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**“I Eat Transphobes For Breakfasts”: Postcolonial literary language politics and identity construction on social media.**

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## Abstract

Marginalized communities in postcolonial states, in particular transgender people, face unique challenges when consciously displaying their gender and/or sexual identity. Drawing upon the postcolonial concepts of appropriation and abrogation – typically only limited to the literary tradition – this paper seeks to understand how colonial language and aesthetics are articulated in media by diverse transgender activists in the Pakistani context. I do this through the case study of the indigenous *khwajasira* community – an overarching term for transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people, often known as the “third gender” or as gender category X in legal communication. I study the tension between linguistic appropriation and abrogation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989) combined with multimodal critical discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin & Mayr 2012) on Instagram posts by bilingual/multilingual activists with a primary focus on English and Urdu. We delineate four case studies of Pakistani *khwajasira* activists including Mehrub Moiz Awan, Shahzadi Rai, Hina Baloch and Nayyab Ali as they utilize both English and Urdu languages in their advocacy efforts. Through a close reading of online cultural artefacts and texts from these activists, we analyze language as a fraught and a contested site through which the postcolonial condition is negotiated for those on the margins. In terms of a collective media corpus from all cases, we collected 830 social media posts from their public Instagram accounts. By limiting the inquiry to reels, Instagram videos, Lives, images, and interviews, with all corresponding captions, we evaluate innovative linguistic and textual strategies such as untranslated words, codeswitching, codemixing, metonymic gap, interlanguage, and neologism. By examining the language practices of Mehrub Moiz Awan, Shahzadi Rai, Hina Baloch, and Nayyab Ali, this paper captures a range of diverse perspectives, experiences, and linguistic expressions within the *khwajasira* community. That combined with the level of scrutiny and attention that these activists garner on mainstream/alternative and local/international media, this paper provides a unique lens into the tensions and challenges of the postcolonial subaltern subject. Our exploration of social media texts and the discourses surrounding them reveal nuanced insights into the ways in which marginalized communities use language to resist, decolonize, and dismantle dominant power relations. Through these case studies, this paper contributes to our understanding of the complex interplay of language, media, identity, and gender in postcolonial

milieus. Beyond this, the paper emphasizes the need to center non-Eurocentric perspectives within the broader LGBTQI+ movement, in shaping our scholarly understanding of queer experiences.

## **Language as Subaltern Resistance in Transgender Activism**

Language is a powerful tool for constructing and expressing identity. Postcolonial societies are characterized by linguistic diversity, with multiple languages coexisting and interacting in complex ways. In this context, academic scholarship and notable decolonial works suggest that language is not only a means of communication but also a marker of social, cultural, and political identity (Achebe, 1958, 1964; Bourdieu, 1991; Fanon, 1961, 1970). In terms of the English language, we take it for granted that wherever English appears in the modern world, it occurs in a bi/multilingual environment and as part and parcel of multilingual repertoires (Blommaert, 2016). While unraveling the historical foundation of the modern/colonial world system and imaginary, decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo also validates language as a crucial site of struggle in the “dewesternization” and “delinking” process. According to Young (2001), since the late 1970s, the main objective of postcolonial studies is to examine world history and its culture from a non-hegemonic Eurocentric perspective, and to articulate or symbolize subaltern views and marginalized experiences.

"Subaltern" refers to individuals or groups who have been marginalized and whose historical contributions, actions, and experiences have been disregarded, suppressed, or misunderstood within dominant narratives, discourses, and social structures. In the context of the indigenous *khwajasira* community, their marginalized status and experiences align with the conceptual framework of subalternity. Drawing from Gramscian scholarship and building upon the works of postcolonial critics and scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Ania Loomba, we identify the *khwajasira* community as subaltern. It is crucial to recognize that their subalternity is a result of the historical processes of colonization and the imposition of Western values, norm, hierarchies, and power structures.

As a direct translation, the term *khwajasira* means “the caretaker of the house” (Moiz & Gaewalla, 2021). More importantly, the term *khwajasira* is a renaming from the “Indian” *hijra*, as

advocated by community members in 2009 as a reaffirmation of legitimacy in Pakistan (Khan, 2009; Pamment, 2019). Historically and in the pre-colonial era, *khwajasiras* drew their social esteem from early Islam as guardians of significant religious sites. They trace their revered history to the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) and to the Mughal era (1526-1857) in the Indian subcontinent (Arondeker, 2009). Functioning as advisors, warrior-priests, political administrators, royal deputies, court functionaries, ritual performers, Sufi-informed identities, mystics, or as emissaries between men and women (Khan, 2016). However with the onset of European colonization and the British preference of the gender binary, non-conformity and fluidity was considered a “perversion.” Non-conformity challenged and “threatened” the colonial legal system, which was grounded in heteropatriarchy, reproductive sexuality, and traditional family.

