

## Identity and Representation in Pakistani Theatre: Khawaja Sira and the Dynamics of Cultural Discourses

Sorin-Dan BOLDEA\*

Raeem FAROOQ\*

Alexandru-Octavian CĂLINA\*

**Abstract:** This article examines how the identity of the Khawaja Sira trans community is constructed and represented in Pakistani theatre, in relation to the contemporary social, cultural, and legal context. Starting from the historical status of this community, often associated with the idea of a “third gender,” the study highlights the persistent tension between formal recognition and social marginalization. In this framework, artistic representation becomes a crucial space for negotiating identity. The analysis considers both representations in film, such as the case of *Joyland*, and contemporary theatrical practices, ranging from the commercial circuit of stage shows and mujra to theatre initiatives that allow the community self-representation. Drawing on the concepts of representation and performativity, the article investigates the extent to which theatre functions as a space of resistance or, conversely, as a mechanism for reproducing stereotypes. The findings suggest that theatre offers a privileged framework for expression and visibility, yet remains marked by structural ambivalence, where identity can be simultaneously affirmed and transformed into spectacle.

**Keywords:** identity; representation; acting; Pakistani theatre; marginality

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\* Dan Boldea, researcher, actor and playwright affiliated with *Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu*, Department of Theatre.

\* Raeem Farooq, marketing specialist and alumnus of the *Foundation for Advancement of Science and Technology*, Department of Marketing, Islamabad, Pakistan.

\* Alexandru-Octavian Călină, communication specialist and Master’s student at the *University of Bucharest, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies*, Department of Communication.

# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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## Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of representing marginalized identities has become central in cultural and theatre studies. In Pakistan, the Khawaja Sira community occupies a paradoxical position: it is culturally and legally recognized, yet socially marginalized. This tension is directly reflected in artistic space, where identity is simultaneously made visible and constrained through cultural, moral, and commercial codes.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of representation theory, media and art do not simply reflect reality but actively produce meanings, hierarchies, and forms of social intelligibility. In this sense, the representation of the Khawaja Sira community must be understood not only as presence on stage or screen, but also as the result of regimes of gaze, consumption, and interpretation.<sup>2</sup> In the Pakistani context, this discussion becomes even more significant because “theatre” does not represent a unified field. There is a major distinction between contemporary critical, social, or institutional theatre on the one hand, and the commercial circuit of Punjabi stage shows, vulgar comedy theatre, and contemporary mujra<sup>3</sup> on the other. This internal rupture prevents any assumption that the stage is automatically a space of emancipation. On the contrary, for the Khawaja Sira community, the stage can function either as a site of exploitation and ridicule, or as a space for self-representation and symbolic claim-making.<sup>4</sup> This article aims precisely to explore this tension. It first examines the historical, cultural, and legal context of the Khawaja Sira community; then analyzes

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<sup>1</sup> Sabeen Kazmi, *Gender Diversity and the Law in Pakistan: A Critical Decolonial Review of Criminalization and Social Exclusion of Khawaja Sira/Hijra/Gender X*. *Sociology Compass*: e70103. 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.70103>.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Azfar Nisar, *Governance, Thirdness, and the Khawaja Sira of Pakistan. Governing Thirdness: State, Society, and Non-Binary Identities in Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 1–19. Print.

<sup>3</sup> *Mujra* designates a form of musical-choreographic performance originating from South Asian court culture, historically associated with *tawa'ifs* and Mughal artistic traditions. In its historical forms, *mujra* included dance, music, and poetry and was part of a refined performative culture. In contemporary Pakistan, the term is frequently used to designate commercial stage performances, often associated with male popular entertainment, the eroticization of the female or feminized body, and a lower cultural status in dominant discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Bilal, *Pakistani Theatre: A Unique Cultural Form of South Asia*. *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies* Vol. 33, No. 1, 85-95, 2018.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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the limits of media representation through the example of *Joyland*; subsequently discusses the Pakistani stage as a divided space between degraded commercial performance and theatre of resistance; and finally argues that the central dilemma is not simply between visibility and invisibility, but between two forms of visibility: one based on exploitation and consumption, and another built through testimony, dignity, and self-representation.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Khawaja Sira Context: Historical, Cultural, and Legal**

