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**Author/s: OINDRI ROY**

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## ***Of Writing Transsexuality in India: A Comparative Inquiry of the Hijra-Figure vis-à-vis Queer Theories***

**OINDRI ROY**

Research Scholar

Dept. of Comparative Literature and India Studies

English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India

Email: [oindriroy.20@gmail.com](mailto:oindriroy.20@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Queer is understood as subversion to the hetero-normative gender binary. However, the quotidian concerns of transgender/transsexual lives based on a complex intermingling of conformity and the lack of it to known gender roles face the threat of erasure due to this trend. Narratives pertaining to transgenders/transsexuals in India construe the *hijra* as the central figure. Comparative literature provides a disciplinary scope to find instances from the two texts, *Antaheen Antareen Proshito Bhrotika* by Somnath Bandopadhyay aka Manabi Bannerjee and *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, to examine the validity of implication of western queer scholarship in India. The narratives pertain to certain cultural perceptions of transsexuality with reference to the hijra-communities and seek to explore a new modality of disseminating “queer” learning by juxtaposing the personal with/against the theoretical. Hence, the study of narratives about the personal ‘trans’ can be provided that much needed coherence in such a space where the “patterns of connections” (Bassnett 1) can be studied without the subsuming of individual experience.

**Keywords:** transgender and hijra, the personal problematic of queer, narratives and theories of the queer, shared identity bases and politicized differences in gender fluidity, the quotidian aspects of sexuality, affective spaces of gender fluidity.

The contemporary, academically relevant Queer theoretical discourses can also be construed as fraught with contestations. Having reclaimed a chiefly homophobic term, the ‘queer’ at the explanatory level shuns consolidation of meaning and pertains to an indeterminacy that is inclusive. As Annamarie Jagose (1996) offers “there is no generally acceptable definition of queer” and “the inflection of queer is ... the one that problematises normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality.” In fact such indeterminacy facilitates the disruptive purposes of the concept: “By refusing ... to crystallize in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (99). Jagose draws from Butler’s ideation and subsequent negation of gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990, 33). Even in more recent works like *Queer Theories* (2003), Hall deploys the same to “multiply and complicate our identity bases to the point that we are less likely to look at others and desire to “put” them in their “place”” and in a rather poetic turn of phrase also concludes that “only thing to be afraid of is the messiness and complexity that is life itself” (16).

The rhetoric used may not be needlessly criticized but on the grounds of whether Hall’s privileges as “a middle-class, white man, atheist, professor, occasional rave-goer, writer, returned Peace Corps volunteer, intellectual, and among many other things, a happy queer” (Hall 16) provides him with the opportunity to be intellectually creative. In fact, in this very book, Hall vindicates in the chapter “Queering Class, Race, gender Sexual Orientation” that “queer” needs to become an intersectional subject of race, class, culture while continuing to be denaturalized which “means posing and continuing to pose some very hard questions about its omissions, blindspots, normal practices, and nervous avoidances” (Hall 88). It is based on this grounds that Hall takes up the evolving field of Transgender Studies and its alliance with Queer Theories drawing upon the works of Stryker and Halberstram who draw upon Queer Theory “with its emphasis on mutability and disruptability through differing performances and embodiments ... to

probe gender and sexual diversity” (96). However, what is more thought-provoking in this context is Hall’s criticism of Namaste who “blasts” the queer theory for “its absolute neglect of everyday life for transgender people” (Namaste 2000, 9, quoted in Hall 2003, 97). It, hence, becomes necessary to look into Namaste’s indictment, specifically in “Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory’s Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity” where she argues that “Queer Theory emerged within American Departments of English, film studies, cultural studies and the humanities” and hence, “critics in queer theory in appeal to the social location of cultural texts, offer little analysis of how social relations are inscribed within, and virtually no examinations of the institutions in which these texts are produced, nor those in which they emerge and circulate” (20). Hall, though not agreeing with Namaste, both recognizes her contributions as an activist and contradicts her with the claim that her “broad charges ignore the fact that numerous individuals ‘within’ queer-identified theory are speaking out of transgendered subject positions and clearly out of their own experience of everyday life as transgendered individuals” (97).

