drag to the street and the club, to general masses and metropolitan audiences and to the east as well

as the west is a sign of how the queer body is rhizomatically defined. The Pakistani-Muslim drag is a paradigmatic example of unstable, unfixed and volatile origins. His movement from the place of birth to the *place of birth* of his new identity marks a mobility that has connections but no destinations. In Deleuzian terms, a rhizome is a philosophical antidote to the hierarchical structures of binaries. The drag, a corporeal rhizome, therefore subverts the stringent categories of man/woman, us/them and heterosexual/homosexual. In the case of the subcontinent, predominantly Pakistan, the rhizomatic drag body threatens and permeates the obsessively dogmatic and patriarchal world of politics.

### Queer Desire and Drag Politics

Unlike his predecessor, the hijra, whose international face is the contemporary Pakistani-Muslim 'drag queen' is a performer but is also an activist. Realizing that the body is culturally, religiously, and politically controlled, drag and queer right activists like the poet Iftikhar Naseem alias Ifti Nasim alongside radical feminist poet Fahmida Riaz joined the line of poets/artists in exile at the very onset of their rebellious careers. This relocation becomes an important and recurring metaphor in the lives of South Asian queer. Their movement away from home signifies a realization of their true homosexual self. Coming out in this context then is impossible until one moves out and away. Both Naseem and Riaz have varying careers but similar histories. Despite having been raised by well to do families, Nasim and Riaz faced exile because of their queer choices. While Naseem faced sexual and economic abuse, Riaz had to experience political persecution and life threatening situations. It was not until both these poets migrated that they truly experienced sexual and bodily liberation.

Iftikhar Nasim (1946-2011) popularly known as Ifti Nasim received attention as a poet when he published his first anthology of poems in Urdu language titled *Narman* a Persian word meaning hermaphrodite or half-man, half-woman. As the title indicates the anthology was Nasim's first candid confession as a queer. In a rather bold poem called *Baba*, Nasim argues for an alternative sexuality and questions the patriarchal family structures:

My father, everyone says my appearance resemble yours.  
My eyes, my forehead, my lips, my accent, the way I talk, sit around, the way I walk;  
movement of my hands, everything is like yours only.  
I have heard that the son is the heir of his father's lineage.  
A questions comes to my mind. If I am exactly like you  
then why my sexual preference is so much different from yours? (Nasim)

The poet's unease over a masculine structure of desire, his dissatisfaction with heteronormativity and his rejection of a phallogentric and monolithic conception of love are recurrent themes in his poetry. Nasim's audacious involvement of a father figure all while he describes his "sexual preference" perfectly describes how the queer Nasim was wary of the masculinity expected of a male child. Where a patrilineal family is strictly controlled, unified and rigid, Nasim hoped to dissociate himself from his father and create connections that are unstable, multicultural and inclusive. This attempt at subverting and revolting against the hierarchical family structures leaves behind an array of open spaces. It is through these fissures that a rhizomatic queer identity is created. In Deleuzian terms, a rhizomatic existence, an opposition to the vertical structure of a tree, is an inversion of all things phallogentric. The father in Nasim's poem *Baba* is a phallic figure whom the poet desires to restrain by putting forth an unconventional and unaccepted sexual orientation.

In a family *tree* there is an obvious causal relationship between a single point of origin (the father) and his offspring. Thus the image of the tree expresses how the dominant model of Western thinking creates a single version of the truth (one tree, seemingly living in isolation – or, if you like, one father and one family), from which the ‘Other’ is then defined—the space around the tree or that which is ‘not tree’. (Sutton and Jones 3)

It is this ‘not tree’ that the drag body tries to become. Its resistance to any unitary version of gender, sexuality and anatomy creates a possibility of multiplicity. Against the authoritative phallic/father figure, the drag king/queen not only exposes gender as a construct through performances and impersonations but also deconstructs the sanctity of familial kinship. In breaking away from fatherly or male-centric desire, sexuality and even domestic spaces, the drag establishes an alternative institution, one that is neither patriarchal nor matriarchal. Ifti Nasim’s *Narmani* poetry, a neologism coined after his anthology *Narman*, is another example of how the poet destabilized established poetic norms and created a multiethnic form of beatnik poetry. *Narmani*, which literally means true poetry, became a celebrated form of verse for many who sought to talk about taboo subjects. In an interview preserved and transcribed by South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), Nasim talks about how his use of all three languages English, Urdu and Punjabi enabled an expression that was at once tied to and free of any particular poetic tradition. What he could not write in one language (for fear of censorship and castigation) he wrote in another. Like his titles then, *Narman* and *Myrmecophile*, which signify a consolidation of opposing anatomies, his poetry too is a set of connections. It is through these ‘assemblages’ lingual, thematic and conceptual that Nasim acknowledges drag and its potency. The cover illustration of both his anthologies depict a figure that is devoid of any or all stable identities. The ambiguity around the silhouettes is deliberate as any possibility to reduce a man either to his anima or animus is not just impossible but also unjust.