The Khawaja Sira community in Pakistan represents a specific form of gender identity distinct from contemporary Western categories and is often associated with the notion of a “third gender.” In academic literature, the term is used to describe persons whose gender identities do not conform to binary norms, including transgender individuals and other forms of non-normative gender expression. This identity is not merely a psychological or biological category but one deeply rooted in the cultural and historical structures of the South Asian subcontinent.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, Khawaja Sira-type communities held recognized social status in the precolonial period, especially in the Mughal world, where performers and communities associated with feminized or non-binary gender roles could occupy administrative, ceremonial, or cultural functions. At the same time, the broader history of performance in North India and the Indo-Islamic sphere shows the existence of a court culture in which *tawa'ifs* and other performing communities produced music, dance, and poetry of high prestige. Colonialism and later moral campaigns degraded the status of these traditions and contributed to the pathologization of nonconforming bodies and identities. In contemporary Pakistan, the Khawaja Sira community remains visible in social life, especially through participation in rituals such as weddings and childbirth ceremonies, where blessings and traditional dances are performed. Yet this

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/29/pakistan-province-bans-film-about-trans-character>. Accessed on 26.01.2026.

<sup>6</sup> Chanda, S., Patnaik, A., & Chatterjee, S. C., *The Courtesan Project and the Tawa'ifs' Cultural Commons*. *International Journal of the Commons*, 15(1), pp. 195–205. 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1073>.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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visibility is deeply ambivalent: it confirms a form of symbolic recognition while also confining identity within narrowly defined performative functions rather than producing genuine social integration. Recent studies of lived khwaja sira experience in Pakistan continue to document stigma, exclusion, and precarity as dominant conditions.

From a legal perspective, Pakistan is frequently cited as an example of legislative progress in the region. Between 2009 and 2012, the Supreme Court officially recognized the right of transgender persons to be registered as a “third gender” in identity documents, and this process culminated in the adoption of the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act* in 2018. The Act enshrines self-identification and prohibits discrimination in key areas such as education, employment, and access to services.<sup>7</sup> However, scholarship consistently points to a significant gap between legal recognition and social reality. Recent work argues that the legal “third gender” category did not automatically produce meaningful socioeconomic inclusion and did not eliminate the community’s vulnerability. Instead, Khawaja Sira persons continue to face violence, poverty, limited access to education, and symbolic expulsion from respectable social spaces. In this context, art, and theatre in particular, becomes an important space for expression and identity negotiation. Yet, as the following analysis shows, theatre should not be idealized: in Pakistan, the stage can mean both a site of exploitation of marginal bodies and a site of symbolic recovery. This is precisely why the historical, cultural, and legal context is essential for understanding why the representation of the Khawaja Sira community on stage is so tense and so politically charged.

### **Representation in Media: *Joyland* and the Limits of Visibility**

The representation of the Khawaja Sira community in Pakistani media must be understood within the broader framework of representation theory, according to which media do not simply mirror reality but actively produce and structure cultural meanings. In this sense, transgender identities are mediated through visual and narrative frames that not only make them visible but also fix them within recognizable

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pakistan-Transgender-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2020-ENG.pdf?utm>. Accessed on 29.01.2026.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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interpretive patterns. Research on Pakistani media shows that such representations have often been reductive, based on stereotyping, caricature, and the accentuation of difference as social spectacle.<sup>8</sup>

Television in particular, as the dominant medium, has tended to construct transgender characters through an aesthetics of exaggeration: heavy makeup, theatricalized gestures, marked vocal delivery, and easily readable visual signs. This type of representation maintains distance between character and audience and turns identity into a sign of alterity rather than a complex human experience. This distinction between television and cinema is developed explicitly in the comparative study of *Guru* and *Joyland*, which shows that television tends to reproduce the signs of “otherness” while cinema allows more space for empathy and subjectivity.