This debate becomes the premise for the paper which acknowledges that the necessity of transgender narratives to be read vis-à-vis the works of queer-identified theories. The paper also seeks to provide an independent analysis of writing transsexuality in India by seeking to step away from previously exiting debate. It seeks to question the relevance of the political stances, for example in Hall’s deployment of transgenderism/transsexuality based on “the ability to undermine any sense of a “natural” basis for gender identity and the stability of the relationship between sexuality and biology” (95) which is also common to transvestism and intersexuality that may detract one from the quotidian issues of being a transgender in India. Rather, the focus is on the pertinence of the narratives recording the quotidian transgender experiences. The study, hence, is based on two narratives of transsexuality from India: a Tamil autobiography in English translation, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life-Story* (2008) by A. Revathi, a well-known gender activist and writer in India; and Somnath Bandopadhyay’s *Antaheen Antareen Proshito Bhortika* (2002) a Bengali novel by a transsexual-identified author. As of July 14, 2009

9:00 BST, *The Gaurdian* published in its website the story of Dr. Manabi Bannerjee (as told to Anthony Dias). The article titled “Transgenderism: ‘Society can be cruel’ refers to “a novel on eunuchs, Endless Bondage, which has been a bestseller”, refers to a proposed translation. Both the narratives, thus, bear the markers of Indian regionality but with a possibility of wider readability in future. The resonances the texts may contribute to can build a comparative episteme, as may be said, through “the mutual illumination of several texts or series of texts considered side by side, the greater understanding we derive from juxtaposing a number of frequently very different works, author and literary traditions” (Prawer 102). The “patterns of connections” (Bassnett 1) does not seek to contribute to the appellation of Indian transgender narratives but to look into the socio-historical processes that lead to such individualized articulations of transsexuality in India. The inferences from the comparative study of the text when juxtaposed to Queer Theories, will also be an attempt to contribute to the process of further denaturalizing the queer, hitherto nurtured in the Euro-American intellectual spaces.

It, hence, becomes necessary to look into the specifics of the Indian transgender as the *hijra* figure and its continued existence in the society. The contemporary queer discourses from India align with the hijra-figure in terms of segregation due to the normative gender practices and subversion to the same. Aravind Narain and Gautam Bhan writes in such terms about “only one kind of acceptable desire – heterosexual, within marriage, and male” in the Indian social space and how “those who dare to think outside the perfect ideal are considered threats to ‘morality’ and to society at large” like “an inter –religious or inter-caste couple, a daughter who has just realized that she has half the claim to her parent’s land as her brother, a hijra whose body is the subject of public ridicule in a culture that claims to treat sexuality as a private issue, or a lesbian woman who must not fight to be a lesbian, but simply as a woman in India who has sexual desires” (Narain, Bhan 3). While such perspectives radicalize the hijra existence, the quotidian Indian reality which is not of uncomplicated ostracization resultant of a distinctive history is not taken into account. In fact, as Ashley Tellis points out that even now, “it is important to point out that the word

‘queer’ in its travel from the streets of New York and its appropriation and transmutation in the elite spaces of an upper class and upper caste set of people in India, many of whom run NGOs or are part of them designating themselves as a ‘movement’, needs to have its trajectory traced as the first step in the critical self-analysis needed to generate something like a critical movement” (150). The comparative episteme based on writing transsexuality in India can thus be used to focus on areas that have the potential to contest the possible elisions and gaps in the contemporary understanding of the queer.

The lack of political leverage is largely based on the reconfiguration of gender that is central to their existence as opposed to complete disavowal of gender categories: Hijras are culturally institutionalized as an alternative to mixed gender role, neither man nor woman, neither male nor female. Mostly the Indian female is rather too emphatically writ over their costumes, gestures, manners and even facial expressions. However, two symbolic acts distinguish them from the feminine figure: the distinctive handclap with which they announce their public presence and the other is the actual or threatened lifting of their saris to expose their genitalia to protest against a hostile audience. The possibility of misrepresentation of these non-heterosexist modes of living is therefore manifold.