In the year 2000, Ifti Nasim released his second book *Myrmecophile*, a collection of poems about homosexual love, sexual longing and physical intimacy. The snapshot on the cover is of an unapologetic Nasim, decked out in full drag, wearing a blonde wig and jewelry. This portrait of the poet, cross-dressed and transvestite, along with the title of the collection, signals a network of connections in all directions and of all sorts. The motley creation, in this case the drag on

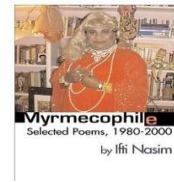


Fig 1 Nasim's self-image

the cover page, points to an unending system of relations, links and associations. It is through a series of connections, that new developments, identities and conceptions of the body emerge in what is labelled in Deleuzian terms as an ‘assemblage’. An assemblage allows a body to be viewed not as organic or unified entity but an organism demonstrating dynamic and disparate animate and inanimate characteristics and qualities. Further deconstruction of Nasim’s drag appearance unravels the fusion the portrait attempts to make. Signifying hijra tradition of the subcontinent through a flamboyant eastern attire and white-western drag ethics through a blonde wig, see fig.1, the poet indicates an important crossover of his life. From a Pakistani poet to an immigrant gay rights activist, Nasim embodies a moving out into new territories. This ‘deterritorialized’ existence, undergoing change and modification in both culture and geography compliments the drag’s existence. Living both as male and female, both in and outside the place of origin and being both accepted and rejected, the myrmecophile truly challenges categories, and classifications. In fact, the myrmecophile truly parallels Nasim’s and other Pakistani-Muslim

drag's life. The symbiotic relationship which this creature enjoys serves a perfect metaphor for the Muslim queer who having escaped persecution and censorship in their home countries look for a resettlement elsewhere. This however is not the end for a rhizomatic drag body. The migration from global south to global north indicates the beginning of another oppressive bond. Once colonized, the settler eternally remains the alien and the other. It is this feeling of homelessness and diaspora that Nasim records in his poem, "An Immigrant" from the collection *Myrmecophile*. His 'not tree' or matriarchal conception of a homeland is a direct contrast to the popular and dogmatic vision of a masculine/patriarchal home country. He writes "I grew up, / Traveled thousands of miles / To the other side of the sun... / I am tall and a proud / Citizen of the world's biggest country / But my umbilical cord is still / Attached to my mother's womb" (86)

Judith Butler in her 2004 book *Undoing Gender*, talks about the ways in which gender is always a 'doing', a performance that is incessantly carried out within a "scene of constraint" (1). A verbal investigation of her choice of word reveals to us the nature of gender itself. Like Deleuzian 'becoming', Butler's 'doing' is a lexical verb that challenges the static and stable category of to 'be' a male or female. Butler's argument that one is always 'doing' gender implies a contextualized enactment. What she calls the scenes of constraints, are in reality norms under which a sex presumes a role and a specificity. A drag body is therefore an abjection, an abnormality because it fails to comply with the performance it is normally set out to perform. Deleuzian 'becoming' becomes a lucid category to define this transgender existence. Once the gender is 'undone' from both body and sex, its "movement from stable, "molar" entity to indeterminable "molecular" nonidentity" (Garner 30) begins. The trans body is always becoming, is always in opposition to the original body and is rarely ever complete. Ifti Nasim's exodus from his home country, his un-closeted life and his unconventional poetry is accordingly a becoming of the Deleuzian nature. His poetry and later his induction into the Chicago Gay Club subverts the structures and borders of body, religion and national belonging. Some of his controversial poems challenge the misogynistic elements of all major world religions. These poems often border on blasphemy but a liberal more secular position elucidates his concern over the exegesis of Holy Scriptures that has translated and transformed a generous and tolerant culture of the subcontinent. It is this form of Islamic construal that rallied with the colonials to regulate and control gender plurality. Nasim's lamentation over the loss of a society that was once inclusive and less distrustful about sexual deviation is a theme of many of his poems.

