



# Extended Space as Disgrace: A Phenomenological Study of Rahat Khwaja's Queerness in the Pakistani Movie *Zindagi Tamasha*

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## Abstract

This phenomenological study reveals the societal backlash faced by Rahat Khwaja in the movie *Zindagi Tamasha*, highlighting broader implications for the acceptance of queer identities within Pakistan's socio-religious landscape. I, hereby, contend that Pakistan's gender-based patriarchal society disregards and questions queerness, especially in religious personalities. Rationalising this study using Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological model of affect as contact with Gillian Rose's visual methodologies, I examine the conundrums of gender performance in the patriarchal Pakistani society by significantly focusing on how Khwaja's dance performance challenges normative gender roles and problematises societal backlash on becoming a queer-oriented religious person. Nonetheless, his newly acquired queerness as rejection of the norms highlights the socio-religious dilemma of his existence. This study reflects on the problem of queer phenomenological belongingness and unbelongingness of Khwaja as a disoriented figure in the hetero-obsessed patriarchal society and the resultant challenges he faces due to the backlash on his dance performance while asserting his identity as a righteous masculine man. Although he refuses to apologise, this extended space becomes disgraceful for him, and recreates his marginalised position as a fat-belly dancer. By examining the societal reaction to Khwaja's performance, I underscore the complexities of queer identity politics in contemporary Pakistan, shedding light on both the challenges and resilience of individuals navigating cultural norms for adjustment.

**Keywords:** Queer Phenomenology, *Zindagi Tamasha*, viral queer memes, disgrace, socio-religious shaming culture; Pakistani queer cinema, Rahat Khwaja

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## Introduction

Sarmad Sultan Khoosat has been acknowledged as an eminent filmmaker and a renowned actor who creatively brings forward some critical aspects of society through various artistic projects on small as well as big screens. Nevertheless, *Zindagi Tamasha* is his depiction of a profound thought for Pakistan's diverse society including transgender and queer identities to highlight the sexual politics pertinent to the Pakistani Muslim world. *Zindagi Tamasha*, as an epic cinematographic representation of Pakistani society's backlash toward queer identities also highlights the politics of disorientation to obscure intertwined sexual violence as represented through the character of the religious cleric. Nonetheless, in the religiously fundamentalist society of Pakistan where queer personalities are unacceptable and religiously unsanctioned for openly announcing their identities, *Zindagi Tamasha* has hiked an open debate on a taboo topic of sexual politics.

This research paper is directed towards the evaluation of the role of Rahat Khwaja as a religious and respectable man who recites Naats, however, his dance on a movie song with unusual feminine dance steps becomes unacceptable for the society for the parallelism drawn by the masses and religious clerics with the transgender community's forbidden acts. This performance becomes an affect after contacting transgenders. The conflict arises when his dance video gets viral and the community stops accepting him as a respectable heterosexual man, ultimately challenging his orientation and presenting him as a queer character in the postcolonial anti-queer Pakistani world. Therefore, I contend that Pakistan's gender-based patriarchal society does not accept queer identity and questions such problematic momentary orientation in public, especially performed by religious personalities as in the case of Khwaja's dance on a movie song. I underpin my argument using Sara Ahmed's phenomenological concepts of being and becoming from *affect as contact* model given in her noteworthy work, *Queer Phenomenology- Orientations, Objects, Others*. The method I have opted for this study is Gillian Rose's visual methodology provided in *Research Methods for English Studies*.

In the Pakistani community, the concept of honour is always privileged. When we keenly observe Pakistani cinema and its major role in defining lives, we come across disparate and critical life-changing aspects of life on the screen. The reels not only are inspired by real events but also inspire real-life change. According to Tarja Lane, "Cinema is the art of shared space, bringing before the spectators the intersubjective 'life spaces' of the characters in the film" (10). Conjunctively, cinema holds different temporalities and spatialities in between different paradigms and cinematographic works to cater temporal and spatial acceptance of abnormalities through digital representation. Pakistani cinema has consistently depicted male dominance despite showcasing a few empowered and leading female roles as in *Aurat Raj*, *Bol*, *Khuda Ke Liye*, and *Dukhtar* (Yousaf, Adnan and Aksar 3). Gwendolyn S. Kirk insightfully mentions queer life slightly hinted in some movies of the 1950s including Noor Jehan's fifteen-second clip of a passionate kiss by a female character in the movie *Neend* and later, Angeline

Malik's drama *Chewing Gum in Kitni Girhain Baki hain* that sparked backlash and criticism in social media discussions (Kirk). Such scenes provoked and impacted real life and hyped debates on screening multiple identities in the Pakistani context.

## Gender Performance in Contemporary Pakistani Cinema

In Lollywood, some noted movies have targeted the concept of gender with a major focus on the transgender, queer, or homosexual community. Previously, Rauha Salam Salmaoui and Shazrah Salam have investigated the subversion of established masculine norms through the strategic use of 'social media' to propagate hybrid masculinity as Mascara boys "that is both locally informed and globally resonant", however, the hybrid space is formidable in their offline space (1). Despite being named effeminate due to their queer practices, these Mascara boys have evolved the stoic image of a heterosexual man by assigning it some gender fluidity and boldly challenging the intricately manifested patriarchal tapestries.

