



Unveiling Precarity: Family, Recognition, and Intersex Vulnerability in Khuda Mera Bhi Hai (2016)

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ABSTRACT

Pakistani television dramas are important cultural artefacts which shape, contested and sustained the norm of mainstream gender in Pakistan. The first mainstream Pakistani serial that featured a transgender child or intersex in the main character was Khuda Mera Bhi Hai (ARY Digital, 2016) which sparked public debate on issues of family honor, social pressure and transgender and intersex rights. This paper is a scene-focused qualitative analysis that explores construction of intersex protagonist Noor as 'visible' and 'precarious' in this drama. Judith Butler's theory of precarity has informed the study, where precariousness is defined as a universal condition, one that all lives experience, but that precarity is also understood as a socially- and institutionally-produced condition—one that puts certain lives at a disadvantage of being more likely to suffer harm, exclusion and neglect. The paper also builds on Faris A Khan's scholarship on khwaja sira identity to position the drama as an identity in the context of the South Asian kinship and honour dynamics. A detailed examination of significant scenes, from scenes of birth and familial rejection, to scenes of exclusion from school, to the individual protection of the mother and to enquiries about marriage and adult belonging, to the drama's negotiated resolution, reveals how emotional intimacy and maternal sacrifice help to humanize Noor; the persistence of the structures of institutional neglect, moral policing, and conditional acceptance are relatively unchanged. The paper suggests that the drama's reputation for boldness is mostly about somehow rendering intersex vulnerability noticeable and emotionally obvious to the wider stream society, and not in the creation of permeant protection based on rights. By so doing, it also does its part to feminist media scholarship on South Asian televisions by providing a sustained single-text analysis based on Butler's concept of precarity, and the critical analysis of how popular drama can simultaneously question and reinscribe the lines of what constitutes a fully grievable life.



Introduction

Pakistani dramas play a pivotal role in the construction of gender, family and respectability. These serials watched across classes and across nations do more than entertain – they demonstrate forms of life and kinds of suffering that can be recognized and sympathy elicited; forms of difference that can be disciplined back into social order. In this context *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (2016), a series broadcasted on ARY Digital, has a special place, since it features an intersex child, Noor, at the heart of its narrative, rather than glossing over her physical anomalies or overlooking her existence.

The drama takes the spectator through Noor's life from infancy to childhood and adolescence, and charts the implications of an intersex identity for a family in which continuity, honour and social decorum is the norm is patrilineal. Perhaps it's the mom's resolve to shield and raise Noor, usually at odds with larger family and community, that makes the heart of the series. The drama came at a time when a year prior Pakistan's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 was passed, which for the first time acknowledges transgender and intersex people as a gender and granted them the right to "self-identified gender". The drama arrived just two years after the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 came to be passed, which for the first time recognised transgender and intersex people as a gender and granted them the right to "self-identified gender", a step which brought trans rights into the draft laws of Pakistan, albeit on an uneven footing. This ambivalence was reflected in the way the drama was received: The Express Tribune saw it as a "game changer" and applauded the topics covered by the drama as being social issues like the taboo on divorce, social pressure, transgender women and intersect women, which did not receive sufficient attention elsewhere, while The News stated that it was not sensitive and did not have enough information about the topics discussed by the drama. The split reception itself is suggestive: It illustrates that visualization and representativeness are different achievements.

The aim of this paper is to trace in sustained detail how one mainstream drama manages this tense space between humanizing the intersex figure and reproducing that social space that renders the intersex figure's life precarious, in this specific case, by taking a single mainstream drama as its sole object of analysis, namely, *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*. This is not the first time that transgender representation in Pakistani dramas is mentioned in this light, studies have already pointed to this idea, such as the comparative study of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and *Alif Allah Aur Insaan* by (Zaman, Sadia and Azra's et al., 2023). (Abbas et al., 2019) also discovers that transgender characters in Pakistani TVs are generally brought in into the narrative of pain and social separation, which provoke pity without upending social connections. What is yet to be explored is a close, theoretically informed and single-text analysis of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, which traces precarity as it unfolds over the course of one character's life, from infancy to adulthood, instead of as a series of thematic snapshots found in a number of dramas.