In 1862, the Indian Penal Code came into effect in British India, which perpetuated the myth of the inherent superiority and “modernity” of the British legal system in comparison to the Indian counterpart (Skuy, 1998). Colonial legislations like the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) marked many communities as “criminal”, relegating the “third gender” from sacred to shunned. Drafted by Lord Macauley, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code introduced the concept of sexual offences which are “against the order of nature”, thus criminalizing sexualities (Hinchy, 2019), which persists in Pakistan and Bangladesh till date. Hinchy also notes that *hijras* were categorized as an “ungovernable population” who needed tireless regulation, control of spaces and delineation. The gradual decline in their sociocultural and economic status, added with the fragmentation of Mughal courts and princely states, threw *khwajasiras* into the public domain with many resorting to begging, sex-work, and prostitution (Pamment, 2010).

By restructuring the discourse on the *khwajasira* body as inferior, polluted and “unnatural”, the colonial project aimed at taking agency and power from the “natives” to govern them. Through a Foucauldian lens, bodies are strictly policed over centuries by repression and silencing sexuality. Transgender identities were reshaped into a discourse of menace (Reddy, 2005) by asserting control through fabricated knowledge about them as “deviants” or miscreants. British moral panic normalized terminologies such as “sodomites”, “eunuchs”, “castrated males” which are still common in Pakistani public discourse. The standardizing and bastardization (eunuchs turned into “*unix*” in court proceedings) of English terms in local vernacular is prevalent which has

stigmatized the community in postcolonial conditions. In 2012, the Supreme Court of Pakistan granted the *khwajasira* community the right to vote and choose their gender identity on national identity cards. Subsequently, in 2018, Pakistan enacted the Transgender Persons Act, aimed at providing fundamental protections to the community, at least in theory. Religious conservative political parties like Jamaat e Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) expressed reservations about the legislation, arguing that it “contradicts sharia” (Islamic laws). Political and religious opponents declare that the provision to choose/change one’s gender identity could open the door to “Western problems” like same-sex marriages. The renewed targeting of the transgender community is attributed by transgender to the practice of lumping "transgender" together with "homosexuality." In September 2022, trending hashtags like #AmendTransAct and #TakeBackTheVulgarBill" gained significant popularity on Twitter (Zaman, 2022).

To that end, language use by transgender activists has become a site of resistance, negotiation, and reclamation as they navigate the tension between societal expectations and their own self-expression. Having access to bilingual repertoires provides the selected activists with a unique advantage, as they have the ability to navigate between multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. By utilizing both English and Urdu languages in their advocacy efforts, they can engage with a broader audience(s) and address diverse communities.

### **Transcending the Postcolonial Literary Canon**

In recent decades, as a burgeoning academic field, postcolonial studies have explored the phenomenon of colonial identity by an alternative reading of literature and philosophy. Branching out into other academic fields such as anthropology, political science, philosophy, cultural studies, feminist studies, archaeology, linguistics, diaspora studies and film studies, but the main focus has been derived from literature. Regardless of the field, the notion of unequal power relations between postcolonial “centers” and “peripheries” remains the main thesis of this field. Postcolonial literary authors and artists have extensively made use of linguistic appropriation and abrogation in novels, fictional pieces of work, short-stories, and poems, to produce counter-discourses. They have attempted to decolonize and culturally assert themselves through indigenous language, self/national construction, or through shaping English language politics. At the intersection of

postcolonial identities and language what drives this research, in this obviously transdisciplinary field, is the lack of research into the application of literary decolonizing procedures i.e., appropriation, abrogation – and utilizing such strategies in a non-literary context. Dominance of language appropriation and abrogation by postcolonial societies or marginalized communities have been strictly consigned to the verbal language or the traditional written form – but mostly in past and present understandings of the literary world, and rarely in a media context.

Drawing from Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin's seminal work on postcolonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), we study the tension between linguistic appropriation and abrogation. For Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffins (2002), appropriation is an ideological operation that confronts or subverts norms and values. They define appropriation as “the process by which [imperial] language is made to bear the burden of one's own cultural experiences” (p. 38). They identify at least five language appropriation strategies including glossing, untranslated words, syntactic fusion, interlanguage, and code-switching or vernacular transcription. On the other hand, abrogation is “the refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetics, its illusory standard of normative of ‘correct’ usage and its assumption of a traditional or ‘fixed’ meaning inscribed in the words” (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin, 2002, p.37). Consequently, the process of “decolonizing” language follows a distinct two-step approach, encompassing the acts of appropriation and abrogation.