While looking at the cinema, Syeda Momina Masood and Khurshid Alam investigate queer infection in society spread by vampires as a part of gender politics in the 1967's movie *Zinda Laash*. Despite the movie's warning of seduction, the homosexual vampire is celebrated by audiences with a mesmerising gaze, which dismantles the oppressive epistemic frameworks of patriarchy (Masod & Alam 87-8). Further, Fawzia Afzal-Khan has analysed queer performativities in Pakistani cinema as politics of visibility and representation on social media to cater to the 'queer utopian imaginaries.' She highlights the relevance of Jose Esteban Munoz's insights regarding *dis-identification* to the Pakistani context along with 'feminist cultural materialism within a postcolonial rubric' (Afzal-Khan). While analyzing *Aurat Raj*, *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah*, and *Churails*, whereby *Churails* as a web-series being out of the bounds of Pakistan's Government as it was broadcasted on Zee- Zindagi Indian web Channel, created a turmoil among many critics owing to its sensitive content. Keeping in mind the Muslim ideological stance and fundamentalists against liberalism and multiple sexual orientations, Fawzia Afzal's genealogical approach highlights the dismantling of the crucial direct public exposure of queer identities in Pakistan as the web and social media platforms provide the extended and unbound digital space for queer communities and their artwork. However, according to Afzal, queer identity as an accepted orientation and the concept of Butch women as the normalized identity to rescue women from patriarchal heterosexual males and their families is "not yet here and may never be" (8), pertaining to Pakistan's religious as well as social and political obligations and Pakistani women's preferences. Here, I may refer to the problematic "Aurat March" to ascertain the phenomenon of rejection of such protests by the hetero-obsessed patriarchal Pakistani community, considering these feminist women as liberal and these protests as secular rather non-religious aspects of Pakistani feminists' excessive and unwarranted freedom as a direct influence of cinema.

Through this paper, I never intended to indigenize queerness in Pakistani society as Ahmed puts it, "bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism" (Ahmed, QP 111). I rather

envisioned to open the debate on the phenomenological tendency to act and perform on our favourite movie songs irrespective of gender roles' debates to nullify the othering of an already 'othered' postcolonial subject. However, the socio-religious gender issues burgeoning at the centre of these discussions immediately propel scholars to reject such liberal ideas and dancing for *Naatkhwans* as well as declaring queerness as illegitimate- *Haram*- in Islam pertaining to its seductive content. This socio-cultural and religious unacceptability of extended space led me to investigate it further to gauge the freedom and availability of space for religious men to avoid being identified as effeminate or queer dancers. This study needed to follow the phenomenological methodology of *affect* after contacting such queerly gendered identities as a critical problem of space adjustment. The findings through this study although were shocking but also revealed women as ready to subjugate than to support butch or queer identities as traced by Fawzia Afzal Khan, while religious men are not allowed to dance like females or transgenders in private and public spaces as discussed in this study.

Sara Noor, Shaheena Bhatti, and Shazia Rose Kiran Nathaniel in a Spanish conference proceedings focused on the masculine gender roles and queering, while distinctively emphasizing ideal patriarchal and traditional masculine roles and their performance in various contexts with reference to *Zindagi Tamasha* and *Joyland*. They focused on the male behavior manifestations and queering in light of hegemonic, caring, queer, toxic, inclusive, and hybrid masculinities in aforementioned Pakistani movies (Noor, Bhatti and Nathaniel 269). Mina Khan has also added her knowledge in the epistemological cluster of Pakistani cinema. She discussed screening lesbian as well as homosocial and homosexual relations in Muslim context across the global south and focused on various critical aspects of presenting kissing on the cheeks of the same sex as well as other sexual and nonsexual gestures as derogatory in meaning and taking multiple semantic variants for onlookers. Whereas my paper solely focuses on Rahat Khwaja's masculine character with all hetero-sexual male characteristics as described by Noor, Bhatti, and S.R.K Nathaniel in their research study. However, the main concern here is the extended space and associated disgrace with the phenomenon of dogmatic queer dance.

In this paper, my epistemological question focuses on the rejection of the ontological "to be or not be" and subverts the notion of queerness along with homosexuality by immediately posing the problematic orientation question of "to do or not to do" or "to take space or not to take". Such extreme problem of the vicissitude of behaviour and performance pushes the individual to shun the idea of disorientation or reorientation of gender pertaining to the core assimilation of male-female binary irrespective of blurred boundaries of performance on the death of the partner or non-availability of house-help.

## **Queering of the Lens or Queer Identities? Public Shaming in Pakistani Context**

Shocking the spectator, as found by Smith in her study, is the critical aspect behind presenting explicit content with dances on the screen, which further shrinks the space for disoriented heterosexual men. According to Warner, “Since shame makes some pleasures tacitly inadmissible, unthinkable, they might find themselves burdened by furtiveness, or by extraordinary needs for disclosure, or by such a fundamental need to wrench free from the obvious that the idea of an alternative is only the dim anticipation of an unformed wish” (3). Warner also mentions that “Sexual deviance previously posited more of shame than the stigma” (28), whereby, with time despite some acceptance, it is still unknown to Pakistani men, especially in public. Focusing on the key issue of imitation of other foreign cultures and depiction of cinematic reel life in the real context without considering its worth in the society, how it actually affects the postcolonial Pakistani society, thereby, changing the orientation of the honoured man into a disgraced queer-orient(ed) figure is the main concern.