To carry out this analysis, the paper refers to the concept of precarity of Judith Butler. While precariousness, a state of bodily vulnerability and dependency common to all human life, is distinguished from precarity, an unequal, politically constructed distribution of exposure to violence, neglect and disenfranchisement, Butler does highlight the inherent vulnerability of the body as an element of precariousness in all human life. In *Frames of War*, Butler takes this argument one step further and questions "who can recognize a life at all, and what losses can be

publicly grieved," which are expansions of the concepts of "life recognition" and "public grievability" as introduced by bell hooks. Out of this, (Butler et al., 2009) presents a further question, "who can recognize a life at all, and what losses can be publicly grieved," thus extending the concepts of "life recognition" and "public grievability" first introduced by bell hooks. If a mainstream community is to become emotionally capable of understanding Noor's life, Butler's framework provides a precise vocabulary with which to describe what *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* does and does not do: it doesn't fully imagine an institutionalized social order where the life feels safe, but makes it emotionally intelligible.

The paper is organized as follows. It sets the stage for the drama in relation to the wider scholarship on trans and intersex representation in global and South Asian media and specifically in Pakistan. It then lays out the theoretical framework of precarity, recognition and the performativity of gender which informs the analysis and explains the methodology used in the selection and coding of scenes. The analytical part of the paper discusses five important scenes of the drama, which shows the evolution from the birth of Noor to the conclusion of the drama. From these insights, this discussion summarizes and suggests that the drama's greatest strength and its greatest shortcoming are both that it is a drama of feeling intersex vulnerability without being a drama of changing institutions.

Literature Review

Transgender and Intersex Representation: Global Considerations

There has been a noteworthy surge in scholarly research on transgender and gender-variant representation in media studies and queer studies in media over the last ten years. One thing that keeps occurring in this literature is that visibility in the media doesn't necessarily lead to social equality. In the context of the United States, (Billard et al., 2019) conducted a large-scale content analysis of transgender characters on television, and revealed that more representation does not necessarily mean more disruption of marginalization – that transgender characters are far more likely to be represented in extraordinary stories that are about trauma, suffering, or moral lesson, and less likely to be represented in ordinary social relationships (p. 46). In a related vein, (Dutta et al., 2018) argues that these processes of 'individualizing' structural violence often lead to personalised assessments of individual suffering in media texts, which in turn functions to mask the political and institutional practices that render people vulnerable to structural violence in the first place (p. 613–615).

Feminist media scholars warn that the extent of representation -- though marginalized characters may be present -- is measured not just by whether or not they are represented on screen, but also by the way their stories are represented. As (Gill et al., 2016) notes, modern media is easily able to display feminist and seemingly 'good' visibility, while femininity is simultaneously defined by hierarchies of value and worth which remain significantly hidden under an affective and moralized surface (p. 23). This visibility, however, is different from structural change, and is pivotal to the reading of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (KMB) outlined in the present paper, a play often commended for its visibility of an intersex protagonist, which has a seemingly more complex structure.

A convergence of perspectives

South Asian media scholarship places gender variant representation in the context of a rich history of religion, caste/class hierarchy, and colonial regulation. A duality that exists in the visibility of Khwaja sira and hijra in the ritual and in public life, and in their exclusion from social and economic participation, continues to influence the media portrayal of these groups today (Khan et al., 2016). From a more general perspective on South Asian film and television, scholars see gender variants often being represented in the context of spiritual symbolism, moral testing, or sacrificial suffering, which results in a sympathetic recognition of the gender variant characters without necessarily challenging the implications of otherness in the otherness bargaining system (Ghosh et al., 2016; Hossain et al., 2017). (Hossain's et al., 2017) investigation of the portrayal of hijra and third-genders in the Bangladeshi media, reveals that their representation is mostly about a discourse of redemption and pity which precludes their access to rights and citizenship. 635–637). This regional pattern is directly applicable to the story of the drama, as it is specifically structured around the love of the mother, who is the subject of redemption and self-sacrifice, for Noor.

Transgender and Intersex Representation in South Asian Media

Specific scholarship focuses on the gradual change in the representation of transgender and intersex characters, since 2015 at least. According to (Abbas et al., 2019), content analysis of Urdu-language dramas aired from 2010-18 suggests although caricatured characters have decreased in number, transgender characters have emerged in greater numbers but most of these characters are limited to low status roles and are often sidelined from the narrative, implying a continuous discourse of vulnerability (p. 12). Abbas adds that transgender often come into view in a language of suffering and the rejection of the transgendered, which only begs for compassion, but not for change in social norms.