Within this context, *Joyland*, directed by Saim Sadiq, appears as a significant intervention in the landscape of representation. The film proposes an approach centered on the subjective experience of a transgender character played by Alina Khan and employs a cinematic language that privileges intimacy, ambiguity, and emotional depth. At the same time, *Joyland* makes visible the stark discrepancies that characterized the treatment of transgender performers in Pakistani productions throughout the 2010s. While straight actors routinely received central roles and full audience attention, transgender individuals were often relegated to minor, frequently humiliating appearances during the intermissions between acts, precisely when spectators would leave the hall for breaks such as a cigarette, thus turning their performances into marginal spectacles delivered to near-empty venues. The film further underscores the community’s profound lack of social integration: many Khawaja Sira persons are forced into survival sex work, their lives constantly endangered by violence, mutilation, murder and rape. These realities, repeatedly documented in both media reports and academic studies, remind us that cinematic representation, however empathetic, cannot be detached from the everyday precarity that continues to define transgender existence in Pakistan. Unlike dominant television codes, *Joyland* avoids hyper-stylization and constructs identity through subtle gestures, close framing, and an empathetic relation between character and spectator. The film also received major international recognition in the festival circuit.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Khoula Khan, Noor Aireen Ibrahim, și Ungku Khairunnisa Ungku Mohd Nordin, *Margins and Mainstream: A Comparative Study of Transgender Representation in Pakistani Television and*

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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Its reception in Pakistan, however, reveals the structural limits of representation. The film was initially banned in Punjab, and both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International framed this episode as one of censorship and shrinking freedom of expression in a context already hostile to transgender rights. This reaction demonstrates that the artistic representation of marginalized identities is not only an aesthetic act but also a political one, subject to control, moral anxiety, and public contestation.

Moreover, media visibility can have ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it expands awareness and public discourse; on the other, it may trigger rejection or intensify the vulnerability of those represented. Research on transgender representation in Pakistani press and media points precisely to this instability: to be visible is not necessarily to be accepted.

Thus, the case of *Joyland* reveals a central dilemma of representation: even when identity is presented in a complex and empathetic way, it may remain contested within the social space in which it is produced. Representation becomes a field of negotiation between artistic intention and the cultural limits of reception. At this point, theatre matters not because it is automatically “better” than film, but because it allows a different mode of presence and a different relation between body, gaze, and audience.<sup>10</sup>

### **Pakistani Theatre Between Exploitation and Symbolic Recovery**

To understand Pakistani theatre in relation to the Khawaja Sira community, it is useful to begin with a brief comparison to certain European theatre structures. The European Commission’s sector study shows that in many parts of Europe, especially Central, Northern, and South-Eastern Europe, publicly funded repertory and producing theatre systems remain common, with stable ensembles and more robust institutional infrastructures. In Pakistan, by contrast, research on theatre history and

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*Cinema. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, vol. 9, no. 10, 2025, pp. 4238–4248. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000349>.

<sup>10</sup><https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/11/pakistan-ban-on-film-joyland-showcasing-transgender-character-must-be-immediately-reversed/>. Accessed on 05.02.2026.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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ecology describes a much more fragmented field in which contemporary “serious” theatre coexists with a commercial popular circuit of Punjabi stage shows.<sup>11</sup>

In Pakistan there is no state-subsidized repertory theatre system comparable to the European model of permanent ensembles and publicly funded institutions. The venues that come closest to what is understood in Europe as “institutional” or “state” theatre are in fact cultural spaces most often affiliated with university theatre departments (such as those at NAPA in Karachi or various departments in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad) rather than fully institutionalized public theatres. A small number of cultural centers produce experimental and critical work that aligns more closely with European notions of serious theatre; however, these remain extremely limited in number and reach when compared with the far more numerous music- and dance-oriented commercial venues discussed earlier. Even this already precarious landscape suffered a severe blow in 2023 when the Punjab government intensified crackdowns on commercial theatres, sealing more than ten major venues in Lahore division for alleged obscenity and imposing strict new regulations under the amended Dramatic Performances Act. As a result, many of these theatres no longer operate in any official capacity without heavy censorship. This measure can be read not only as an attack on artistic freedom but also as a further marginalization of the Khawaja Sira community, whose performers have historically found one of their few spaces of visibility precisely within these performative circuits.