Instead of thriving in the stable confines of *a room of one's own*, Rahat Khwaja comes out in public and considers it his talent. Jasbir Puar enunciates,

The strategy of encouraging subjects of study to appear in all their queernesses, rather than primarily to queer the subjects of study, provides a subject-driven temporality in tandem with a method-driven temporality. Playing on this difference, between the subject being queered and queerness already existing within the subject (and thus dissipating the subject as such), allows for both the temporality of being (ontological essence of the subject) and the temporality of always-becoming (continual ontological emergence, a Deleuzian becoming without being. (xxxii)

This becoming without being is the main phenomenological problem to be traced out in this study as Khwaja's identity proves him to be a man without “queerness”, while his becoming is also without “being” queer. However, a momentary queer performance becomes objectionable.

Focusing on the concept of shame connected with the feminine dance for a man in the Pakistani community and then his defamation on social media, the space for him shrinks and he actually surpasses the orientation and leads towards disorientation and reorientation of his identity as effeminate committing a forbidden act in public on public demand. The hidden concept of public hypocrisy also profoundly signifies the problematic patriarchal society where the demand presented on the table does not matter rather the provision of that demand as a happiness project in Sara Ahmed's words, is considered as taking extra room and showing forbidden willfulness (Ahmed, WS). The concept of occupying space to practice feminine dance steps, which are solely associated with females or transgenders, consumes the very thought of staying the same hetero-male after committing the act. The likeness of the dancer with other community members vanishes. It, therefore, poses a serious question of morality on inhabiting a hybrid space not meant for men to transgress pertaining to their masculinity and its requirements as studied by Khan et al.

## Sara Ahmed's Phenomenological Model of *Affect as Contact*

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, I use Ahmed's concepts of becoming queer and navigating through various identities to avoid marginalization in the postcolonial world. Ahmed proposes "a model of affect as contact" (Ahmed, QP 12; 52). According to Ahmed, emotions are directed to what we come into contact with: they move us "toward" and "away" from such objects" (QP 2-4). Such proximity and depiction of emotions on the basis of location and space closely affect the orientation of the subject. She further elaborates, "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared habitat, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward" (Ahmed, QP 2-4). Contrary to this, "when we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have" (Ahmed, QP 6). Such absence of orientation as far from possession provides a sound basis of disorientation as transgression in the conservative Pakistani society where we are sequestered from these controversial hybrid concepts for plausible acceptability.

While creating a distinction between the straight and queer space, Ahmed defines 'straight space' as "the queer body does not extend into such space, as that space extends the form of the heterosexual couple" (QP 92). She describes queer as "twisted... a sexuality that is bent and crooked" (Ahmed, QP 67). Chloe Vitry while reviewing Ahmed's work mentions, "Queer Phenomenology invites us to look at how objects *produce* heterosexuality because of the way they are arranged" (935), which guided me to examine Khwaja's orientation. Furthermore, Ahmed writes, "a queer freedom lies in keeping open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths" (QP 178; Vitry 947), which navigates the attention toward gay, lesbian, and other marginalised identities. While keeping in mind that Butler and Foucault ground their feminist works ontologically on phenomenological acts for crafting bodies into gender (Rodemeyer 312-3), Ahmed focuses on Husserl's phenomenological orientation and redirects it toward sexual and then to geographical orientation and racism. She writes "What bodies 'tend to do' are effects of histories rather than being originary" (Ahmed, QP 56; Rodemeyer 313). When Rodemeyer highlights Terry Eagleton's rejection of the connection between phenomenology and queer theory, David Ross Fryer's, Henry S. Rubin's, and Gayle Solomon's reinforcement of philosophical and phenomenological overlapping with queer theory functions as a connection with Husserl's, Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's concepts (314-5). When Butler and Foucault describe gender as a separate phenomenon from the body and more discursive (Rodemeyer 316), Al-Saji discusses it as,

the localization of sensings in the form of an appearing living body—a body that is not only felt from within but also perceived from without—becomes possible through the "special case" of the body touching itself. (Ideas II, p. 144) What is significant in Husserl's account is that this self-perception gives the body to itself as living body



(Leib)—as a field or spread of sensings—and not as a mere extended, physical object. (20)

Al-Saji furthers her concepts by specifically focusing on the two affective contrasts and interests. He declares the affective world as “a sedimented social space” (33),

This space has not only been configured by the repeated movements, actions and gestures of multiple bodies within it—mapping out possible routes for my body while foreclosing others—it is also a space mediated by representations, discourses, and structures of power. (2) My body finds itself situated within this social world, an intersubjectively and historically constituted affective relief, to which it is called to respond in already mapped (though not fully determinate) ways. Social positionality is inscribed in the lived body through habit. Habit works differentially; habit is at once a function of my body’s location within different systems of oppression and it is generative of my concrete embodiment as receptivity, felt capacity (“I can”), and style. (Al-Saji 33)

Similarly, Ahmed while taking a position about any object on the basis of likes or dislikes with other elements of the surrounding environment, collides with the stability of the subject and pushes it to change its orientation to be more acceptable in the society as following the straight line. Ahmed contends, “For Husserl, while orientations also do not simply involve differentiating left from right sides of the body, they do involve the question of sides” (QP 8). In the case of human beings, the sides and the choice of sides create a serious critical subtlety, which demonstrates one’s exact orientation and targets his disorientation as an objectification phenomenon. She further writes, orientation provides the starting and ending points, from where we begin and then its ending point, which leads to particular consequences and oriented identity. “The ‘here’ of bodily dwelling is thus what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings, the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression” (Ahmed, QP 9). This atmosphere either spoils it or grows the body depending on the favorability of the atmospheric conditions and constituents which are in direct contact. She describes bodies as “shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling” (Ahmed, QP 9). Although bodies acquire and inhabit space, their spatial perception and orientation matter more than merely the occupation of the space. A person while questioning his ontological standing takes different absolute or relative orientations and spatial dynamics because of his experiences with others as well as the affect he accepts (Ahmed, QP 12).