Hence, it becomes all the more necessary to look into the complicacies of narrating the non-heteronormative in the Indian situation. The lack of a theoretical background is sought to be supplanted by the comparative episteme which helps to construe the recurrences in the two narratives. These can be used to study the possibilities of representation transsexuality in the Indian situation. Interestingly, the narratives can be read as means of re-allocating this power of representation from the heteronormative agencies that ostracize the non-compliant to those who follow “dissident” modes of living. Hence, the articulation of selfhood beyond the restrictions of the heterosexual can be attributed to the narratives. However, there is more to it. A. Revathi writes in the Preface to her work of her necessity to write as “one such individual who has been marginalized because” she “was born a male and wanted to live” her “life as a woman” and the text of *The Truth About Me* chronicles her “everyday experience of

discrimination, ridicule and pain ... endurance and ...joys.” The hijra positioned at “the fringes of society” has “dared to share” her “innermost life ... about being a hijra and also about doing sex work” and the story “is not meant to offend, accuse or hurt anyone’s sentiments” but “to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture as, and their dreams and desires” (Preface v-vi). The centrality of educative and informative purposes of narration invites a reading of non-heteronormativity/queer as constitutive of practices, of modes of living. Somnath Bandopadhyay’s words pertaining to the rationale behind the text also echoes with the same sensibility: “This text is not of pertness, arrogance or insolence. Rather, it is a heart-wrenching scream that transpires of one voicing the torture of prolonged existence in harsh darkness ... Because these marginalized people, who are hated as much as lepers in the aromatic sophistication of our society, were born in the mainstream. ... Whether they are come away, or are pushed away – that may be judged by the readers” (“Why was this text written” 5) [translations mine]. There is a succinct sense of selfhood and expressing that selfhood, preceding the sense of resistance a commentary on themselves as a part of the society as opposed to the society’s commentary on themselves as outcasts. The possibility of relocating the self is thus actualized in the text through the recreation of the extant order of things rather than merely resistance.

The docile bodies have their own system of socio-political and cultural impact as a consequence of their struggle for existence. The agency of the docile body is a self-contradictory phase but a number of discourses on power beginning with that of Foucault, Gramsci to the academic fascination with ‘subaltern’ have countered the ideation of power being of one-dimensional movement. As Fred J Evans (1993) writes, “When Foucault speaks in later works as if subjects are ‘agents’ rather than “docile bodies”, he appears to go to opposite extreme and conceive of them as subjects that create themselves as “*ex nihilo*” . . . If we wish to adopt the specificity of Foucault’s “micro-powers” (Lyotard’s “language games”, Nietzsche’s “active and reactive forces” and the general post-structuralist emphasis on particularity over totalizations), then we must be able to provide for the self as a constituting agent as well as constituting self or “docile body”” (45).

These two narratives provide ground for engaging in similar debates about articulating the marginalized and the resistive self, more specifically at a quotidian level rather than a theoretical one. Both Revathi and Bandopadhyay depict the *hijra* figure as a means of choice, resistance and struggle. There is no insistent perusal of the sexual mores that obstruct their individual liberty, but as a necessity while liberating the self. The heteronormative is related only in this sense and is different from Hence, De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) reveres the power of the seemingly weak, propounding "Marginality" as "massive and pervasive" this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolized remains the only one possible ... Like law ... culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces or controls superior force" and "develops in an atmosphere of tensions and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts and compatibility and compromises all more or less temporary" which leads to "tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak makes use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices" (xvii). The applicability of Michel De Certeau's argument about the agency of minority is largely based on the economic and the political. Understanding gender frameworks and more specifically gender anarchy requires a more psychosocial understanding of power. Andrew Blauvelt (2003), who derives from the works of Certeau provides a more appropriate explanation: "Certeau's investigations into the realm of routine practices ... were guided by his belief that despite repressive aspects of modern society, there exists an element of creative resistance to these strictures enacted by ordinary people. ... Certeau outlines an important critical distinction between strategies and tactics in this battle of repression and expression. According to him, strategies are used by those within organizational power structures, whether small or large, such as the state or municipality, the corporation or the proprietor, a scientific enterprise or the scientist. Strategies are deployed against some external entity to institute a set of relations for official or proper ends, whether adversaries, competitors, clients, customers, or simply subjects. Tactics, on the other hand, are employed by those who are subjugated. By their very nature tactics are defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited ways and seized momentarily within