We consider appropriation as a revolutionary act in identity-formation which uses dominant language to undo the same logic of its culture. In tandem, the act of abrogation is both the act of refusal of the categories of imperial culture and paradoxically taking up Western aesthetics to break it down and “re-place” it with the pre-colonial, indigenous, or native. In this process, transgender activists play with the normative structures of language as defined by Eurocentric notions of self and life and superimpose it with a native account, as seen in typical postcolonial parlance such as mimicry, ambivalence, and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 1995, 2001). One way in which transgender activists are doing this is by appropriating language traditionally used to marginalize and stigmatize them, such as the use of terms like “*hijra*” (in the Pakistani context) and “*khusra*”, which is often used as a slur. By strategically utilizing these abrogation strategies of “reclamation” and “reappropriation”, marginalized communities and

activists are unknowingly reclaiming agency and asserting their own identities and narratives in the face of systemic oppression.

### **Case Studies: Insights into Bilingual Activists**

In the larger framework of this project, we delineate three categories of activists at the language level to ensure a diverse sample. Our categories include English-centric activists, bilingual or multilingual activists and Urdu-centric activists, based on their language use and discursive practices. We propose a Tripartite Language Framework to denote the activists' orientations towards English-centrism, bi/multilingualism, and Urdu-centrism. This framework is merely employed here as a tool to facilitate analysis and explore linguistic dynamics against the setting of the research objectives. It is not indicative of how these activists self-identify or classify themselves within their own advocacy work. Giving critical attention to activists who employ a combination of English and Urdu languages in their advocacy efforts, this categorization demonstrates distinct characteristics. To that end, English-centric activists are delineated in their ability i) to adapt their language use based on the context and audience, using English for broader platforms and Urdu for local engagement; ii) to incorporate culturally specific terminology and narratives into their activism, and iii) to navigate both global and local discourses to inform their struggle for transgender rights.

Mehrub Moiz Awan, Shahzadi Rai, Hina Baloch and Nayyab Ali are prominent transgender activists. In the international context, they have been featured in media news outlets or magazines such as The Guardian, The Juggernaut, The Funambulist, Vice News, BBC News, Deutsche Welle (DW), Reuters, France 24, Radio France Internationale, National Public Radio (NPR), The Christian Science Monitor, Associated Press (AP), Voice of America (VOA) and many others. Collectively, they have made contributions to advocating for legal rights to promote inclusivity, equality, and social justice for their community. Mehrub, Shahzadi, and Hina also played a big role in coordinating Pakistan's first trans pride event, the *Sindh Moorat March*, taking place on 20th November 2022, and coinciding with the International Transgender Day of Remembrance. Prioritizing the empowerment and education of *khwajasiras*, they regularly engage in initiatives that offer support/resources for transgender people to uplift them from their position



of “radical otherness” in postcolonial Pakistan. While advocating for improved access to healthcare services, employment opportunities, and gender-affirming care, some of these activists also engage in cultural and artistic endeavors through various mediums such as music, poetry, comedy, performance, and visual arts.

In order to provide deeper understanding of the individual case studies with respect to their profile, a detailed examination of each participant will be presented individually in this section. On her social media profiles, Dr. Mehrub Moiz Awan refers to herself as an academic, transgender rights activist, performance artist and global policy practitioner, with a strong interest in post-coloniality, indigenous wisdom, and issues of gender and sexuality. A doctorate in medicine, Mehrub has gained a Masters in Global Health Policy as a Fulbright scholar from The George Washington University, in the United States. After this – and before she transitioned – she has taught policy and research at Habib University, Karachi. Her perspectives and analysis on contemporary issues frequently attract attention from both national and global media outlets, giving visibility to South Asia through a queer lens. On YouTube and Twitter, Mehrub has been targeted numerous times by Youth Club, a right-wing collective on the rise, who launched a coordinated Twitter campaign using hashtags like #AmendTransgenderAct and #SayNoToTransgenderAct. Anti-transgender discourse and right-wing troll armies have called upon people to "save" the fabric of Pakistani society and uphold the principles of Islam by resisting efforts to normalize homosexuality (Durrani, 2023). Hence as a prominent voice and a ‘controversial’ figure, she is an excellent subject to examine in the context of postcolonial language politics.