Describing orientation in detail, left is associated with politics for weak and worthless as those are oriented and objectified. Whereas, right demonstrates truth, reason, and normality (Ahmed, QP 13) associated with power and prejudice against the othered subjects, and therefore, both are not symmetrical in their temporal or spatial orientation. Then, she presents the concept of a path being well-trodden or a trace of past journeys (Ahmed, QP 16)

as a source of defining our thoughts and orienting our next dimension. Consequently, we consider dependence on the repetition of norms and traditions (Ahmed, QP 16) as a standard and thus, avoid transgression. Disjunctively, becoming reoriented means disorienting the already existing world differently. Heidegger calls it “making room” (Ahmed, QP 20) or understanding various subtle nuances of existence and meaning-making owing to the freedom associated with existence. Whereas, at a point in life, when the subject demonstrates abnormal behaviour that defies the norms and standards, it becomes a source of shame and dishonour. The external othering unlike other members of the society actualizes the disgrace associated with the transgression, especially when it involves gender roles’ reversal despite its affect as an outcome of the contact with a similar environment.

As Sartre also demonstrates the inseparable nature of shaming oneself before the other (Mitchell 4), it profoundly exhibits a peculiarly negative experience of coming into contact with the immediate environment and reflecting its norms, therefore, it verbalises the tension of being an objectified, (dis)oriented and marginalised man in the postcolonial term in case of a Pakistani subject and present disorientation as a consequence of the abnormal behaviour or defiance from the standard that detains his worth due to the clamped-down space and elasticity in orientation for such transgression. This occupation of forbidden space becomes an inescapable crime for Rahat Khwaja, specifically when captured and uploaded onto the digital platform in the form of a video without seeking his consent. This digital space also when comes into contact with others, impacts their lives and brings a sudden shift in the ideation of a person from ‘righteous’ to a ‘stigmatised’ person.

While fulfilling gender roles reinstates performativities, and superior masculinity in the hetero-obsessed patriarchal society, meeting and befriending transgenders are acts against the socio-religious norms. Nonetheless, such hybrid modes of actions, which are termed as feminine become the cause of humiliation due to their forbidden *affect* on one’s character development. Acting like transgenders is considered as shameful for both genders in Pakistan. The same disgrace when encountered in public or on social media platforms immediately introduces an inexorable enigma in the person’s life and may prove to be traumatic in many instances. It immediately creates the feeling of unbelongingness from the society and marks the onslaught of shame, guilt, identity conflict, and dislocation in many cases, thus, causing queering of that person. According to Mitchell,

If shame is ‘an inner torment, a sickness of the soul’, it is also an emotion of self-assessment, a peculiarly social experience and, I suggest, a culturally pervasive affect with particular pertinence for understanding contemporary constructions of gendered subjectivity, expressions and experiences of sexual desire, the complexities of embodiment, and social processes of ‘othering’. (1)

The interstices emerging pertaining to the changed identity or a totally unexpected outlook of life, dismantle the whole image of a man into pieces. Making one shameful and feel disgrace



on merely a feminine dance with a fat belly as a re-presentation of his whole new self whose angelic character was once an epitome of honour and pride, is the rejection of this queer phenomenon in the gender-based society. Rahat Khwaja is now targeted because of the blame he faces for a moment of experiencing freedom of actions, whereby, dancing femininely to a movie song. It succinctly portrays Pakistani society's hypocritical outlook on gender-specific roles. Mitchell also highlights a similar aspect with reference to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's dichotomous relation between "subjected and sovereign" or "subjectification and desubjectification", whereby "self-loss and self-possession, servitude and sovereignty" (4) are the binaries highlighting the threshold where Rahat Khwaja may be termed as *Homosacer* in Agamben's term. Incorporating the main argument of this paper with these binaries to make sense of a patriarchal conservative society where performing as an effeminate or *looking like a woman* change the whole orientation, will suffice the logical coherence to question the physical inter-relatability of two genders as well as the mutual impact of living as a community with transgenders. Furthermore, presenting desubjectification as disorientation and then reorientation to rejuvenate the identity despite all disgrace associated with queer orientation, profoundly describe *phenomenological being and becoming* as the purpose of this research, while focusing on the main character Rahat Khwaja.

Besides, these dances when presented on Television are considered as the major source of entertainment, especially when performed by females. Our apparent shamelessness and juxtaposed public shaming both paradoxically destroy the same subject that is othered out despite all the hypocrisy hidden behind our predefined and fixed gender norms. These subjects in relation to their identity and the associated disgrace on transgression experience the subtle ontological perplexity of *being* and significant yet objectionable *becoming* after experiencing *affect in contact* with the forbidden transgender people. Furthermore, the ontological understanding of *being* highlights the significance of the *identity* in the moral world that reflects similar performances. Along with Agamben, Nussbaum also highlights the concept of disgust associated with culprits and aliens for disobeying the standards as an apotheosis, especially for Pakistani society. In this case, these alienated people are queers, especially transgenders. Nussbaum categorically classifies them as *abnormal* in the eye of society and declares them to be forced to *blush* whenever society demands them to be ashamed "at what and who they are" (Mitchell 5). In some cases, this process of shaming concomitants political affiliations and intentions to use underhand ways to defame any person for personal or political gains. Ahmed has termed such indisciplined queer identities as *willful*. Rahat Khwaja is one such *willful* character who performs against the norms and meets transgenders to support them.