This institutional ecology matters. In Pakistan, “theatre” may refer both to social, documentary, political, or experimental stage practices and to commercial urban stage shows dominated by vulgar jokes, musical interludes, and dance, often publicly debated in terms of “obscenity.” In January 2025, for instance, the Punjab government announced hardline measures against actors and dancers involved in what authorities called vulgarity and indecency in commercial theatres, confirming that moral regulation of the stage remains a live issue in the present.<sup>12</sup>

Within this field, *mujra* occupies a crucial yet ambivalent place. Historically, the roots of *mujra* are connected to courtly performance culture and the traditions of *tawa'ifs*, in which music, dance, and poetry were part of a sophisticated artistic world

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<sup>11</sup> <https://cultureactioneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EU-Commission-Theatre-Study-1.pdf>. Accessed on 07.02.2026.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1887702>. Accessed on 07.02.2026.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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of high prestige. Research on *tawa'ifs* and precolonial performance communities makes clear that these forms cannot simply be reduced to vulgarity or prostitution; their decline was accelerated by colonial transformations, moral campaigns, and nationalist reorganizations of respectability.

At the same time, contemporary commercial iterations of mujra and stage shows in Pakistan are widely perceived, including within Pakistan, as low-status entertainment marked by sexism, economic exploitation, and male spectatorship. A SOAS study on masculinity and mujra in Pakistan, together with a comparative analysis of Punjabi stage shows, indicates that these forms operate within a male-dominated cultural economy organized around the consumption of feminine or feminized performance.<sup>13</sup>

This is where the issue becomes particularly important for the Khawaja Sira community. In a context where the “respectable” female body is severely constrained in public space, transgender performers may sometimes be tolerated precisely because they are positioned within the register of excess, scenic exception, or amusement. Their visibility is permitted not through dignity but through availability for spectacle. Materials around the documentary *Showgirls of Pakistan* explicitly describe this industry in terms of censorship, violence, and exploitation, following performers such as Afreen Khan, Uzma Khan, and Reema Jaan, a transgender (khawaja sira) performer, within the commercial mujra economy.

This performance zone, therefore, should not be automatically confused with theatre as critical expression. Rather, it can function as an economy of controlled exposure in which marginal bodies are accepted in order to be watched, consumed, and sometimes ridiculed. In that logic, what is called “theatre” may serve art less than male amusement, and khawaja sira performers may become objects of public entertainment rather than legitimate artistic subjects.

In contrast to this commercial stage, however, contemporary theatrical initiatives are attempting to reclaim performance as a space of voice, memory, and legitimation. The William & Mary project devoted to exploring the struggles of transgender communities in Pakistan through theatre shows how the stage can become

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<sup>13</sup><https://soas-repository.worktribe.com/output/329652/new-media-masculinity-and-mujra-dance-in-pakistan>. Accessed on 07.02.2026.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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a tool of research and testimony. Similarly, PNCA<sup>14</sup> and Dastan Theatre publicly announced *Balkarah* in 2025 as a bold and emotional theatrical work, signaling an institutional effort to shift performance away from degraded amusement and toward social and affective reflection.<sup>15</sup>

These practices belong to a broader tradition of social and documentary theatre in which the stage becomes a site of critical intervention. Here the difference from commercial mujra is decisive: the performer's body is no longer a scenic commodity for male consumption but a carrier of experience, memory, and claim-making. Pakistani theatre, in this sense, is not a unified field but a divided one, stretched between exploitation and symbolic recovery.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Dilemma of Representation: Between Resistance and Spectacle**

The analysis of Khawaja Sira representation in media and theatre reveals a fundamental tension between two functions of art: that of offering a space of resistance and that of transforming identity into an object of spectacle. This ambivalence can be understood through representation theory, according to which cultural production does not simply reflect the world but organizes it symbolically, selecting what becomes visible, intelligible, and legitimate.

