

## Book Review

Hossain, Adnan. Pamment, Claire. and Roy, Jeff. *Badhai: Hijra-Khwaja Sira-Trans Performance across Borders in South Asia*. 176pp. Bloomsbury Publishing 2022.

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In *Badhai: Hijra-Khwaja Sira-Trans Performance across Borders in South Asia*, Adnan Hossain, Claire Pamment and Jeff Roy present a sophisticated, interdisciplinary and politically resonant exploration of badhai performance practices (related to celebratory ‘gift’ blessings performed by trans communities on weddings and births) across South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Bridging anthropology, performance studies, ethnomusicology and queer/trans theory, this collaboratively authored volume provides a much-needed intervention into both regional studies and the global field of trans performance scholarship. At once deeply grounded in ethnographic research and theoretically ambitious, this excellent volume is a remarkable attempt to centre performance as a site of worldmaking, relationality and resistance for hijra, khwaja sira, and trans communities in South Asia.

The central argument of the book is elegantly simple but theoretically rich: badhai—a constellation of ritualised performance practices including song, dance, satire, prayer, and blessing, typically offered at life-cycle events—should not be dismissed as an archaic or marginal cultural artifact but understood as a vital, living practice through which trans-feminine communities negotiate their identities, economies, and social positions in contemporary South Asia. The book re-envisioned badhai as dynamic artistry and key to what the authors call ‘hijra-khwaja sira-trans worldmaking’ and emphasises its improvisational and responsive nature, demonstrating how performers skilfully adapt their repertoire to specific troupes, contexts, and publics, playing with and across various sociocultural relationalities including gender, sexuality, class, caste and religion.[1] The core argument elevates badhai from mere ‘extortion’ or ‘public nuisance’ (p.43)—as it is often depicted in contemporary media and state discourses—to a sacred and agentic occupation sanctioned by the divine, a source of strength and self-expression for its practitioners.

The authors thus position badhai as both a methodology and a metaphor—a framework through which to rethink region, kinship, performance and subjectivity across borders, disciplines and epistemologies.

The structure of the book is both collaborative and segmented. After a jointly written introduction and theoretical framing, each of the three authors offers a case study grounded in their respective field sites and methodological commitments. Hossain’s chapter on Bangladesh critically interrogates the legal recognition of hijras and the development apparatus that simultaneously seeks to include and domesticate badhai practitioners within neoliberal frameworks of respectable citizenship. His engagement with the paradoxes of state-sponsored inclusion offers a nuanced critique of how performance becomes a site of both empowerment and control.

Pamment’s chapter on Pakistan focuses on badhai performances and the shifting territorial and affective geographies that khwaja sira performers navigate in urban contexts. Through careful attention to affect, sound and spatiality, Pamment illuminates how performance articulates with emerging rights discourses and religious-nationalist imaginaries. Her use of cinematic and theatrical aesthetics as analytic tools is particularly compelling, underscoring the fluid, improvisatory and relational nature of performances by *tolis* (or troupes/bands) of khwaja sira in Lahore.

Roy’s chapter on India turns toward the sonic and musical dimensions of badhai. His ethnomusicological lens brings to light the affective politics of voice, rhythm and movement in hijra performance ensembles, particularly in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Roy argues that badhai’s sonic textures operate as ‘affective infrastructures,’ enabling trans performers to reimagine public space, collective memory and futurity. His work with vocalists

and musicians foregrounds how musical practice enables agency and sustains intergenerational transmission of knowledge within the gharana system.

One of the book's most notable strengths lies in its explicitly transnational and regionally comparative scope. Rather than reinscribing nation-states as the default frame for understanding gender and sexuality, Badhai foregrounds what the authors term the 'hijrascape'—a regionally interconnected network of performative, spiritual and kinship-based practices that traverse colonial, national and disciplinary borders. In doing so, the volume not only challenges the hegemony of Western-centric trans studies but also critiques the myopia of narrowly national frameworks that obscure the relational and historical continuities between communities across South Asia. The generative concept of 'hijrascapes' is thus a deliberate move away from 'methodological nationalism' (p.29) and the 'myopias of a colonial visual regime' (p.xv) that historically de-centred performance and focused narrowly on abject regulation of dissident bodies. This framework allows the authors to analyse badhai practices across national boundaries (Bangladesh, Pakistan, India), highlighting interconnected origin narratives, tropes, gestures and linguistic and religious referents that traverse geopolitical divides.