spaces, both physical and psychological, produced and governed by more powerful strategic relations” (20). Both the texts are also embodiments of these reciprocal tactics of existence beyond the gender-normative. The usage of the domestic spaces within the birth-family and the hijra houses, the references to the interpersonal relationships affected by gender fluidity, the balance in attention to intricacies of personal desires, like wearing a saree or performing a dance and to the larger decadence of the society refers to an experiential paradigm that is different from theories. Revathi herself in the act of writing a book about ‘aravanis’ (as *hijras* are referred to in southern India) talks of the same: “My accounts turned out to be more than a record of interview sessions, they expanded to include my experience of living with the aravanis, eating with them, sharing their troubles, listening to them, heeding their feelings and thoughts. A few of them wondered what use a book of this kind would be. ... Once they understood my intent, they agreed to be interviewed ... They shared with me their life experiences and their sorrows and joys ... I still shudder, recalling the ways the aravanis I spoke to sobbed and screamed when they recounted stories of their mothers, lovers, husbands ...” (294). Subir has a similar reaction when faced by the idea of welfare schemes for ameliorating the living conditions of *hijras*: “Subir remembers how some NGO or the other and contacted Shyamoli-*Ma*. They would help hijras back into the mainstream; they would make incense sticks, candles, *papads* to sustain themselves... Shyamoli-*Ma* clapped her hands and said and told the chief of that organization: “Your means of livelihood are trashy. We have enough *Jholki* (money), you first recognize our sex organs.” Subir understands that *Ma* wants social acceptance of her sexuality. She is unable to explain, but she wants the right of the individual human being to live all the more” (96). Both Revathi’s and Subir’s reactions to two very different situations touch upon the need for a humane existence, both beyond heterosexist norms and resistance to heterosexist norms. It is about the involvement with the emotional, the ostensibly trivial, and yet the life-affirming, the psychosomatic and the somato-psychic that neither requires intellectual sophistication nor political radicalism.

Therefore, while queer theory recognizes the act of subversion through non-conformity of gender roles, it often has been uninformed

about the priority of non-conformity in everyday life. Several attempts to define ‘queer’ and also contest queer has, even in the recent past centered on the idea of disrupting hetero-normativity: For example, Sue-Ellen Case (1991) puts forth the idea of “Queer sexual practice” which “impels one out of the generational production of what has been called ‘life’ and history, and ultimately out of the category of the living. The equation of hetero=sex=life and homo=sex=unlife generated a queer discourse that reveled in proscribed desiring by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living. In this discourse new forms of being, or beings are imagined through desire. And the desire is that which wounds – a desire that breaks through the sheath of being as it has been imagined within a heterosexist society. Striking at its very core, queer desire punctuates the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the hetero-sexist notion of being” (4). Nikki Sullivan’s work a decade later as she proceeds to write “in order to think through some of the possible ways in which we might, spoil, quiz , disorder, denaturalize, or, in a word, queer, hetero-normativity” (52-53) also focuses on the psychosocial rather than the psychosomatic personal. Therefore, her theorization is yet, though not entirely, dependent on disrupting the heteronormative. In fact her position is hardly any different from those whom she terms as radical ‘queer’: “Right at the other end of the queer continuum we find groups such as Queercore, a loose coalition of radical anarchist and/or punk queers for whom the term queer defines not a specific sexuality, “but the freedom to personalize anything you see or hear then shoot it back to stupid world more amazing than it was before” (Cooper 1996, 295 qtd. in Sullivan 2003, 45). Evidently, then, the epistemologies pertaining to ‘queer’ has increasingly accrued an obsession with the heteronormative and the focus has shifted from the non-heteronormative self-comprehension as entities in themselves. The comparative study of these narratives comes across this self-comprehension more than often and shows uninformed silences in the queer theoretical discourses. Hence, the texts are read with specific references to the same.

In fact, both the narratives can be read as quest narrative of self-comprehension construed of moments of realization as the conflicts

between the psychosomatic and the psychosocial intensifies. Bandopadhyay's protagonist, Subir, and A. Revathi seek to dissociate themselves from their birth-assigned gender and recreate an identity. The process occurs in phases where both the narratives converge, for example the reference to the childhood as a phase to be recollected later as the first sensibilities of their need to be a woman. Though Bandopadhyay's novel begins with Subir approaching the hijra community, it is revealed in retrospect about his first realizations as a childhood about having a wrong body and the desire for attaining womanhood. Teased for his inability to be a boy at school and at home, Subir nurtures his feminine desires in private: "Whenever he feels sad, Subir goes to the loft-room ... There his doll-family lives in homely comfort ... He nursed the doll-child, Mimi, the way he vaguely remembered his mother doing it, wearing the "milk-feeding" blouse and keeping one of the flaps open ... In his mother's discarded velvet casket, he keeps snow-powder-lipstick-rouge-sindoor... he had even grounded some pieces of brick to make sindoor... often, he would stand at the window in the saree, looking at Ranga-da playing cricket in the alley" (67). [translations mine] Revathi's autobiography begins by narrating such moments of truth as the child Doriasamy begins to choose the performances of a woman over the ones attributed to him based on the anatomical features. Her mother, too busy and impoverished to pay attention to gender propriety, lets her son do chores that he should not be doing, but that which he likes to do. Hence, she recollects in the narrative with a sense of nostalgia "I've been drawing kollam since I was in Class 3. My mother would wake me up early even then. When she milked the cow, I swept the yard, splashed water mixed with cow dung and drew the kolam. My sister doesn't wake up in time to do these things" (4). Much like Subir, Revathi recollects how the female guise as the child, Doraisamy, was merely laughed at as childish truancy, how the stage-performances as a woman were praised by those unknowing of the release from boyhood she obtained in those phases: "I played Chandramathi in *Harishchandra* ... For this particular scene, I had to walk to a sad song, my false hair streaming about me, and the sari end held out like a begging bowl. ... everyone praised me saying that I looked and acted like a real woman. This pleased me very much" (9). It is noticeable that both the writers