As a consequence of the queer dance, the effeminate person is presented as a succubus by Sally Munt, as, "notably, a demon who takes on female form, usually to seduce men" (Mitchell 14) and enjoys the hybrid gender norms. That's why in the case of *Zindagi Tamasha*, Khwaja is ashamed of his public dancing just because of his effeminate re-presentation on a digital space that uncontrollably becomes the cause of a viral video. Additionally, the concept

of disgrace owing to targeting his masculine power and forcing him to blush to feel the guilt of being queer also purports to strict societal gender standards to target his masculinity and keep him straight. Judith Butler declares such a yardstick as a tenuous reality while raising questions equals putting this concept into crisis as it hinges on the problem of how to distinguish between the real and the unreal (GT xxiii). It also hints towards the brittle nature of straightness that may lead to breakage. She is of the view that such a tenuous law puts one into trouble by threatening him to keep out of trouble through power (Butler, GT xxvii). This distinction of the real, unreal, and the digital reel life shifts the identity and gender roles unidentifiably, but when highlighted creates a performativity problem pertaining to intertwined patriarchy.

While analyzing Henry James' *The Art of Novel*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contends that queer performativity leads to shame, considering them subverting for gender roles and hence, threatening (Sedgwick, 2003; QP, 1993) for the predetermined binary system. This shaming consequently results in defaming a well-established and respectable person by targeting his weakest point, pushing him to transgress and commit the unacceptable crime, and marking him as willful and stigmatised for life are some key strategies used by the already marginalised factions of the postcolonial world. Their purpose is to achieve a subtle sense of accomplishment and meeting the standard through bluffs or scapegoating the most admired personality to target the dogmatic beliefs through hypocritical re-presentation. This othering is purposed for public-appeasement of the masses for being morally upright in avoiding transgenders and following the binary gender roles to keep affirming the masculine superiority, especially in South Asian postcolonial countries.

Since a community is not capable to look at the subject each time without any prejudice, the reminiscence of the past actions keeps stigmatising and recalling the very existence of the culprit as queer despite being punished for the crime several times. The doubtful queer identity of a man and his deviation towards feminine traits results in a killing gaze as the main source of guilt-trapping the subject and changing his position from the subject to the object of the gaze as a target for appeasing social factors' inner self-consciousness and confirming their own ontological existence as meaningful and worthy. This Foucauldian gaze transforms the objectified Rahat Khwaja in *Zindagi Tamasha* into an accused transgressor and a marginalised queer person who has been stigmatised for life for being queer or effeminate. Unacceptance of such orientation of queered Khwaja is predominantly the political gesture of demonstrating punishment for all such queer identities as a means of imposing the phenomenon of power. It also signifies the transcendental binaries which believe in purity of performances rather than irregular extensions.

The basis of this disgrace is in phenomenological terms the acquiring of a hybrid space as also propounded by Heidegger and further developed by Ahmed. Pertaining to the non-availability of this space to Khwaja due to his respect and stature in the patriarchal Pakistani

community, the feminine dance becomes a tightening noose around his neck and shrinks his space in the immediate social setup. This non-availability of space is still underexplored with reference to heteronormality and gender roles in the postfeminist patriarchal world of Pakistan that has been discussed in this study.

Considering this reel life's impact on real life, I highlight in this paper the stigmatised male dance performance of Khwaja in the movie *Zindagi Tamasha* to ascertain the fact that queerness brings socio-religious backlash in the hetero-obsessed Pakistani society. The marginalisation he experiences and the aftermaths of his actions bring forward his disorientation and then reorientation as the critical gender-based performativity problem in postcolonial society. I examine the portrayal of Rahat Khwaja focusing on how his unconventional dance performance challenges societal norms of masculinity and navigates the intersection of queer identity, postcolonialism, and media influence in Pakistani society. Considering the discussion and key aspects of this research, I aim to identify the queerness of Rahat Khwaja and the subsequent disgrace associated with his queer sexual orientation or feminine dance, which emerges as an *affect of contact* with transgenders. Additionally, I analyze the queer disorientation and reorientation as a problem of space within Pakistani society, irrespective of fixed gender identities. This study seeks to illuminate how these dynamics challenge traditional norms and create social and spatial constraints for individuals who transgress established gender boundaries.

## Visual Methodology

For this current study, I have selected the visual method proposed by Gillian Rose. According to Rose, the visual images are in close proximity and “are almost always found in such persistent spatial proximity” (70) that are considered interconnected and pose similar meanings as do written texts. These visual images and videos are pervasive and seriously affect their viewers unescapably on the basis of direct visual contact. According to Rose, these visuals demonstrate inclusion and exclusion as well as differentiation and prejudices on the basis of which society decides the impact of these visuals and documentaries or movies on the real lives of subjects. The qualitative method for English research studies includes close reading of visual prompts and scrutinizing them carefully to comprehend the meanings in relation to the social construction of characters (Rose) in the movie at the first hand and then in the viral video within the movie. Moreover, I have provided the images of the male dancing act in the movie *Zindagi Tamasha* (2023) running between 20:10 to 20:40, as the movie was first banned in cinemas in 2019 and later broadcasted on YouTube on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