In the case of the Khawaja Sira community, the dilemma cannot be reduced to the simple opposition between visibility and invisibility. Far more relevant is the distinction between two forms of visibility: one obtained through exploitation and consumption, and the other built through self-representation and dignity. In television, stage shows, and commercial forms of contemporary mujra, transgender bodies may

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<sup>14</sup> *The Pakistan National Council of the Arts* (PNCA) is the main national cultural institution in Pakistan, operating under the federal government. It promotes and develops visual and performing arts through festivals, educational programs, exhibitions, and productions. PNCA functions as an institutional hub for artists and contributes to the professionalization of the artistic sector. In parallel, the Pakistani educational system currently offers formal training in arts and theatre through specialized higher education institutions such as the National College of Arts, the University of the Punjab, and the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/PNCAOfficial/posts/pnca-and-dastan-theatre-presented-its-bold-and-emotional-play-balkarah-on-19th-o/855622237099202>. Accessed on 12.02.2026.

<sup>16</sup> <https://upperstall.com/film/showgirls-of-pakistan>. Accessed on 20.02.2026.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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become visible precisely because they are framed as exception, ridicule, or controlled eroticization. In social, documentary, or institutional theatre, that same visibility is reorganized around testimony, lived experience, and humanization.

This distinction can also be read through the concept of performativity. Judith Butler showed that gender is not a fixed given but something constituted through repeated performative acts. In the Pakistani context this takes on additional meaning: Khawaja Sira identity is not only lived but also imposed, negotiated, or exploited through the stage. When performance is controlled by commercial economies and the male gaze, it risks turning identity into a surface of consumption. When reclaimed by the performer or by critical theatre, performance can become an act of rearticulating subjectivity.<sup>17</sup>

Studies of theatrical presence and interaction underscore the transformative potential of the stage. But that potential should not be romanticized. The live presence of the body does not automatically guarantee dignity; it may generate empathy, but it may also intensify vulnerability, especially when the marginalized body is inserted into a regime of looking dominated by desire, laughter, or moral control. Here the difference between institutional European theatre and the precarious Pakistani commercial stage becomes important: while the former is often organized within public frameworks of artistic legitimacy, the latter may operate within a field shaped by precarity and moral panic, where the meanings of “art,” “obscenity,” and “family” are constantly contested. The dilemma of representation, therefore, cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between emancipation and stereotyping. In the case of the Khawaja Sira community, art functions as an ambivalent space in which identity is simultaneously affirmed and constrained. Artistic visibility becomes a complex process in which recognition, spectacle, precarity, and the possibility of symbolic repair coexist in an unstable balance.

### **Social media and changing public perception in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, social media has become a crucial space for negotiating the visibility of the Khawaja Sira community, especially in a context where traditional media has often produced reductive or stigmatizing portrayals. Recent research shows

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<sup>17</sup> Farida Batool Syeda, *New media, masculinity and mujra dance in Pakistan* [PhD thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2015, London]. <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00020357>.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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that platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X and YouTube have enabled khwaja sira activists and creators to build their own narrative frames, challenge derogatory language and produce alternative forms of public representation. A study on Pakistani transgender activists on Instagram demonstrates that social media functions not only as a space of exposure but also as a tool of visibility politics, where identity is presented strategically in order to claim dignity, legitimacy and social belonging.

At the same time, this digital visibility is deeply ambivalent. The same platforms that enable self-representation also facilitate the circulation of transphobic discourse, misinformation and symbolic attacks. Analyses of Pakistan's digital sphere underline that online debates about the khawaja sira community are often shaped by hostility, moral panic and discriminatory language, especially in moments of intense public visibility such as the controversy surrounding *Joyland*.<sup>18</sup> In other words, social media does not automatically transform prejudice; rather, it becomes a battleground between competing narratives of gender, morality and social legitimacy.<sup>19</sup>

Even so, the impact of social media on changing attitudes should not be underestimated. Unlike traditional television or mainstream press, where the transgender community has long been represented from the outside, digital media enables direct address, personal testimony and the building of affective communities. This has important implications from a communication perspective: visibility no longer depends exclusively on institutional validation, but can be built through personalized content, visual activism, storytelling and community mobilization. Research from Pakistan suggests that digital media can contribute to empowerment,