Shahzadi Rai has been a transgender/human rights activist for over a decade. Her chosen name, “Shahzadi” is an Urdu word for princess. She has been working as a violence case manager and field supervisor since 2019 at Gender Interactive Alliance<sup>1</sup> (GIA), an organization working

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<sup>1</sup> One of their primary objectives involves lobbying to the government, to acknowledge transgender individuals as equal citizens in Pakistan. GIA also offers free medical assistance to transgender people who are regularly denied access to public healthcare. Their efforts also extend to promoting entrepreneurship among transgender individuals, who are often left out of mainstream economy. In their official communication, they also motivate the use of the terminology transgender by stating that, “[...] we use the term transgender as an adjective and a qualifier to describe people who do not identify with conventional male and female gender roles. This adjective is an umbrella term which covers a wide range of possible identities including, but not limited to, intersexual, transsexual, hijra, *khwajasira*,

towards equality and civil rights for transgender people in Pakistan. For the last four years, she has volunteered with the Sindh police force to directly take the cases of victims from the community to officials. According to Trans Murder Reporting, in 2022, Pakistan witnessed a higher number of murders of transgender individuals compared to the previous five years, with 14 cases reported. However, the true death toll is likely higher due to underreporting (TMM, 2022). Amid these violent incidents, Shahzadi has been involved to streamline communication between the transgender community and authorities to report transphobic hate crime (Le Breton, 2023). She also works at the intersection of HIV activism and awareness, and for other vulnerable groups including women, sex workers, and transgender sex workers. Additionally, she developed a community-driven approach to address gender-based violence and is a certified therapist in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Since June 2023, Shahzadi was one of the first two transgender persons to be elected to the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC), a public corporation and governing body to deliver municipal services in Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan.

Hina Baloch is a researcher, writer, transgender activist, and field supervisor at Gender Active Alliance (GIA). She is also the political convener and organizer for Sindh Moorat March. After the march, she has stated that “we received rape threats, acid attack threats [...] mobs tried to attack us, we escaped vigilantes, there were people following us to our homes, to work” (Le Breton, 2023). Lastly, Nayyab Ali, a human rights advocate, asexual transgender activist, and social scientist, has extensive expertise spanning ten years in the fields of gender equality and economic empowerment. She works as a victim support officer and heads the Transgender Protection Unit within the Islamabad police department. As an independent consultant, she has worked with numerous United Nations (UN) agencies like USAID, UNDP, etc. She has founded the first trans-led Transgender Rights Consultants Pakistan<sup>2</sup> (TRCP), which gives technical support to the government to draw up provincial and federal laws for protection which then culminated into the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018. She has established a

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butch, cross-dressers, and transvestites” (Gender Interactive Alliance, 2023). Both Mehrub and Shahzadi are involved with GIA in offering free-of-cost services in private health and assistance in cases related to violence, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> One of the campaigns that TRCP has led is the Trans Inclusive City (TIC) campaign, aimed at mainstreaming *khawajasira* community by initiating collaboration between public and private entities and commitments to organizational changes & reforms, which has resulted in the Transgender Protection Unit. Other programmes include TRCP volunteer program, Transgender Shelter Home, Transgender Food Relief Program, Medical & Dental Outreach Program, and an Emergency Response Team.

Khwajasira Quran School, serving as a religious educational hub and community center specifically catering to the needs of intersex and transgender individuals. Within the framework of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and as foreign policy endeavors, Nayyab was awarded the joint Franco-German Prize for Human Rights and the Rule of Law in 2020 (Auswärtiges Amt, 2020). Previously, she has received the Irish LGBT+ GALAS Activist Award and the transgender HERO Asia award in Thailand (National LBGT Federation, 2020).

With a significant presence on social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, together they have amassed a substantial following and engagement. In particular on Instagram and YouTube, the use of linguistic cues and symbols in hashtags like #EndTransViolence, #TransRightsAreHumanRights, #ProtectTransAct, #ProtectTransgenderAct2018 is also indicative of hashtag activism through online grassroots activity. Hashtag activism projects a sense of solidarity, exposes power relation and realities of inequalities (Clark, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020). Through a range of media forms, including Instagram posts, YouTube videos, interviews, podcasts, and other online content, Mehrub, Shahzadi, Hina and Nayyab employ creative and linguistic techniques to express their identities. This variety of mediums also allows for understanding the complexities of their language and discursive strategies.