talk of childhood and the act of transgendering in childhood in a culture specific manner. There are instances of self-expression that can only be articulated with the specific cultural context of domesticity and familial structures.

Now the child-figure occurs in queer discourses as it is often deployed as a heteronormative agent of victimizing the queer. The questions posed about the theoretical understanding, for instance, by Lee Edelman (2004), refer to the political and ideological wars being fought around the rhetorical truism of "We're fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?" to implicate homosexuality, transsexuality and other non-normative (symptomatic of non-procreative) sexuality as baneful to childhood in general. Hence he writes: "[At] the heart of my polemical engagement with the cultural text of politics and the politics of cultural texts lies a simple provocation: that queerness names the side fighting for the children," the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (3). While being aware of the problem, as a Queer Theorist he offers the resolution of negating normalcy by disrupting the social order which disassociates itself from the queer: "The ups and downs of political fortune may measure the social order's pulse, but queerness, by contrast, figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order's death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection expressed in the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally, and hence a place from which liberal politics strives-and strives quite reasonably, given its unlimited faith in reason-to disassociate the queer. More radically, though, as I argue here, queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure"(3). However, Edelman is deploying the child figure, by limiting the potential to that of subversion. Now, such a possibility is congruent to the dominant notions of Queer theory based on the intellectual accomplishments of gender performativity and notions of a non-fixed sexuality. But the questionability of how this empowers/ or even enables the transgendering of children, specifically in the Indian family structure still persists. The concerns in the

narratives are very different from those in the theoretical paradigms. Locating resistance in the social structure of interpreting childhood does not address the concern of a boy-child who wants to be a woman, who is in need of affection but is shunned. The necessity, here, is to deconstruct and recreate the social structure pertaining to affectivity. Moreover, the theoretical context while rendering the act of resistance does not emphasize how this resistance is culture specific, a continuous process and thus, ignores the constitutive aspects of the same.

Hence, the realizations about abandonment and isolation from the familial circle determine the subsequent acts of transgendering, and the next important phase is that of articulating womanhood in self as the part of the hijra community. Both Subir and Revathi, at different points in the course of the narrative refer to this as a specific stage in the life of an Indian transsexual, the word ‘Indian’ denoting not only cultural affiliations but also specific socio-economic conditions. The hijra-houses or ‘*kholes*’ as is mentioned in the Bangla-text provide a refuge, a space to liberate the self from masculinity, which is not possible within the normative family structure. It also becomes a space of sharing experiences of transsexuality. It can partially pertain to Richard Ekins’ (1997) idea of “group-doing”.

This phase, therefore, sheds light on the hijra-household, implying the family structure and modes of domesticity. In Revathi’s narrative, the affective connotations are initially very pronounced as she tries to substitute the one where she was born as a son. What Ekins terms as “belief system” becomes of a more layered kind, with values of loyalty and compassion coming into being. Revathi’s guru-ma makes sure that she gets to visit her birth-family and helps her financially. She pays for her surgical transformation and helps with the, though minimal, post-operative care. Revathi, throughout the narrative, appropriated heteronormative family values to construe her hijra family as she writes: “I am a woman and I have a family with a mother, a grandmother, sister-in-laws. ... [F]or a hijra who is a daughter, the mother’s home is like a natal home. ... In this sense, the house to which I was sent was my nani’s place, that is, my guru’s natal home” (59). Similarly, Shyamoli-Ma, Subir’s Guru-hijra and the other fellow-hijras contribute to Subir’s transformation, provide her with the food and