It is noteworthy to mention here that Zaman, Sadia and Azra's comparative study between the two dramas *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and *Alif Allah Aur Insaan* is directly relevant to the present paper as it deals directly with the drama considered here. They conclude that both serials represent transgender and intersex characters within an emotional valence of suffering and moral endurability, of conditional acceptance (p. 586–588). Driven by their desire to highlight the positive in these depictions, while recognizing the sympathetic tone of their portrayal, the authors believe that both drama and non-dramatic representations do not fundamentally challenge the marginalization of transgender and intersex lives in society and institution. This work builds on (Ullah, Saeed and Sarhadi et al., 2024) who analyse the normalization of physical, psychological and symbolic violence on transgender characters in Pakistani Urdu dramas, as a means of desensitizing the audience and rendering transness as a lived reality rather than a socially constituted condition (pp. 252–255).

Comparative work provides a regional perspective on the Pakistani Television. While both media and narrative registers have a shared hegemonic moral and social discourse which, in the case of both performers and spectators, is all but oppressive, (Khan, Ibrahim and Nordin et al., 2025) outline the difference in how they are negotiated in this case of the drama *Guru* and the film *Joyland* (p. 4241–4244). Over the course of these various studies, one thing is consistently found: the portrayal of trans and intersex lives in Pakistani television has become more accommodating, but not necessarily imagining trans and intersex lives as fully secured in family, community and state structures. One of the first and most openly known occurrences of this

change was *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, and, as such, deserves to be studied as a standout case study in this scholarship.

Transgender and Intersex Representation in Pakistani Television

Precarity is not yet a term that has been extensively used for Pakistani Television in general but it has been used extensively by the feminist and political theory to understand the differential exposure to harms. Butler suggests that precariousness, the vulnerability, dependence and exposure of living things is universal, and permanent life is never wholly in control or invulnerable to loss. Precarity, on the other hand, identifies the irregular nature of such socially unequal and political unjust placements; those who are outside the mainstream of legitimate and protective social and political arrangements are more likely to suffer from violence, neglect, poverty, and early death.

The difference has been fruitful in media studies, where it has served to think about how certain lives are made "real" vs. other lives that are made "peripheral" or "disposable" (Butler et al., 2004; Butler et al., 2009). The precarity of today's life reared its head everywhere, in contemporary life, as Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, noted in a 1997 lecture (quoted in Springveld, p. 26) and in a larger theoretical shift, towards precarity as a defining condition of contemporary social and economic life. Precarity, (Butler et al., 2015) writes in his foreword of Isabell Lorey's *Government of the Precarious: State of Insecurity*, is not only a more recent and temporary dynamic but also a mode of regulation specific to this historical moment. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing also wonders if precarity isn't the state of the "here and now," but rather a regular occurrence.

The concept of "precarity" as a form of governance, as explained by (Lorey et al., 2015), is useful for interpreting *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*. Lorey highlights that insecurity felt by the margins might be sanctioned by dominant groups through narratives that naturalize their structural marginalization as suffering of the individual, as individual trial (p. 13). This means that, on TV, a series may be "sympathetic" to a marginalized character who is depicted as the victim of his or her own circumstances (rather than merely an unfortunate misfortune of family life), yet at the same time reinforce the cultural common sense that the character's marginalization is natural, inevitable, or a private social and institutional problem.

Research Gap

The previous research on transgender and intersex television image in Pakistan has been fruitful in certain aspects like visibility, stereotyping and staging violence in the television narrative. But, there are three gaps that need to be addressed. First, most studies are general in their approach to representation, and apply precarity as a focused theory to a single narrative arc without holding this theory to a close scrutiny or using it consistently. Secondly, in instances where it has been studied it has generally been looked at in combination with other plays and so it is not the only drama being subjected to in-depth study. Third, as far as I know, there are few studies that follow the negotiation of precarity throughout the entire life cycle of a given character (birth to adulthood) of a single Pakistani drama. This paper fills these gaps by providing a consistent, scene based interpretation and development of Butler's precarity drawing on Noor's life, taking it as a whole, through the drama's narrative arc – highlighting continuity and change in the way the drama has constructed a life of Noor as recognizable, yet precarious through its entirety.

Theoretical Framework: Precarity, Recognition, and Gender Norms

Stemming from Judith Butler's theory of precarity, this paper provides a critical vocabulary for the analysis of precarity and its production, distribution and mediation through culture and representation. The formula Butler uses proves to be particularly helpful to analyse *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, a play in which an intersex man's visibility is attached to social insecurity, acceptance on condition and the continual absence of the institution.