Fahmida Riaz, a poet "brutally honest in her expression and completely unafraid to countenance love and sexual desire" (Rumi 13), shares with Nasim the anxiety of altered times. In a rather Foucauldian fashion, Riaz expresses how discourse, produced first under colonization and later Zia's regime, excluded and ousted the third gender. In a heartfelt poem *A Eunuch's Whisper*, she exasperatingly notes how "the world has changed" (170), and achingly recalls:

There was a time  
When this country was a happy place  
I was a herald of joyousness...  
And for this reason alone  
I remained always in the shadow of mercy  
No one young or old dared to incur my malediction (170)

In the same dirge, Riaz discloses a significant element of the colonial/patriarchal discourse. The "she-Majnuns" and "he-Lailas" (171) decries the existence of colonial categories that views the

world only as a bipartite division between the male and female. The only recluse and expression for a queer body then is to articulate in a language that is not marred with majoritarian politics. For Riaz, Persian is a language perfectly capable of capturing queer experiences. The rhizomatic existence of Riaz's eunuch who is "Like a tree without a seed / the tale of "transience" in opposition to "eternal" (170) can be realized only in a non-normative linguistic tradition. *The Body Torn* is this attempt to create a queer poetic tradition. In her exploration of the female and trans body, unabashed manifestation of sexual desire and visceral longings, Fahmida Riaz discovers from within the patriarchal and masculine idiom of Urdu poetry, a tradition of feminine poetics. The eviction of Persian as the language of the seculars, the islamization of Urdu in Zia's regime, and the relentless hostility towards *Tehrik e Niswan* of the 80's curbed all expressions of sexuality, eroticization and desire thereby depriving queer sensibility a legitimation in language, art and literature. Riaz's collection of poems under the aforementioned title *The Body Torn* enunciates some critical bodily experiences. Poems like *The Virgin*, *The Kiss of the Tongues*, *She is an Unclean Woman*, *Aqleema*, and *The Laughter of a Woman* voices feminine and queer desire. Experimenting in what can perhaps be called 'écriture féminine', Cixous coinage for women's writing, Riaz's poems abound in images of "blood, milk and menstrual discharge" (59). While she is unapologetic about female sexual pleasure, she is also critical of structures that recognize and legitimize heterosexual and phallogocentric desires only. Desire in her is neither phallic nor vaginal. Her devout celebration of love in the poem, *The Kiss of the Tongues*, is a suggestion to a possible non-heteronormative relationship as it subtly avoids mentioning any gender. It is in these slippages, absences and evasions that Fahmida Riaz manages to construct a queer consciousness within a patriarchal and often misogynistic masculine Urdu language.

The induction and inauguration of a queer expression in language make it accessible to queer politics too. Once language has been decentered of its phallogocentric snarl, or at least purged of its masculine idiom, by inserting in poetry queer neologism and biology, it can now be borrowed to talk about queer activism and gender policies. When Ifti Nasim founded SANGAT, an organization devoted to gays and lesbians of Asian origin, he sought to make it an organization that fought for citizenship rights of South Asian queer. In an article written by his longtime friend, Azra Raza, for an online blog *Three Quarks Daily*, she records Nasim's earnest efforts to try and rescue queer individuals seeking asylum in America. Not just content with solidarity marches and street parades, Nasim invested money to hire lawyers for people persecuted for their sexual orientation (Raza 2011). He also condemned *Tehrik e Niswan* for being too cautious and exclusive in their activism. In a poem, titled *An Answer to the Female Liberationists: For Kishwar Nahid*, Nasim calls out women liberationists, "where were you / --You who screamed for women's rights / Why were you silent / When I washed dishes: the eunuch going house to house" (86), and questions feminism for ignoring marginal/minority women and also transgender communities. Queer politics on the other hand, unlike feminist movements, is more than just speaking of gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual and hijra communities. Its concern with larger questions of gender and sexuality, its connectedness with class, gender, caste and religion and its preoccupation with issues of body image, gender dysphoria and identity make it an inclusive humanist project. Nasim poetic and what could be called political career was an endless series of connections "linked to others in rhizomatic assemblages" (Nayar 48). Throughout his poetry and through organizations like SANGAT, he established a clear inclinations for a drag like existence—an existence that was neither male nor female. His romantic idealization for "a man in a saree", "dancing and singing

for the amusements of the crowd” (Nasim 86) brings back the image of an Indian of precolonial days which was still undestroyed by the ascetic Christian morality. He celebrates the lives of Narman (hermaphrodite) and Myrmecophile (an organism inhabiting an ant’s nest), also titles of his poetry collections, always preferring becoming over being, shifts and evolution over stability, always desiring over constant/singular identity. Like Deleuze and Guattari’s *Body—Without—Organs* which is a body defined by multiplicity, plurality, unorganized energy, genderless existence and fluidity, Nasim’s *Her/Man* is a fusion of genders untouched by heterosexual norms, patriarchal oppressions and phallogocentric values,

I am a two-in-one...

Only a man can complete a man

Only a woman can complete a woman

I am Man/Woman

I am complete within myself

O divided ones

Do not try to tear me apart

Heal thyself! (89)

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