## **Data & Methodology**

Selection of Instagram as an ideal source of data is based on several factors, firstly due to the visual nature of the platform (Abidin, 2016), and secondly as a “[...] valuable performative and discursive space” (O’Neill, 2014, p.36) to express sexuality and gender identity. At the same time, it starts from the assumption that social media such as Instagram play an important role in gendered and sexual(ised) online representation of activism for the transgender, queer and feminist community. More importantly, the presence of the selected sample active on Instagram played a significant role in the decision-making process. That combined with the added knowledge that self-representations are interpreted as gender performances (Butler, 1990). In many cases, Instagram texts create and reinforce gender conceptions that are influenced by larger societal and cultural discourses (Caldeira, Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2018; De Lauretis, 1987). While the argument that self-representations on Instagram can convey “gendered” messages may hold true

in many contexts, it may not be applicable to all individuals, especially those from marginalized communities who use images and texts on these platforms to subvert gender norms and dominant cultural narratives to express themselves “authentically.”

This research also continues from the premise that activist language is inherently multimodal, relying on both textual and visual means of communication with several semiotic modes. For this article, we collected publicly available Instagram data published by Mehrub (@unrelentlesslyours), Shahzadi (@shahzadi\_rai), Hina (@surkhina), and Nayyab (@nayyabalipk). In terms of ethics, the chosen Instagram posts occur within the public domain. The data includes visual (images + videos), audio-visual (videos with sounds), and textual (captions) from January 2020 to April 2023. The timeframe was chosen to correspond with significant events related to the trans movement in Pakistan, including moments of increased visibility in mainstream media, renewed discourse on/against legal rights of transgender people and increased social connectedness on digital media due during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Most importantly, this period also coincided with a wider cultural discourse and transphobic narratives that characterized transgender people as a "Western" problem, adding further urgency to the need for research in this area.

We manually collected 330 posts from Mehrub’s account, 300 posts from Shahzadi’s account, 100 posts from Hina’s accounts and 100 posts from Nayyab’s account. The Instagram posts were gathered from the desktop version (instagram.com). Screen capture software was used to record the videos and audios linked with each Instagram posts. The frequency of posts collected from each activist's account is influenced by their individual posting habits and relevance of their content to the research objectives. More emphasis has been placed on activists like Mehrub and Shahzadi, whose accounts exhibited a higher volume of posts that align with the research focus. Real-time Instagram stories were excluded from the dataset as they expire after a 24-hour period. Corresponding to each activist, Instagram posts were archived in a separate folder that operated as an auxiliary set of “fieldnotes” (Kozinets, 2020). As such, in the digital ethnography or netnography methodology these fieldnotes function as an “immersion journal” which is an empirical and textual rendering of the digital ethnographer (Quick, 2021). As Boellstorff (2012) phrases it, the approach to studying the digital realm should not treat it as a mere object of research,

but rather as a methodological tool rooted in participant observation that enables the investigation of the virtual and “its relationship to the actual” (p. 39). The collected data underwent a thorough immersion process which involved repeatedly engaging with the data, familiarizing with the content, and developing an understanding of its context (Kozinets, 2015). This ongoing process will facilitate us in the identification of significant patterns and themes these cultural artefacts, including texts, audios, videos, and visuals.

In this project, we aim to develop a “Postcolonial Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis” (PMDCA) framework to analyze online cultural texts produced by postcolonial actors. Self-explanatory in its namesake, this framework combines a qualitative interpretation of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s (1989, 2002) postcolonial language appropriation and abrogation strategies and draws on a methodology that is embedded in critical theory and social semiotics (Halliday, 1985) called multimodal critical discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012). This aims to reveal how language, image and other modes of communication combine to make meaning. We extend the work in the postcolonial literary canon by evaluating innovative linguistic and textual strategies found in social media posts. These strategies include transliteration, untranslated words, codeswitching, neologism, and codemixing, in two languages – English and Urdu.

Originally based on systemic functional grammar as developed by Halliday (2006), multimodal discourse analysis refers to the evaluation of different semiotic modes in discourse. Therefore, it is aimed at integrating “[...] the representational, interactive, and textual meanings achieved by various elements” (Bo, 2018, p.132) to analyze how different elements work together to form complete discourse. To study the visual mode in multimodal discourse analysis, we consider several visual semiotics resources, as outlined by Machin & Mayr (2012). These include 1) representing the attitudes of speaker (analyzing quoting verbs, pose and gaze of social actor); 2) and representational strategies in visual communication which “positions the viewer in relation to people inside the image” (p. 96). More descriptively, the analytic procedure encompasses the following: the staging of the images/videos, the activist’s gaze and positioning, attributes (concepts and values disseminated by objects/props and how they are represented), distance and angle of