Precariousness and Precarity

Butler differentiates between precarity and precariousness in this book, *Precarious Life*. Precariousness indicates that the fundamental condition of human life is vulnerable, dependent and exposed as humans are inherently precarious beings (Butler et al., 2004, p. xi–xiii). Social networks, institutions and practices of care are essential to the survival of human life, which never exists without social support or without care practices. Butler repudiates this common vulnerability as not an equal distribution of protection or recognition. But, precarity refers to a socio-politically created situation that places certain groups at a heightened risk of violence, neglect, poverty and death (Butler et al., 2004, p. 139–143). On this account, precarity is not preordained, or natural, but instead, it is the outcome of social control, the law and institutional policies with respect to whose lives are worth protecting. This is important to the present paper because the processes of social and institutional vulnerability that reliably create Noor in this drama (and that she secures through ironic positioning as always vulnerable), are generally not examined within the logic of the drama itself, but are rather presented instead in terms of her vulnerability being an unfortunate fact of her body.

Grievability and Recognition

A second analytic lens that Butler suggests is grievability. Butler's question in the title, *Frames of War*, is: "When is a life a life at all?" (Butler et al., 2009, p. 1). For this story, "grievability" is a measure of "social recognition": People can grieve, and that is a sign that their lives are meaningful; lives that go ungrieved are lived in the background, they are "background loss" rather than "significant loss" (Butler et al., 2009, p. 24–26). Media frames of recognition are central to the creation of these frames, and they constantly help to designate certain subjects as worthy of protection, and sympathy, and marginalize others to a sort of disposable status.

To apply it to *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, it brings a significant tension in the way Noor is developed in the drama. When applied to *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* it brings in an important tension in the building-up of Noor in the drama. It is Noor's emotional sympathy that is presented to the audience: she is meant to evoke the viewer's suffering at every rejection or humiliation of her at the hands of Noor's mother, and in each serial episode. And this sympathy is not blind, but rather, it is selective. At the moments which accord with the established childhood norms of vulnerability, gentleness, maternal dependence or a morally innocence, Noor becomes fully sympathetic, if not at all her moments. It is at her moments of vulnerability, gentleness, dependence on maternal protection, or at a moment of moral blamelessness that Noor becomes fully sympathetic, if not at all moments. Thus, the humanization of an act of violence like Noor is done in relation to the theatre's very frame, and is not a contestation of it.

Gender, Social Control, and Norms

However, Butler's previous work on gender performativity still remains as the bases of this analysis. Gender is neither an inner essence to "be" nor a feeling based on instinct, but a performative accomplishment that is continuously maintained through recurring social practices that make certain embodiments and identities intelligible and legitimate (Butler et al., 1990, pp. 179–180). People that do not conform to the norms of their gender are driven to the fringes, punished or erased in symbolic ways. This is a structure which bears striking resemblance to *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, a drama which is grounded in the concepts of family honour and religious morality with social respectability following as its final complement, all of which are reliant on a hard and fast gender binary. The play's logic is constantly one of containment, as strategies have been devised to keep Noor from being seen by others, to needling her into revealing more (or less) of her difference, and to forcing her back into the social fold by other members of her extended family through rejection or pressure. In each of these story-telling methods, the management of a body involved in disrupting the intelligibility of the already established gender order is performed, Butler says, as an attempt to manage one.

Precarity as Governance

Isabell Lorey's discussion of precarity as a way of ruling goes beyond Butler's work, and is relevant to *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*. But, Lorey is not claiming that societies are necessarily striving to remove precarity, rather, they are using it as a policy logic that spreads exposure to precarity unevenly amongst the social groups while portraying exposure to precarity as a natural rather than political process (Lorey et al., 2015, p.13). Noor's precarity is told in the family with an emphasis on maternal sacrifice and discretion, not as a problem that the school system, medical profession or the state needs to take responsibility for. This sense of an individual situation - one that is actually a structural situation - is representative of Lorey's notion of normalized insecurity of marginalized groups: the drama invites its spectators to accept the endurance of the mother as proof of her virtue and worth, but no investigation of why it is necessary that the mother endure at all.

Khwaja Sira and Gender Variance in the Pakistani Context

In order to make Butler's theory more meaningful and relevant in the context of Pakistan the present paper relies on (Faris A. Khan et al., 2016) article on khwaja sira identity. Through the use of the umbrella term khwaja sira, Khan shows that there are multiple gendered subjectivities that exist under it which are formed and informed by kinship relations, class dynamics and social control (2016, pp. 158–160). This is often reduced to moral stereotypes which serve populist fear of gender nonconformity not lived reality of khwaja sira existence, as is done in the mainstream media. While Butler's discussion of precarity is a more general one, Khan's account of conditional belonging fills in the missing piece in this paper, and is also quite a useful complement to the theory of precarity, since her account is one that questions recognition through rights, yet relies upon kinship and morality to negotiate this sense of belonging.