*Figure 1 Rahat Khwaja Dancing in the Movie Zindagi Tamasha (Khoosat 20:14)*



*Figure 2 Rahat Khwaja Dancing in the Movie Zindagi Tamasha (Khoosat, 20:30)*



*Figure 3 Rahat Khwaja Dancing in the Movie Zindagi Tamasha on the song with the same title (Khoosat 20:25)*

Other than visuals of Rahat Khwaja's dance clips, I have also selected the image of a homosexual dancer who performs in public on the same song *Zindagi Tamasha bani* to earn money. His acceptability of a hidden homosexual community in the same environment in the movie *Zindagi Tamasha* also problematizes Rahat Khwaja's sexuality and performativity as a phenomenological issue. The purpose of this sample is to investigate through drawing a comparison of hetero-sexual queer dance as well as homosexual dance. Since the study is designed with a qualitative phenomenological literary approach, the sampling is based on some random screenshots of the selected dance visuals from the video being played for the mentioned time to ascertain the problematic dance. The time duration of this video is 56:00 to 58:25 minutes. It demonstrates a homosexual dance video to entertain the people belonging to similar sexual orientation. However, Rahat Khwaja becomes aggressive and says, "What do you want to prove by inviting me here at this goddamned brothel? A Homosexual Gathering" (translated) (Khoosat).



Figure 4 A Homosexual Performing on the same song to Appease gays and transgenders in a gathering (Khoosat 56:01)



Figure 5 Rahat Khwaja Talking to a Homosexual Man in front of the Dancing Man (Khoosat 56:10)



These images are the main sample of the study to evaluate the problem of feminine dance and the impact of this extended space on Rahat Khwaja's life while living in Pakistani society. After watching the viral video, the homosexuals want him to accept his becoming as a homosexual. Whereas, Rahat Khwaja vehemently asserts his identity as a heterosexual man "safe from such perversions" (Khoosat 55:10).

## Phenomenological Queer Identity of Khwaja

The conservative Pakistani community finds it harder to accept the queer existence owing to its religious and ethical drawbacks as well as the critical gender-based disorientation, negating the concept of gender diversification and hybrid space for such characters as allowed in the West. The movie understudy *Zindagi Tamasha* predominantly creates the narrative of the orientation in the life of a common man with hardships that originate after transgressing the norm. The main character Muhammad Rahat Khwaja reorients his life and consequently faces disgrace because he extends his performativity room for his female-inspired dance. Initially the public pressure and later the resultant defamation associated with his effeminate dance with a fatbelly, make his life miserable. It opened space for meme-making and ridicule for Khwaja for navigating between more than one gender. The lyrics of the songs are complementary to his new identity and reveal his suffering and shame afterwards. "*Life has become such a sad spectacle/ No more than mere amusement for the world*" (translated) (Khoosat).

The situation becomes profoundly more bizarre when he realizes that the discomfort his family has faced is beyond simply defamation, especially when he is not given permission to recite Naat in the holy ceremony by a religious cleric. He is pressured by the cleric to publicly ask for forgiveness for sabotaging and damaging the religious sentiments of the masses. On not completely obeying the cleric, he faces further dishonor as the cleric beats Khwaja with his shoe and then announces him as the disgraced effeminate who is not allowed in any holy function and not even in any house. His family disgusts him and refutes all his kind acts, especially after his wife's death.

The movie is segmented into three sections; the first section of grace and respect, the second segment of defamation, and the third segment of isolation from society. The shifting of multiple spaces for viewers, first as the movie *Zindagi Tamasha* itself, second the original female dance video that Rahat watches, and lastly the viral video of Rahat Khwaja's dance, subtly change the phenomenological evaluation of Rahat's performativity. The disgrace due to his actions raises the epistemic question of genderroles and phenomenological performance in the socio-religious anti-queer, patriarchal Pakistani society. When the religious cleric sanctions him punishable by religious law, however, no particular punishment is given to him except asking for an apology, the act of othering Rahat through public displays and media representations underscores his categorisation as *queer*, aligning with Ahmed's observation of how bodies are positioned within hierarchical social structures.



Although his impulsive decisions lead to his distorted image in the society, he keeps meeting transgenders. This action implies the same act as an *affect of contact* (Ahmed, QP) in the homosexual environment. One of the homosexuals asks him to join the same gathering and enjoy the dance, which he adamantly declines by declaring him a heterosexual man with a strong moral character. However, people refuse to admit him as a masculine man pertaining to his problematic meeting with transgenders having an impact on his personality and his further dance performance. Only the transgender girl understands his pain and the shame he faces on coming into contact with banged doors and critically gazing eyes. She asks him to distribute the food in neighbouring houses, “lao, me baant dendi aan (Give it to me, I will distribute it)” (Khoosat 1:19:25).

Besides, the respect once he used to enjoy is taken back from him and the straight space shrinks as the religious cleric Molvi Sahab mentions while taking Rahat’s confession and apology note, “Itny sawalon ki gunjaish nhe hoti (There’s no room for such questions)” (Khoosat 1:06:11) due to his dance as the forbidden act in which he actually restores his childhood temporal desire of dancing like the female dancer. According to William, “Movies both reveal and conceal” (2). When Khwaja talks about dance shaming and the beating by his father in his childhood (Khoosat 19:00), his nostalgia hides the sense of disgust and disrespect that helps him in disorienting his real identity and act as a queer self to take a shift in his spatial and temporal location that is not available for the hetero-male in Pakistani society. Consequently, it invokes anger and disgrace for him in public. Initially, he relies more on his previously earned respect without considering his delicate position in the community. His pristine image is spoiled by a small dance video capturing thousands and millions of views on digital revelation, which changes the whole environment for him in his immediate contact. His likeness changes into unlikeness with other men and affirms his transgression from the normal straight gender role to a eunuch within a minute. This Freudian slip instead of extending his space, distorts his masculinity and puts his graceful survival at stake.