The authors are also attuned to the limitations of both academic and activist discourses that have historically marginalised hijra and khwaja sira communities. In particular, they offer a powerful critique of the lingering colonial gaze that sought to pathologise hijra bodies through regulation, criminalisation and visual surveillance. Building on the work of scholars like Jessica Hinchy, the authors reveal how anti-hijra legislation like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 explicitly targeted performances by 'eunuchs' dressed as women. They demonstrate how these colonial views persist in postcolonial contexts, where badhai is frequently dismissed as 'backward communitarian practice' hindering 'social empowerment' (p. 23). This legacy of colonial violence endures in postcolonial regimes of respectability, including state-led welfare initiatives, legal recognition frameworks, and NGO-driven development programmes. Hossain's chapter vividly illustrates how state policies in Bangladesh refigure hijras as 'protibondhi' (handicapped or disabled) and criminalise badhai and cholla (collection of money and food from marketplaces) as criminally oriented 'extortion and public nuisance,' reinforcing 'real/fake' hijra dichotomies (p.38). By centring contemporary performance, the authors 'prioritise relational and embodied forms of knowledge production and transmission' that go 'beyond the colonising and restrictive epistemic grids' (p.18), confronting how the colonial archive continues to shape cultural institutions and values. The analysis of the shifting status of badhai within these contemporary formations is both timely and incisive, particularly in light of ongoing debates about

trans inclusion and rights recognition in South Asia.

At the same time, the book pushes back against simplistic narratives of victimhood or cultural stasis. Rather than framing badhai as a vanishing tradition, the authors emphasise its ongoing vitality, improvisational capacity, and strategic adaptability. The text repeatedly returns to the embodied, sensorial, and affective dimensions of performance—what the authors term 'co-performative witnessing'—to demonstrate how badhai practitioners engage with, disrupt, and remake their social worlds. This attention to embodiment and relationality is among the book's most original contributions, aligning it with broader efforts in performance and affect studies to reorient knowledge production away from purely discursive models.

That said, there are moments when the book's breadth and polyvocal structure can lead to some fragmentation. While the division of chapters by author and geography enables depth of analysis, it occasionally limits sustained comparative engagement across the three sites. A more robust synthesis in a concluding chapter would have offered greater clarity, weaving together the common threads and divergences in badhai practices across Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Additionally, readers unfamiliar with the specific socio-political and cultural contexts of the case studies from each country may find themselves needing to reference external materials to fully appreciate the nuances of each one.

Further, while the volume acknowledges caste, class and religious difference as salient factors shaping hijra–khwaja sira–trans lives, these dimensions could be explored more explicitly and consistently across chapters. In particular, a deeper interrogation of how caste hierarchies intersect with the transmission of performance knowledge, access to public space and audience reception would have enriched the analysis.

Nevertheless, these critiques do little to detract from the book's significance. Badhai is a pioneering work that refuses the binaries of tradition versus modernity, victimhood versus agency, or ritual versus art. Instead, it presents performance as a dynamic, contested and deeply relational field of practice. Through its attention to voice, movement, gesture, affect and space, the book invites readers to listen to, and move with, hijra–khwaja sira–trans performers as they navigate the shifting terrains of recognition, marginality, and belonging. The evocative photographs in each chapter ground the analysis in rich visual material, which, in the absence of companion website with videos of performances, or an audio playlist, helps readers to at least (partially) understand the embodied hijrascapes under discussion.

In sum, Badhai is a groundbreaking and necessary contribution to queer and trans South Asian studies

and performance studies more broadly. It models what collaborative, interdisciplinary and ethically engaged scholarship can look like, while offering new pathways for thinking about gender, culture and performance in the Global South. The book's emphasis on affective and sensorial engagements, and its comprehensive transregional analysis make it an invaluable resource that not only elevates the artistry of these communities but also insists on feeling and sensation as vital forms of politicking and world-making. In centring the practices, perspectives and voices of hijra-khwaja sira-trans communities, the authors not only enrich academic discourse but also contribute to a more just and expansive understanding of queer/trans worldmaking across borders.

**Endnote:**

[1] The authors italicise "trans" in their book, to differentiate it from its more uniform usage as a global category and instead emphasise its vernacular usage in the South Asian context. While 'hijra' is the popular term in north India and Bangladesh, and 'khwaja sira' is a term with origins in the Mughal-era, and is commonly used in Pakistan, in reality, there are a range of regional linguistic terminologies in use, which the authors recognise.

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