Methodology

Sample and Rationale for a Single-Text Focus

Given that *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (ARY Digital, 2016) is the only drama that has been produced by the ARY company, it is decided to focus only on this drama in this paper so as to provide

certain level of narrative and theoretical detail that is difficult to achieve in multi-dramas comparisons. The selection of the drama was based on three criteria, namely: (a) It puts a central intersex character at the centre of the narrative from the first episode, (b) It has aired on a major mainstream network, and has been seen nationally, and (c) It addresses themes of family, morality, religion, exclusion and care throughout the character's lifespan from infancy to adulthood. The precarity framework was best applied to *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* since it was one of the first mainstream Pakistani dramas to make a point of its intersex protagonist, and aroused much interest in the public at the time of its airing.

Overview of the Drama

Khuda Mera Bhi Hai is about Noor, an intersex kid and how her mother is continually striving to protect and nurture her in a family system of honour, shame and hyper-conforming to gender. The drama depicts the home as the primary and most pivotal place in which recognition is won or lost, and looks at the consequences of such a rejection over a lifetime – in education, social belonging and personal dignity. Throughout the progression of the plot, Noor is walked its way to protection or lack thereof, not necessarily through institutional or community-based protection. Throughout the narration, individual maternal protection is the overarching mode of protection for Noor, not institutions or communities. The issue of whether family and society can accept Noor without conditions, the issue of her humanity doubtless rears its head again and again in the drama. The same ambivalence was seen in how the serial was received by the general public: The Express Tribune reviewed the drama in their retrospect with the words “game changer” since they had been raising questions on the taboo of divorce, social pressure, transgender and intersex rights; whereas The News' criticisms of the drama were that it lacked depth and treating the subject sensitively. While these critics seem to have their reservations, the general public was not nearly so negative, with the drama receiving an IMDb rating of about 8.2 out of 10 that is mostly favorable (IMDb, n.d.; Wikipedia contributors, n.d.).

Scene-Based Units of Analysis

Precarity is produced by the repetition of these moments in the narrative and is not met with any singular emphasis on precarity alone, so in this study, there are moments of the narrative that are discrete, where recognition, exclusion and livability are actively negotiated. Signs of key turning-point scenes where Noor appears at birth, in confrontation, excluded, and in moments of protection or care; expressions of gender norms, moral judgment or shame and honour, and/or expressions of social legitimacy; scenes of family acceptance and rejection and the conditions upon which acceptance is tied; and visual framing, such as camera focus, positioning, and staging when used to signal Noor as different, vulnerable, or subject to moral evaluation.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis is divided into three steps: Patterns of rejection by the family, moral policing, humiliation, conditional care, institutional neglect, and survival strategies are identified and coded in the first stage, which involves identifying scenes. Second, coded scenes are then analyzed on the basis of the Butler's theoretical analysis to establish whether Noor's vulnerability is attributed to nature and inevitability, or as a result of certain social and institutional choices. Finally, it examines how the language of recognition has changed throughout the trajectory of

the drama from the moment of Noor's birth to the time at which the drama concludes, to see if and how the terms of recognition change as Noor grows from a baby to a child to an adult.

Analysis

Instead of forging a monodimensional path of vulnerability as a theme, this study explores how *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* constructs precarity as it emerges throughout Noor's life journey. The analysis questions at every turn if the drama depicts Noor's afflictions as a near inevitability of her human life or as the result of individually different and socially constructed conditions, and then follows them. In every instance, the analysis asks: Is the narrative of Noor's suffering a 'necessary condition' of her human body, or the consequence of recognizing that her 'condition' is unevenly distributed across social relations in a particular way? Beyond this, Khan's show of *khwaja sira* as a conditional, as negotiated through kinship and morality, does further flesh out the ways in which recognition plays out in the drama, but does not fully determinate into a security of the social.

Scene 1: Birth and Immediate Rejection

The drama starts with Noor's birth listed as a family crisis – not a celebration. But the father's answer is a defence of the man, descent, and legitimate status of the social order: instead of being the first site of unconditional care, the home is the early site of unrecognizedness. This scene in Butler's model illustrates precarity at its most extreme: It is not Noor's body per se that makes her precarious, but rather the family structure as it works out its internal logic of honour, a logic that makes sense or doesn't make sense of Noor's life within the framework of the gender model. Noor is not intersex vulnerable; she is vulnerable because of the norms of her family which are not yet able to accommodate her.