Many media channels and relatives ask him to dance at their functions (Khoosat 43:40) to ridicule him. Some couples ask him for a *selfie* to appreciate his dance (36:21) while some call him *pimp*, *fat belly* (40:36), and other such names (English translated, 44:35). This perplexing situation draws our attention toward the problem of space and acceptance for the *queerness* that is not even there as Ahmed puts it, “the differentiation between strange and familiar is not sustained. Even in a strange or unfamiliar environment we might find our way, given our familiarity with social form, with how the social is arranged” (7). “The mark of unfamiliar impressions” (QP 9) disgraces Khwaja as others leave their disrespectful impression. In actuality, as the space allows him, Rahat Khwaja migrates from his respectable skin of a religiously acceptable person to an unlike queer dancer. Nonetheless, everybody identifies him as a heterosexual male owing to the contact with him, yet he fails to make gestures of return from that queer transgression toward the normal ideal masculine man

because of the uncontrollable social media, which ultimately leads to his downfall. Ahmed writes,

For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return. (21)

In this way, the “loop of repetition” (Ahmed 58) forces Khwaja to face the disgrace, where he is now unable to work as a heterosexual pertaining to his more famous queer act than his normal performativity. As Ahmed puts it, “What is astray does not lead us back to the straight line” (QP 79). Thus, the space shrinks, and acceptability for Khwaja reduces. He is termed as a shameless man because of his refusal to publicly announce his apology with the demand of deference and humility by the Cleric (Khoosat 1:05:15) on following transgender community's acts. His clear brazenness in openly acknowledging his sinful queer act congeals his shamelessness and, thus, highlights his new *queer* identity.

### **Queerness, Diversity, and the Problem of Space in Pakistan**

While focusing on the second objective of the study, though Khwaja negotiates different regimes of visibility by bringing to the limelight the invisible and concealed reality that lies within him in his personal space, the paradigm shift from being an invisible queer person to an identity of an effeminate dancer in a viral video openly orients him with a new angle of queerness in his moves, which change his physically-determined identity. It also aggravates the fear of inclusion and diversification of the community against the set norms because the *affect as contact* is not positive rather seductive for straight men. He no longer remains capable of tolerating the queer-shaming he faces as the consequence of the video that becomes visible to all on social media and reveals the concealed act. The viral video challenges his new contact with the media as a problem contrary to the appeal for the feminine dance he feels while watching the song on television that triggers him on the demand of his friends to dance. This problematic doing challenges his *being and problematic becoming*. Although the *affect* also juxtaposes the hypocrisy of the society, the action taken by Khwaja is what brings into limelight his own deliberate action and preference at a wrong space and time merely to seek happiness from a fake disposition. The critical environmental context he ignores transforms his whole new existence.

The new *affect as contact* with the world is now of ridicule for him whereas of amusement for the world. Contrarily, his friends feel ashamed while watching him dance and disapprove of his existence among them as a disoriented figure by calling him “*adha teetar adha batair*” (half pheasant half quail; abnormal and queer) (Khoosat 54:33), and a shameless man, which also highlights the paradoxical double-standards of the Pakistani postcolonial society. When the same viewers come into contact with the right gender, they admire and approve of it,

otherwise, categorise it as queer and a threat to their sane and pure existence. The boys standing on the street make fun of his “fat belly” (Khoosat 40:20) and post ads of medicines curing masculine weakness. These reflecting posters make him imagine his fat belly resonating here and there to capture more space than usual. He is caught in the paradoxical time and space where the people of his community not only want to be entertained but also contain him through queer shaming. Although he keeps himself away from all perversions and wrongdoings despite all allegations, his one dance act distorts his noble image and makes him a huge cause of gender instability in the community.

To further the pain, his wife even criticises his dance intention in old age with a fat belly to which Khwaja responds that “kitta ee te nai si, nikal gya sii” (didn’t do it myself, it happened by chance) (Khoosat 46:44). His daughter Sadaf complains that “wo log jinka koi status hota hai wo is tarah ka dance nai krty... aik jgha naatkhwaan bny baithy hain aur doosri taraf ye sb” (People with status and respect never dance like this...on the one hand, you sit like a highly respected praise poem reciter and then all this” (Khoosat 47:10), especially those who recite Naat avoid the activities performed by *meerasi* and *bhands*, which are pejorative terms for dancers in Punjabi culture. Ahmed rightly points out that readjustment in the provided space makes the identity more twisted and incomprehensive, especially for those who have the tendency to loosen their oriented space to a hybrid position. Such displacement or Heideggerian extension of a room changes his status in his home too as a domino effect. The culturally acknowledged concept of disciplinary homes being made by fathers corroborates with the concept of his worth as a respectable father in his home after coming to contact with his new hybrid becoming. His daughters stop giving him respect as a father as well as the only man of the house. Nonetheless, the Pakistani mindset with postcolonial ethics limits the space for his creative exhibition of dance steps in the wedding event performance, thereby maligning the contact by further condensing the space as well as compromising his position without providing any room for re-adjustment or returning to the previous *normal*. The interpellated norms limit his movements on becoming more deplorable than transgenders and homosexuals, which also causatively provides agential power to Muzammil (Khoosat 54:10) to snatch his right to consent before uploading the video.