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<sup>18</sup> The controversy surrounding the film *Joyland* (2022) clearly illustrated the ambivalent role of social media in shaping public discourse about transgender identities in Pakistan. Platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), and YouTube functioned simultaneously as spaces of support and contestation. On the one hand, activists, artists, and international organizations used digital media to defend the film, promote freedom of expression, and support Khawaja Sira representation; on the other hand, the same platforms facilitated conservative campaigns marked by accusations of "immorality," calls for censorship, and the spread of distorted information. Algorithmic dynamics amplified emotional and conflictual content, intensifying moral panic and the visibility of transphobic discourse. Consequently, social media does not merely reflect existing opinions but radicalizes them, transforming debates such as that generated by *Joyland* into symbolic battlegrounds over gender norms, morality, and national identity.

<sup>19</sup> Maryam Zakriya, Mustabshera Quddus, și Hilal Fatima. *Role of Media in Empowerment of Transgenders in Pakistan*, UCP Journal of Mass Communication, vol. 1, no. 2, 2023, pp. 61–76.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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awareness-raising and public pressure for more respectful forms of representation, even though these effects remain uneven and contested.

From a communication and cultural marketing perspective, social media also changes the logic of reception. If, within the commercial circuit of stage shows or contemporary mujra, performers were often consumed within registers of amusement, scandal or controlled eroticization, digital media creates the possibility of reframing public image through self-representation, contextualization and greater control over messaging. This shift does not eliminate exploitation or stigma, but it opens a strategic space in which the community can influence public discourse and move the emphasis from spectacle to voice, experience and claim-making. Social media should therefore be understood not merely as an extension of representation, but as an active terrain in which changing public attitudes are negotiated in contemporary Pakistan.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusions

The analysis of the identity and representation of the Khawaja Sira community in Pakistan reveals a structural paradox in which cultural and legal recognition coexist with persistent social marginalization. Although the legislative framework provides an important degree of formal validation, everyday reality remains marked by exclusion, stigma, and limited access to economic and social resources. In this context, artistic representation becomes an essential space for visibility and expression, but also a terrain of tensions and contradictions.

In both media and Pakistani theatre, Khawaja Sira identity is constructed through a negotiation between dominant cultural codes and attempts to reconfigure meaning. While media representations tend to simplify and stereotype, even in their newer and seemingly progressive forms, theatre offers the possibility of a more direct and nuanced relation to identity. Yet the analysis has shown that theatre cannot be treated as a uniform or automatically emancipatory space. There exists, on the one hand, a commercial circuit of stage shows and contemporary mujra in which performers may be exploited as objects of amusement and consumption; on the other

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<sup>20</sup> Fatima Zahid Ali, Kevin Smets, și Benjamin De Cleen, *Pakistani Transgender Activists on Instagram: The Politics of Visibility*. *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, 2024, [https://doi.org/10.1386/macp\\_00092\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/macp_00092_1).

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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hand, there are critical and institutional theatrical practices that attempt to restore voice, respect, and human complexity to the community.

In this sense, the dilemma of representation can be formulated more precisely as a tension between two regimes of visibility: visibility as exploitative exposure and visibility as dignified self-representation. Both film, through the example of *Joyland*, and contemporary theatre demonstrate that the representation of transgender identities in Pakistan is a deeply political act, negotiated between artistic freedom, moral anxiety, and the social structures of marginalization.

The main contribution of this study, therefore, lies in highlighting the internally fragmented character of Pakistani theatre as a space of representation for the Khawaja Sira community. The stage does not merely reflect social realities; it actively participates in constructing them, offering both the possibility of identity affirmation and the risk of transforming that identity into an object of spectacle. In this unstable balance between authenticity and consumption, the complex role of the performing arts in contemporary Pakistan becomes visible.

Finally, the analysis suggests the need for a critical and sensitive approach to the representation of marginalized identities, one that moves beyond mere visibility and contributes to a deeper and more inclusive understanding of gender diversity.

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# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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