This is directly pertinent with Khan's work on *khwaja sira* histories. Khan demonstrates the presence of gender-variant people in South Asia for a long time existing within a conditional mode of belonging that is organized around kinship and honour logics, granting recognition in-between. The idea is that this dynamic makes the opening of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* into a scene of the birth of difference as a threat to patrilineal continuity, and as difference immediately assumes the coding of dishonor which must be either managed or concealed. The audience is given sympathy for the scene, mainly because of the mother's protective instinct, but not yet challenged by this scene in terms of the precarity of Noor in the first place, which is produced by a system of gender. Here the recognition, one way or another, is maternal; it's not structural but rather a substitute for it, a sort of love in place of the institutional response from the family.

Scene 2: School Exclusion and the Failure of Social Institutions

With age coming on, the eyes of the drama sway towards the school and humiliation becomes commonplace for Noor. Failure to intervene by both peers and teachers, most importantly, is an institutional failure which echoes the lack of support in the family. School, which is de facto and formally obligated to promote equality, becomes another place of reproduction of marginalization. Here, Butler's notion of differential grievability comes into its own: the anguish of Noor in school is made apparent and poignantly felt to the viewer of the TV series, and this visibility is unexploited in terms of a story-like narrative for the school itself. The pain is

acknowledged by the audience—mechanisms used to create the pain are unexamined and unchanged.

Again Khan's analysis of the marginalization of khwaja sira which maps out the way in which the process of exclusion spreads beyond the confines of the family into education and economic life is instructive. The structure of this drama itself mirrors this continuum, with no institutional protection at any point, and survival being dependent on each maternal individual rather than a system of protection. The mere repetition of humiliation across the episodes becomes a normalized phenomenon in the space of the drama and not a political issue a solution can be found for through institutional reform.

Scene 3: The Mother as Sole Institution of Protection

One of the characteristic recurring themes in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* is the complete shift of institutional safeguards to the role of the mother. When the family, the school and community fail to provide protection, negotiating and emotional repair, Noor takes it for herself, functioning as a kind of substitute institution. When read with the account of precarity as governance, it makes sense to make this sense of choice a narrative choice. It makes sense to make this sense of choice a narrative choice when read with the account of precarity as governance. In focusing all the responsibility for Noor's protection on one mother's care and sacrifice; the drama makes what is, in reality, a structural absence, a failure of legislation, an institution's failure to be held accountable, a community's absence, what the audience perceives as a personal or heroic struggle by the mother. The question of why can only be swamped by the mother's heroic endurance within a moral framework created within the drama, but for which the question remains, "Why does it take such heroic individual endurance? The element of social and institutional support that Butler emphasizes as essential to living is what this narrative-language style has left out, since it only serves as individual care. (Butler et al., 2004, pp. 31–32).

Concurrently, this scene represents a real (but minimal) act of resistance. Because the mother refused to give up on Noor, and she would face extended family members and social pressure head-on, she is an example of 'kinship care' which is more than what is directly required by the biological or by honour. For a sense of this, read Khan's explanation of alternative kinship bonds among khwaja sira groups in South Asian countries: among these groups, "family" and "state" bonds and supports have historically emerged where they are absent. This is hinted at in the drama through the mother's advocacy – she's clearly savoring her own kind of protection – while also limiting the scope of protection to only her.

Scene 4: Adolescence, Marriage, and the Question of Adult Belonging

For Noor, a growing-up struggle with an even more socially charged question arises: what part, if any, does an intersex person have in society, in institutions like marriage, which are built on a rigid male-female, masculinity-femininity dichotomy? This is an important part of the story because it brings the protagonist's complexities out of "innocent-enfant" territory, for which sympathy is more requireable, and into that of social and legal "adults" where it is harder to be sympathetic. Butler once again makes clear what is at stake, as a child's suffering is easily legible as undeserved, as pitiable, but an adult's desire to be recognized as a member of society, as a worker, as an eligible spouse, as an heir, calls for a more demanding type of recognition, one that assumes (on its own terms) full personhood.

This transition is dealt with in the drama, and usually, it reproduces precarity, rather than resolves it. In childhood scenes, the cause of Noor's trouble is nitty-gritty; an insensitive class mate, an overbearing relative; in adulthood, the source of Noor's trouble is more generalized – there is no obvious institutional bridge, there is nothing like the protections later embodied in the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, that would provide her with dignity, employment, or family life as an adult. The sympathy for Noor remains, but as the drama starts to grapple with the social world that it cannot quite envision changing, it's also running into the difficulties inherent in the rhetoric of violence and its accompanying obscurity. Sympathy for Noor toughs it out, being gradually but surely bled by a social world that, with all the rhetoric of violence, the narrative can't quite imagine altering. This is the difference Lorey makes between the mother who loves her grown child no matter what, and the society that does the same.