Another aspect of his wife being bedridden, and his performing house chores also problematise his gender performance as a man in the patriarchal space. Here, Ahmed’s and Butler’s collective assertions related to gender as an artifice highlight the paradoxical nature of cultural determinism (BTM x). While comprehending his acceptable figure as a self-made man who knows how to handle basic necessities of life irrespective of his gender traits in the Pakistani community, Ahmed’s assertions hold significance, especially in Khwaja’s case owing to his wife’s debilitating physical health, which demonstrates his performance as a sturdy husband. He crosses the threshold set by the society to live his life by fulfilling his partner’s responsibilities which brings a change in his ontological standing however, puts a transcendental phenomenological question of his existence as a patriarchal man. His queerness

after his dance is termed as a disease, an aberration that needs to be cured, which eventually aggravates his debilitating orientation. Nonetheless, the wife's death signifies the death of his feminine self as a resonance of societal pressure and consequent allegiance to the straight gender line.

Nonetheless, society also disapproves of his existence in the surroundings to avoid his willful *affect* on them when they come into contact with the video. The dynamics of being an included part of the community is challenged when he tries to merely imitate a dance move and that becomes the climax of his story as the most heinous sin he commits because of its association with the forbidden faction of *transgenders* or in Urdu slang *Khwajasara* depicting the hybrid gender space. Such association becomes a cause of exclusion and marginalisation for his othered queer identity.

## Conclusion

While keeping in mind the concept of shame being discussed initially, Rahat Khwaja represents a critical queer faction of Pakistani postcolonial society, who are considered an abnormal and unacceptable group in the gender-based society. Khwaja's bold dance twists his identity and he becomes an outcast as a stigma in the society because of the shame associated with effeminate performance. He is criticised for being in constant contact with transgenders despite being a *Naatkhwaan*. Therefore, the dance becomes sinfully inappropriate for his gender owing to the associated transgression and seduction, ultimately leading to the disorientation of his personality and shrinkage of space for him. Consequently, a momentary queer performance immediately thwarts his remaining life as a queer conundrum, thereby, putting a question on his gender role, especially as an upright religious *Naatkhwaan*. Rahat Khwaja's heterosexual traits as a patriarchal man with traditional roles of a husband, a father, a real-estate businessman, and a *Naatkhwaan* as well as a caregiver of his physically disabled wife have been discussed in my study. Whereby, I have found that Khwaja transgresses not only the social and gender boundaries but also religious limits by insulting Maulvi Sahab and calling him a corrupt man who embezzles money for building his house and a pedophile raping his Madrassah's children (Khoosat 1:06:15). This aggressive act changes his orientation and the cleric declares him an outcast and a eunuch. Khwaja, however, keeps listening to movie songs despite his wife's critical health condition to satisfy his urge of dancing. The queer images, memes, and visual scenes not only within a movie but on television and also in the video make it worse for him to experience such multiple binds of oppressive dishonour for his being *unlike* others. Every person in his social circle questions his liminal space and right to dance after becoming a *Naatkhwaan*. Therefore, he ruptures the binary standards and highlights the lack of space for multiple gender identities in the Pakistani community.

While summarizing the study, this queer phenomenological discussion invokes questions of religious sanctity, and permission for religious saints and *Naatkhwaan* to listen to movie songs or perform and dance while imitating their favourite female dancers. This study

also highlights the shrunken social space for rather extended queer space and performing chores of the opposite sex/ gender as a socio-religious problem. Not only as a biological phenomenon but also a social performance, queerness is unacceptable in Pakistani society even for hetero-sexual masculine males for a brief moment of time as also discussed by Ahmed. Although post-structuralists as well as postmodern scholars and philosophers open new avenues of gender roles' debates and performativity dialogues while transcending the transcendental boundaries, the queerness still prevails as an enigma in Pakistan. The postcolonial Pakistani cinema faces critical reservations owing to the liberty and extension in the provided space as a connection and imitation of Western ideas and actions that are problematic despite all open digital spaces. It cannot be imagined in the real world to be practiced openly here in Pakistan.

This study has highlighted the rejection of queerness either as a transitory performance or a permanent taboo sexual orientation in Pakistani society. Despite the limited sample of a single movie *Zindagi Tamasha*, it was further delimited to the character of Rahat Khwaja and his queer disposition. I found it a more appropriate sample than other movies to cater to this discussion of queer phenomenology. However, the constraint was of referring to the Quranic verses and other holy references to critically evaluate the Islamic thoughts on this aspect on the basis of which religious scholars term "queerness" as illegal, or haram whereas how we can create room for such human beings on the basis of humanity. Therefore, this study is a humble effort to open readers' minds towards the empathetic approach of acceptance for biologically queer persons and transgenders, who are special and spend impoverished lives due to non-availability of respectable means of livelihood. After watching the movie, the readers of this paper should decisively empathise with Rahat Khwaja and his likes. They should avoid unnecessary criticism and ridicule, leaving conflict of ethical practices for managing respectable existence for queers and redirecting them towards their original sexual and gender orientation. For a balanced and harmonious living space, cultivating a more inclusive and compassionate society in Pakistan is necessary. By challenging normative narratives, phenomena, and promoting more gender-performativity dialogues, we can aspire towards a society that embraces diversity without prejudice or ridicule, thereby enriching the lived experiences of all individuals.

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