shelter for a considerable amount of time and hence take over the responsibility of getting her started in the business of begging and prostitution. Infrequently, they notice Subir's dissatisfaction with life and try to cheer her up with their celebrations in a state of inebriation. However, such actions are also enabled by a sense of profit. In the narrative of Subir/ Robina, the materialistic motives are evident. While Shyamoli-Ma, the chief-hijra helps in realizing Subir's desires of transgendering, she also prepares a *chela* for prostitution, insisting that she learn specific techniques to please her clients. She even insists that Robina a.k.a. Subir retain her penis to provide anal intercourse as per the need of certain clients. She is repeatedly taught the rules of the trade: "You have registered as hijra and now as a prostitute. You should know . . . every client, whatever size their sex organ may be, blessing of Goddess Lakshmi (wealth). Whatever you desire does not matter anymore as long as those who pay you are happy. And listen . . . there is no need for a surgical transformation . . . Some of the clients, big officers, you know, married with children, they would want to be penetrated" (48). Revathi explores the restrictions within the space that she sought to be provided refuge. First as a *badai*-collector (a rather forceful form of begging) and later as a prostitute (doing *danda*) she has to follow a certain code of conduct. Even in her initial days in the community, she is made aware of it: "It is also important to learn the ways of the hijras, follows rules, respect elders, make sure that a youngster's dress does not so much as brush an elder's arm or leg, and do all that an elder asks. This is what is expected of those who want to be part of the hijra community" (47). Later, the more materialistic motives behind such power structures are revealed as business becomes more lucrative, especially in sex-work which Revathi accounts for: "If I had, say, five clients a day, I'd have to hand over the money earned from them to my mistress that day itself. The next day we would split the earnings. If I had earned 500 rupees, I'd take half and she would take the other half. This was how all those who did *danda* in that house settled their accounts" (134). This invites us to look into the hierarchical nature of the hijra-houses. While the guru-hijra facilitates the processes of transgendering, often paying for the surgical transformation as in Revathi's narrative, the *chela*-hijra remain in debt to their "guru-ma", literally translated as "teacher-mother" forever. So, hijra-houses

(dynasties) are formed and they function based on this need-based hierarchical structure.

Queer discourses, focused on dissociating sexuality from the hetero-normative, do not take such power structures into account. Take for instance what Michael Warner (1993) claims: “Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts” (xii). However, in the Indian expression of transsexuality, there is the recurrence of the *hijra* as not of unproblematic ostracization or resistance and with the structures of institutionalization, which cannot be addressed in the given drift of queer theory. Neither is the socio-cultural dynamics involved in analyzing such structures developed enough. The instances in the narratives entail a trans-episteme that derives from mutual affinities that can be explained through a psychosocially, culturally informed understanding of sexuality. A support system that is very much a part of the traditional, ancient knowledge systems finds contemporary relevance. This shows that the peripheral position accorded to the *hijras* is not of uncomplicated ostracization. Sexuality and conjugal desire attenuated by quotidian practices, rather than socio-political ones seem not to have been accommodated within Queer Theories.

The above inference is further validated by the emphasis on the relationship between transgendering/ sex-changing and religion in both the narratives. Religion is shown to provide the means to justify their livelihood through *badai* (a sort of induced charity based on the *hijra*’s power to bless the charitable, generally shopkeepers and families of newborns), often considered extortion due to the accompanying threats of curses and abuses. However, most people comply with the wishes as the *hijra*’s blessings are supposed to be auspicious. Revathi remembers how her Guru-hijra explained the same with the legend of Lord Rama who had asked the “men, woman and children” who would have followed him to his exile to return and had come back fourteen years later to find the *hijras* still waiting for him. Hence, “astounded and moved by their sincerity ... he granted them a boon. “Whatever you