Scene 5: Conditional Resolution and the Limits of Recognition

Toward the end of the film, some level of reconciliation is offered to Noor, whether from close family members who haven't been on the best of terms with her, an audience who has finally been vindicated by her mother's decades of work, or a sense of resolution and acceptance. These resolutions are important and they have played a part in making the drama a “game changer” in Pakistan's portrayal of intersex and transgender lives through television. But, when read through Butler's lens, this resolution needs to be carefully considered in terms of what type of recognition it offers. Is it extended on the basis of Noor's 'right to social membership' or does it depend on her having exhibited a degree of patience, moral goodness and emotional strength of such a kind that she is deserving of it?

The above analysis would seem to point towards the latter. Recognition in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* isn't a thing that should be granted to a person who is just a Noor, but rather something that can only be offered to someone who has been suffering for a long time. This is part of the argument that Butler objects to in her ethics: “Ethical responsibility should seek to minimize exposure to harm, not to celebrate the suffering of harm” (Butler et al., 2004, p. xii–xiii). The very premise of the resolution is based on Noor's proof of her merited place in the world of precarity, not the norms of the family and community that have been changed. Khan's idea of conditional belonging describes this scenario perfectly: Noor was previously an outsider and is now an insider, but the conditions for being an insider (moral worthiness, emotional legibility, and the ability to make it) are still there.

Discussion

The entire length of the serial – from the moment of Noor's birth up to the conclusion of the drama – is characterized by a consistency of and importance to a mainstream Pakistani audience, namely that of making an intersex life visible, emotionally legible, and sympathetic to them, a visibility that, even by most modern critical estimates, was unusual and, indeed, significant at the time. This is one thing for which to take pride. This is the achievement of the reader, readership, and reader's readers, however, not the institutional or structural change, as the same close reading, which was the subject of Butler's theory of precarity and *khwaja sira* belonging of Khan, expanded to the level of affectivity and individual relationship.

In each of the five scenes tested, such as at birth, at school, during adolescence, or when an adult, the drama's story solution is an individual-based one. The mother intervenes; the family comes to soften; a special antagonist is conquered or changed. What rarely if ever does emerge is a school policy that evolves, a legal protection that is called into action, or a community institution that demonstrates it's able to change itself because of Noor. That leaves are exactly as significant as that of a presence, and that's just as consistent. (Butler's et al., 2004) thesis that precarity is a politically imposed condition, which is created by an unequal social and institutional distribution of vulnerability. The drama's emphasis on the individual—not the institution—as a solution to Noor's crises (p. 25–29, 43–44) has made this narrative pattern significant and accounts for why the drama matters: this pattern essentially tells its audiences that the intersex experiences they encounter are not public issues that call for collective responsibility, but rather are private family matters for loving and patient care.

The notion of grievability further accentuates this interpretation. Only after it has been captured as a livable, valuable life can a life be put up for public beration, says (Butler et al., 2009) (pp. 1–3, 23–24). Through the character of Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, the film has been successful in making Noor's plight visible and moving. The film has tried, with success, to make Noor's suffering visible, and moving, through Khuda Mera Bhi Hai. The audience's sympathy is, however, most triggered exactly while Noor is portrayed to be innocent, patient, and morally good (deserving of suffering), but not claiming an autonomous social person (social being) with a claim to social rights. Ironically, Noor is humanized, but only if she keeps playing a kind of moral worthiness that the other characters in the drama aren't expected to perform to earn a place in the drama.

It is important to note that Khan's work on khwaja sira identity is a valuable complement to the Butlerian reading, as it is rooted in the particular ways of kinship thinking in South Asia. Khan's story of 'conditional belonging', negotiated through honour and moral respectability rather than rights is an accurate depiction of the path the drama charts for Noor, from outright rejection to grudging tolerance to a final, still-conditional acceptance based on the premise that Noor has proved her worth. This is not a form of inclusion based on rights as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights Act., 2018) was meant to provide. The drama therefore dramatizes a pre-legal mode of 'belonging' which is by family and therefore a negotiated form of belonging, at almost the same historical moment that Pakistani law was starting to articulate a new mode of belonging, based on rights.