shots, color and visual modality<sup>3</sup>, character choice (pose, facial expression), clothing, location, metaphorical tropes, and the ways these modes blend to create social meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006; Hurley, 2019; Machin, 2007; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Lastly, due to the fact that social media texts have connectivity at its core, the analytical framework also considers intertextuality and interdiscursivity demonstrating that “text cannot function as a closed system” (Alfaro, 1996, p. 268). Developed by dialogic concepts of seminal poststructuralists, the likes of Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida, and improved by Norman Fairclough, the concept of intertextuality is concerned with “how texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and dialogue with other texts” (Fairclough, 2003, p.17). In digital cultures, intertextuality takes shape when texts can transform previous texts and reorganize existing conventions (genre, discourses) to create new meaning through hyperlinking or hashtags. On the other hand, the CDA approach of interdiscursivity denotes the mixing of diverse language conventions (i.e. genres, discourses, or styles) related to social meanings in a single text. Overall, this methodology allows for a nuanced analysis of the data, considering both textual and visual elements, linguistic strategies, and the interplay between different discourses and genres.

## **Findings**

### ***Jaagi Jaagi, Moorat Jaagi!***

In many respects, online activism is a microcosm of cultural, linguistic, and social tensions around the “transgender issue” in postcolonial nation-states. In terms of appropriation, we find that all four activists mostly incorporate two languages i.e. English and Urdu, in their social media posts, videos and interviews. We observe a preferential use of Urdu linguistics in discussions with local mainstream media as Urdu carries cultural or emotional significance whereas English appeals to more global sensibilities. The analytic framework of codeswitching considers the larger sociocultural influence specifically for transgender-related terminology in social media discourse. Encompassing so-called Western notions such as “transition”, “trans pride”, “rainbow flag”, “LGBTQ”, “in the closet”, or “coming out” narratives that do not have direct translations or

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<sup>3</sup> Visual modality consists, but is not limited to, articulation of; detail, background, saturation, modulation, depth, light, shadow, and tone (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

commonly understood equivalents in Urdu. And vice versa, trans activist language also gestures to how certain discursive repertoires are at play such as cultural untranslatability (CU) and linguistic untranslatability (LU) that are embedded in colonial states (Catford, 1965). The variance is perhaps more profound in indigenous *khwajasira* (or *hijra*) culture which functions on its own terms. *Khwajasiras*, historically and presently, undergo ritual initiations, forming hierarchical/discipleship relationships between *gurus* (teacher) and *cheelas* (disciples). With households arranged by discipleship lineages or *gharanas*, they have distinct territories for practicing *hijra* customs such as *badhai* or repertoires of songs, dances, prayers, and humor to celebrate weddings, births, and other heteronormative events (Hossain, Pamment & Roy, 2022). Hijras often develop kinship bonds, referring to each other as mother, sister, daughter, niece, or aunt (Hinchy, 2022). Some maintain connections with their birth families and fulfill both *Hijra* and male housekeeping roles. Hinchy also explains that the community predominantly expresses femininity through attire, mannerisms, gaze, language use, and names, while occasionally intertwining with elements of masculinity.

Urdu – belonging to the Indo-Aryan language group – national language and lingua franca of Pakistan alongside English, traces its lineage to Hindustani. Like various other languages, Urdu<sup>4</sup> has been classified by linguists on the basis of its morphology and syntactical features and contains loan words, nouns, adjectives from Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Pushto, Punjabi, and even Portuguese, but 99% of Urdu verbs have their roots in Sanskrit/Prakrit (Parekh, 2011). The use of transliteration and untranslated words in the online discourse of our transgender activists reflects their deployment of postcolonial literary devices. We find that the term “transgender” or “queer” is abrogated in Urdu with the use of the indigenous terminology *Moorat* – an amalgamation of *mard* (man) and *aurat* (woman), although independently *moorat* means “idol” or “statues”, hence giving new meanings to vocabularies. Words like *moorat* are also rooted in Hijra Farsi (traditional coded/secret language of the *khwajasira* community), and hence *moorat* is not limited to *khwajasiras*, but extends to the gender or sexually diverse. During various events such as International Transgender Day of Visibility and Sindh’s trans pride, activists have popularized

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<sup>4</sup> In different times and places in history, Urdu has also been called “Hindi”, “Hindvi”, “Goojri”, “Rekhta” and “Dhakani.” It was positioned to disseminate historical knowledge in South Asia and in pre-colonial times, flourishing due to its literary and poetic potential encompassing wide variety of genres and subjects.

political slogans such as “*Jaagi Jaagi, Moorat Jaagi*” which could be loosely translated to ‘the *moorat* awakes, the *moorat* awakes!’ or ‘the *moorat* has risen, the *moorat* has risen!’ The use of feminine *jaagi* instead of the masculine *jaaga* indicates that gender is explicably unavoidable in Urdu. In another scenario, the slogan was frequently used in social media campaigns by and for Mehrub against *beelas* (a group of organized syndicates) who attacked her and attempted to gang rape her.

