The January 2023 special edition of the literary magazine *Zauq* is historic in the sense that it is the first-ever issue of an Urdu publication devoted to the topic of *khwajasira*, a marginalized transgender group in India and Pakistan that is referenced by a variety of names across the South Asian subcontinent, including *mukhanas*, *khunsa* and *hijra*. In his editorial, chief editor Syed Nusrat Bukhari discloses that his publisher conditioned the special edition with approval by a *mufti*, a qualified Islamic jurist empowered to give a ruling called *fatwa* (that is, an explanation or clarification of a complex issue in Islamic terms). This speaks volumes about the stigma surrounding *khwajasiras* in Pakistan, as here – like in many other cultural contexts – transgender persons struggle against societal norms when finding their identity. Bukhari states that society’s collective indifference to this transgender group and their dehumanizing treatment has never been a secret, and this special edition is an attempt to make up for that heedlessness. This activist platform is apparent across the volume’s diverse set of contributions, which include eleven essays, three short stories, three biographies, one translation, two poems and one interview.

*Affiliation*
Muhammad Sheeraz
he/him/his
Department of English, International Islamic University, Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada
Email: muhammad.sheeraz@mcgill.ca
Perhaps the long-held stigma against the community is the reason why the special edition includes only one contribution authored by a khwajasira individual, Fiazullah alias Faizi, who was interviewed by the chief editor while also contributing an essay on the community’s code language, called ‘Farsi’ (though different from the Farsi associated with Iran and other countries). The code language is primarily lexical, incorporating invented words or borrowings from varied linguistic sources into the syntax of Urdu and other local languages. Noted sociocultural linguist Kira Hall has studied varieties of Farsi spoken by hijras in Varanasi and Delhi (e.g. Hall 1996, 2005), but there is very little research on the use of Farsi by khwajasiras in Pakistan (although see Sheeraz 2010). Faizi expresses strongly affirming understandings of this ‘secret’ language, arguing that every word of Farsi is carefully coined, and is therefore not only beautiful but also less arbitrary. This provides an important counter-perspective on Farsi, given the negative ideologies popularly attributed to community members and their language practices. For instance, Faizi reveals that the word for ‘addiction’ in Farsi is taal, a word that in Urdu refers to a traditional rhythmic pattern in classical South Asian music. Likewise, he reveals that the word for ‘thought’ in Farsi is peelka or peelma, a word that in Urdu means yellow, or in Faizi’s interpretation, gold-like. Faizi suggests that this difference of meaning attests to the wisdom of the language’s inventors in that they equate thought with gold. More technical descriptions of the language can be found in Faizi’s MPhil thesis (Fiazullah 2020), recently submitted to Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad and supervised by Pakistan’s leading lexicographer, Rauf Parekh.¹

Most of the other writings in the volume read like an urgently passionate affirmation of the ostracized tribe of transgender persons. These poems, short stories, biographies and essays successfully convey the reality of discrimination and ongoing violence against the community, and make a powerful call to action on the part of the society and state. For instance, Tahir Aseer’s ‘Shahzada’ (literally, ‘prince’) is a life history of one of the writer’s acquaintances, a khwajasira marginalized throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood for not meeting cisgender societal expectations. True to the vicious cycle in which most khwajasiras are caught, the story recounts Shahzada’s birth as a male child, their effeminate ways in their teenage years, expulsion from their birth home, induction to a khwajasira household and finally, the resulting experience of poverty, exclusion, vulnerability and exposure to fatal STIs. Included in the volume is renowned Urdu novelist Neelum Ahmad Bashir’s biography of Iftikhar Nasim Ifti, the famous Urdu writer and poet who identified himself as transgender and died in Chicago in 2011. Ifti gained international recognition with the
publication of his collection of Urdu poetry, *Narman* – a word that literally means ‘hermaphrodite’ – which met with controversy in Pakistan.

Also included in the volume are the poems ‘Khwajasira’ by Awais Malik and ‘Moorat’ by Wajid Amir, both lyrical laments over the miseries that frame a *khwajasira’s* life. Short stories such as Saba Mumtaz Bano’s ‘Nimana’ lowly, Muhammad Nawaz’s ‘Reza Reza khwab’ broken and scattered dream and Adil Saeed Qureshi’s ‘Kundi’ doorknob show how families of *khwajasiras* feel burdened by the ‘What will people say?’ cultural shame augmented by both the society and the state. The social hypocrisy depicted in some of these fictional accounts reminds readers of Max Lobe’s tale of betrayal in ‘The Neighborhood Mirror’. Lobe tells the story of Angy, a trans woman who finds it hard to come to terms with her masculine body and is later betrayed by her beloved and subjected to violence. Interestingly, the special edition carries Qaiser Nazeer Khawar’s abridged Urdu translation of Lobe’s tale of betrayal (originally published in French). Nevertheless, in his critical essay analysing Urdu short stories on third gender, Syed Zubair Shah rightly points out that whatever has been written on *khwajasiras* is far too little, given the issues they face in their everyday lives.