The public reception of this drama, which was the subject of much discussion, is illuminated from a different angle of this tension. It is well deserved that the Express Tribune described the serial as a “game changer” and the fact that it decided to put taboo subjects like intersex identity, divorce, social pressure before a main stream audience is commendable. Within the limits of the present paper the News' criticism of the lack of depth and sensitivity in the drama is comprehensible as a reaction to precisely the structural fault described above, that the drama is transforming what audiences see, but not really changing how what they see is seen. In this sense both critical responses are correct; they focus on two different aspects of the achievement of the drama: representational and structural.

What is also significant to note is the other way around—that the individual solution of the drama is one which hides the intersex embodiment, not transgender. What is also worth noting is however the other way around: that the individual solution of the drama is one which hides the intersex embodiment, not the transgendered one. Whereas Khuda Mera Bhi Hai starts from the

beginning of a person's life, and follows an intersex person through all phases of the childhood development, some other dramas are about transgender adults who are forced to confront the stares of their society. This structural decision allows the drama to reveal the power of precarity to build up over the course of a life due to family rejection, school exclusion, and poor adult opportunities and prospects, as opposed to laying it out as a singular crisis. This cumulative story is the most theoretically important aspect of the drama in terms of Butler's theory—the fact that precarity is not one bad moment but an abiding state of precarity that is perpetuated in multiple institutions and throughout multiple stages of life, just as Butler's theory predicts.

This progressive architecture, however, also makes it more evident by its conclusion that there is no institutional action in response. The precarity of birth gives way to precarity of school, adolescent precarity and adult precarity, and the only one through the four points is the mother's devotion, which is very thin and very fragile. No, a mother's love, regardless of how strong, is not equal to a right, a rule of a school, a norm of a community that would apply to an intersex child whose mother is not as resourceful, is not as determined, or isn't as available. By bringing to the foreground one extraordinary mother, the drama suggests that Noor's relative safety is due to the exceptional quality of her family, and not on some protection which is generally available. Butler warns against the "ethical frameworks that promote individual endurance and heroism, rather than consider how institutions should be redesigned to render them unnecessary" (p. xii–xiii, 2004).

All of this indicates that *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* is actually in a rather transitory place in the overall history of trans-gender and inter-sex visibility on Pakistani TV. It is not simply a caricatured or purely comic depiction of a gender variant actor as was common in the preceding decades of Pakistani dramas, but it is an emotional seriousness that lasted through the entire length of the presentation and was definitely appreciated by both the audience and the critic. It doesn't envision, however, nor even depict, the kind of institutional change, legal, medical, educational, communal, that it would take to turn Noor's hard won acceptance by an individual, into something that resembles sustainable social security. Butler's drama is successful in making Noor's life familiar and, in some ways, even mournful, but it is not quite successful in making her life altogether livable, as he theorizes structures.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a sustained, scene-by-scene analysis of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (2016), in order to consider the construction of the life of the drama's intersex protagonist, Noor, throughout the drama, from birth to adulthood. It has been demonstrated in the paper using the theory of precarity by Judith Butler that the vulnerability of Noor is not the ordinary precariousness of human life but something socially produced, molded by family honour, institutional neglect and almost no structural protection other than a single mother's sacrifice. The analysis has demonstrated that acceptance of *khaqani Khawaja* is contingent and relational and not based on rights, as this is the case for Noor, whose eventual partial inclusion in the drama's world is achieved with the provision of moral endurance of a long period of time.

The fact that an intersex identity becomes more visible in each of the five scenes explored does not result in greater institutional security for the intersex life within this drama. Noor is made human, her emotions made central to the narrative, but the conditions of her recognition are still provisional; dependent on her ability to devise and act with patience and innocence and moral

value. Indeed, the most impressive part of the drama might be its ability to maintain a legitimate, non-caricatured intersex story for an entire mainstream serial, yet, what has Butler and Lorey discovered is that the drama is eventually limited to what they see as a fundamentally structural and political issue anyway.

This study brings a feminist approach to the study of media to the Pakistani television industry by providing a sustained single-text consideration of Butler's precarity framework and how one influential drama stretched representability of intersex while still ignoring its deeper structures that produce intersex precarity. Future scholarship could follow this up, and examine whether later Pakistani dramas after the Transgender and Intersex Persons (Protection of Rights Act of 2018), start to imagine institutional protections for trans and intersex characters, rather than only individual protections – thus changing the direction of this paper's analysis of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, in a transformative way. In the meantime, however, dramas like this are going to continue to create what Khan would call “conditional but never entirely safe belonging” and what Butler would call “familiar but fragile lives.”

Author Bio Note

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