The now politically charged phrase *Jaagi Jaagi, Moorat Jaagi* is utilized at protests, demonstrations, marches, and frequently shared on social media like Instagram and Twitter. In our corpus, the slogan is often accompanied by the ‘transgender pride flag’ emoji or used in several captions or as a text overlay with visual images from protests, showcasing multimodality of expression. The popularization and legitimization of *Jaagi Jaagi, Moorat Jaagi* is an illustration of what postcolonial literary appropriation and abrogation signifies as neologism, transliteration, and untranslated words. Neologism is the creation of new words or the combination of existing ones, influenced by social, cultural, and intercultural changes. To that end, when a word/phrase is freshly coined, its destiny within a language is uncertain; it might gain acceptance as a neologism or fade away as a nonce word<sup>5</sup>, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of linguistic evolution. This linguistic fluidity then intersects with postcolonial language, where the embrace or rejection of novel vocabulary reflects the ongoing struggle for decolonization, cultural reclamation, and the negotiation of power dynamics. We deduce that this appropriation strategy serves two main purposes. Firstly, the *subversion of colonial impositions* as activists infuse local and indigenous terminologies which disrupts the linguistic hierarchy imposed by the center. Secondly, the acts of *vocabulary expansion and redefinition* challenges the limited and often stigmatized Euro-American conceptions of gender and offers an alternative perspective that are reflective of local realities and indigenous histories.

In the online discursive arena, the frequency of this slogan shows a productive exploitation by transgender actors and allies, the result of which is the widespread dissemination of new lexical creations. It is also worth mentioning here that following the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the “morality police” in September 2022 due to “improper hijab” and ongoing antiregime

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<sup>5</sup> A nonce word (also sounds or letters) is coined for a single occasion and not understood as a word within that language.



protests in Iran and beyond, transgender activists in Pakistan also adopted the Iranian rallying cry. Our corpus indicates the use of the popular political Kurdish slogan ‘*Zan, Zendagi, Azadi*’ (Women, Life, Liberty) with ‘*Jaagi Jaagi, Moorat Jaagi.*’ Following the logics of social movements in the Internet age, Castells (2015) emphasizes that “seeing and listening to protests somewhere else, even in distant contexts and different cultures, inspires mobilization because it triggers *hope* of the possibility of change” (p. 252). Another instance of interacting with parallel movements, is the reappropriation of the #SayTheirNames and #SayHerName campaigns inspired from the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements in the United States to the #UnkayNaamPukaro at the *Aurat* March (Women’s March) in March 2022. As seen in Figure 1a and 1b, Instagram posts by Nayyab Ali (and the Transgender Rights Consultant Pakistan) commemorate their “*khwajasira* sisters” who are no longer alive due to transgender violence. These texts, like many others in our dataset, also combine elements of visual multimodality with the trans pride flag and color choices which subvert masculinity and aligns with the broader LGBTQI+ struggle. Through the usage of iconic symbols and anchoring them in the local context, *khwajasiras* are able to construct a globally intelligible concept of a transgender identity and queer world-making.



Figure 1a. Names of deceased *khwajasiras*.



Figure 1b. Cover photo of #UnkayNaamPukaro

## The Paradoxical Mirror of Bilingual Identities

In situations where two languages and cultures interact, there is a potential for linguistic and cultural intertwining to occur. English holds an interesting position in Pakistani society and fosters an elite status that stems from historical, sociopolitical, and colonial legacies. Likewise, institutional bias towards English reinforces its perceived prestige, while perpetuating social inequalities. English also has the lure of sophistication, modernity, and social mobility which allows bi/multilingual activists to tap into global discourses, connect with international support networks, and raise awareness about issues on a broader scale. This is particularly true in the case of Nayyab who frequently shares visuals of her activism and representation at workshops, training sessions, seminars, and conferences in both local/global settings including countries such as the United States of America<sup>6</sup>, Australia, and Thailand.