Although contributions to this special edition are overall very supportive of *khwajasiras*, the editors do also include more conservative religious and scientific perspectives regarding *khwajasira* identity, to meet expectations of special editions such as this in the Pakistani cultural context. Specifically, two of the essays explore biological vs. social aspects of *khwajasira* identity in Pakistan from these standpoints. Muhammad Zakariya’s short essay, for instance, offers a biological description of a hermaphrodite. Syed Monis Raza, on the other hand, focuses on highlighting social as well as biological differences between intersex and transgender identities. Although Raza, basing his argument mainly on medical science, sees intersex as a biological abnormality and denies the existence of a third gender altogether, Muhammad Saeed Qadri, in his essay informed by the Islamic framework, powerfully responds, ‘God Almighty has divided human beings into three genders, one of which is man, the second woman and the third is called *mukhanas, khunsa, khwajasira* or *hijra*’. Nevertheless, while Qadri bases his acceptance of third genders on biological factors and sees them as divinely sanctioned, he also views those who take on this identity as ‘cursed’.

These accounts, however, do not outweigh the many humanizing discussions of the community seen in the rest of the special edition. In his essay ‘Khwajasira’, Muzamil Ahmad estimates that the population of *khwajasiras* in Pakistan is about 100,000, and about 100 *khwajasiras* have been murdered since 2015. In his essay on understanding trans identities, Nisar Ali Bhatti traces the history of hatred back to the British colonization of India,
when the multiplicity of gender identity was crushed by the enforcement of the colonial government’s law of 1871 that criminalized khwajasiras of India (see Hinchy 2019 for more detail). Bhatti suggests that one reason for the intolerance of the British against khwajasiras might be their elite status during the Mughal period. As Bhatti points out in a second essay on transgender characters in Urdu novels, khwajasiras used to hold key administrative positions, including the governorship of Gujarat, Delhi, Attock and Agra under different Mughal rulers. Importantly, Bhatti sees the historic khwajasira-friendly 2009 verdict of the Supreme Court of Pakistan as a milestone that gives a range of rights to the community, including the addition of a third gender category on national identity cards, and he urges the government to work towards the implementation of the Transgender Act of 2018. Passed by the National Assembly of Pakistan, the Transgender Act of 2018 is highly controversial for granting each transgender person ‘a right to be recognized as per his or her self-perceived gender identity.’

Like other authors in the special edition, Bhatti sees the quantity of what he calls ‘transfiction’ in Urdu as insufficient for voicing the plights of khwajasiras. Essays such as Saba Mumtaz Bano’s ‘Khwajasira bhi insan haen’ transgender persons are humans and Hussain Amjad’s ‘Mera khwajasira’ my transgender person also call for action on the part of society to treat khwajasiras better and become their voice against cruelty. Other contributions suggest that what is especially needed is for society to find more ways to support the education, health services and livelihood of khwajasira persons. As for the government’s role in fostering this support, some excellent measures are outlined as possibilities in the chapters entitled ‘Obligations of the Government’ and ‘Protection of the Rights of Transgender Persons’ in the Transgender Persons Act (2018). These measures include establishing protection centres and safe houses for transgender persons, formulating vocational training programs, providing easy loan schemes and grants, and ensuring transgender persons’ rights to inheritance, education, employment, health, the vote, property and access to public places.

At a time when Pakistan’s Transgender Persons Act of 2018 is under discussion for amendments by the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, listening to transgender persons such as Sara Gill – the first medical doctor in Pakistan to come out as transgender, as mentioned by Muneer Abbas Sipra in his essay – may inspire readers of this historical Urdu special edition to find ways to value and better support the khwajasira community. Although the khwajasira identity has been a part of the South Asian subcontinent for centuries, with community members performing various significant roles in society, much work needs to be done concerning inclusivity and advocacy for khwajasira rights.
Notes

1 Parekh was also Head of the National Language Promotion Department, formerly called the National Language Authority, Pakistan’s most prestigious institution for the promotion and development of the Urdu language.


References