On the other hand, Urdu can be a difficult language for transgender people as it forces the user to choose a sex referring to oneself. Even mundane speech acts such as “I am eating an apple” in English can potentially become a daring, perhaps rebellious act in Urdu. Nouns possess an inherent gender, either masculine or feminine. Adjectives and verbs undergo changes based on gender to match the nouns they agree with. Hence, bilingual, or multilingual activists who are proficient in English can utilize its perceived quality as a “gender-neutral language” in contrast to Urdu, a language with pronounced gender distinctions. In the realm of Urdu, everything is divided into the masculine and feminine genders, but *khwajasiras* defy the order of linguistic hierarchy by being both and none simultaneously. Diverging from a heteronormative rulebook that relies on the presence or absence of male genitalia, or the “preferred pronoun” debate, self-identification for *khwajasiras* is grounded in the possession of a *ruh* – denoting an innate feminine sensibility or spirit/soul within their own corporeal existence. This is also exemplified in an audiovisual text posted on Instagram on September 23, 2022, where Nayyab appears on a local news channel to counter conservative discourse and to support the right to choose one’s self-perceived gender expression. It is intriguing, and at the same time contradictory, how the activist employs religious rhetoric to confront transphobic, illiberal, and colonialist ideologies, expressing the following viewpoint:

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<sup>6</sup> Some notable location-based tags on Nayyab’s Instagram account include the U.S Department of State, the Pentagon (Washington DC), and the White House.

“If we are telling you that our *ruh* is feminine, who are you to tell us otherwise? Go ask Al-Azhar University in *Misr* (Arabic name for Egypt), go listen to Sheikh Tantawi’s *fatwa* (Arabic word for religious order issued by a Muslim leader), go ask Imam Khomeini! Why are you giving us examples of Europe and India? Give us examples from Muslim nations [...] In Islam, transgender and intersex are two different things. In the Transgender Protection Act, we have written three different definitions for eunuchs, intersex, and transgender. All three categories are legitimate in Islam. Look at Iran ... they have state-sponsored gender reconstructive surgery! Do not teach us this “Facebook Islam”, we know the real Islam” (translations from Urdu are provided by the researcher)

Similar to how postcolonial literature seeks to reconcile the author's loyalty to their nation and their desire for a global audience, transgender activists employ linguistic strategies which problematizes this divide. In an audiovisual text posted on March 10, 2023, from a Women’s Day festival, Baloch politicizes the linguistic use of religious and historical rhetoric to demystify the same rhetoric that emanates from right-wing Islamist factions in Pakistan:

“We [khwajasiras] have been caretakers of religious and saintly sites like Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti’s tomb [Persian scholar/mystic], Sufi shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi [patron saint of Sindh], Laal Shahbaz Qalandar [12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint/poet of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan], Bibi Pak Daman [a mausoleum in Lahore], and Data Darbar [largest Sufi shrine in South Asia] [...] even the term *hijra* comes from Hijrat [reference to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina]. We have also spiritually migrated to accept our gender expression, and we refuse to go back into the closet [...] there are more than 72 sects in Islam. I belong to the Shi’a community. In my sect, transitioning isn’t just *halal* but absolutely *wajib* [mandatory] if your *ruh* is feminine. Look at Iran.. known to be the ‘transitioning’ hub for the transgender community. Do you believe that Iran lacks Sharia? Is Islam not present there? Are Muslims not residing there? Why does Islam not face any threats in Iran? [...] we are also in Mecca and Medina, at the gates of the Ka’ba and Roza-e-Rasool [reference to the prophet’s mosque].”

The text is expressive of the oppressed position occupied by the *khwajasiras* and has mostly been uttered in Urdu, rejecting the inheritance of colonial English to construct images of national, cultural, and religious identity. Against the backdrop of abrogation, Baloch creates and expresses local meanings. The absence of English codeswitching arises from the limitation of the English language in adequately signifying religious prophets, saints, sites, and events. As a result, Baloch attempts to solve this linguistic burden by retaining a selective fidelity to Urdu. Then, the likening of *hijra* to *Hijrah* or *Hijrat* (another important event in Islamic history) represents that activists also rely on metaphors and allegorical examples to construct their ‘sacred’ identities. Through the use of lexical items like *wajib* – an Arabic word for ‘Islamic jurisprudence’ representing an

obligatory act with failure to perform constituting a sin in Islam – Baloch delves into the issue of transitioning. Using both domesticating strategies and the recourse to English for statements like “we refuse to go back in the closet”, Baloch vividly articulates how activist language bridges the gap between indigenizing processes and a wider appeal.

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\* Tbc. This paper is still a work in progress.

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