speak will be true. Your words will come true” (Revathi 45). Religion, thus, also becomes a means of/ about communal existence with the ritualistic initiations of the new *hijras* referring to a belief system and a sense of togetherness in isolation. Subsequently, Revathi writes about her *hijra* self had been realized by religious practices: her ‘nirvana’, surgical change, is validated by the rites that take place post-surgery, addressing the Hindu deities, thus marking the beginning of her life as a hijra: “Hijras in rich, colourful saris, older and younger hijras, and a few sex workers came to take part in the ceremony... A coconut was broken and a puja was performed. *Jani Jai Santoshi Mata* sang the hijras, full of emotions ... We too were asked to chant her name, which we did” (86-87). In another situation, Revathi explains, in a very contemporary condition, the centuries-old myth of Mohini, who was the male-femaling of Krishna so as to provide the soon to be sacrificed son of Arjun, Iravan, with a bride for the night. Aravani (the wife of Iravan/Aravan), which is synonymous with hijra in southern India, therefore entails a support system through the festival where hijras go through the similar process of wedding to widowhood: “Like everyone else, I wore a silk sari, dressing up as a bride would. I bought bangles ... things needed for the puja ... After the rituals I felt that I had indeed married Aravan, that I had actually married a man ... As soon as the chariot reached the sacrificial pit, the aravani’s started plucking out the flowers that adorned their hair ... rubbed off the pottu on their head, keening loudly ... I felt tears gathering when I heard the keening. They cried just as a woman who had lost her husband would... After that, they discarded their silk saris and wore white saris...” (263-264). Juxtaposed with her failed relationships, these rituals acquire a life-affirming significance

Subir/Robina’s narrative, however, looks into the sense of superiority of those who changed their gender attributing it to religious rituals. Hence, the eunuch priestesses who gather at various religious fairs have ostensibly given up all worldly pleasures and wear only saffron robes of Hindu religious gurus who look down upon her, castigating her sex-change actualized due to sexual pleasure. Subir/Robina’s fellow-hijra, Manasha explains her female attire to ‘his’ wife and children through the means of a religious garb, donned on for



special performances dedicated to female deities. In fact, when Robina reminisces of her first desire to be a woman there are references to how the young child, who had been attributed boyhood had idolized his own mother and Goddess Durga (a powerful deity) as the figures of perfect femininity. Consequently, in a state of confusion, when Subir takes recourse to religion again in the hours before his castration, his guru-hijra becomes Goddess Kali, a more fierce incarnation of Durga (The Destroyer and the Mother) who used her *kohorgo*, a scythe-like iron weapon to castrate all her hijras. The castration is, thus, mythologically transmuted into a dream of the sacrificial altar of Goddess Kali. The act of beheading the sacrificial animal is substituted by the act of castration. The physical pain and the spiritual necessity of sacrifice in the Hindu religion are thus transposed into the act of castration in Subir/Robina's mind depicting the ambiguous resistance to the heteronormative. This leads us to the idea of the queer 'trauma' that exists in spite of the resistance to the artificially imposed heterosexist restrictions.

It is also likely that the politicized gender positions will also be unable to interpret the affective content of the narrative especially when the final pages of both the narratives reverberate with the problematic binary of ability/disability. The sense of dissatisfaction with the communal hijra-life gradually heightens and both Revathi and Robina are shown to be looking for an individual existence. Revathi's search for love within familial boundaries fails miserably. Her live-in relationship ends due to social pressure. Her subsequent marriage to a supposedly liberated individual, who was her superior in Sangamma, fails due to depletion of affection on his part. And though "no longer fully inhabit[ing] the Aravani culture" (303), Revathi is shown to fall back upon the relationships she had acquired in her days as a hijra, culminating in her identifying herself as one of them, *the truth about herself* through the title of her autobiography. Subir/Robina had always been unable to surrender herself into the idea of sex work. She finds herself in a live-in relationship with a younger man, and ends up tending to him and providing for him. Her insecurities in this relationship are realized in Shyamoli-Ma's life whose 'man' deserts her for a socially acceptable marriage. Hence, Subir/Robina looks for solace within the hijra community itself. S/he comprehends their song-dance

routine, as the grief-stricken Shyamoli-Ma leaves for the pilgrimage to Haj, as a means of battling pain, an outlet of grief which the civilized society find objectionable. This realization entails a form of resistance to the heteronormative, but the resistance is subsequent to the mode of being, which is the primary aim. There is instead the creation of the parallel community or an alternative existence specific to the Indian queer situation.

In the “Afterword” of *Comparatively Queer*, one of the first endeavors to explore queer studies in the disciplinary space of Comparative Literature, Valerie Trubb refers to the commendability of the efforts “to queer comparative studies while destabilizing its Eurocentrism and to comparativize and decolonize queer studies while challenging its presentism” (215). However, she also adds that the “meaning of *queer*, in contrast, seems to function less as a point of contention than a form of working assumption—standing in, as it often does, for non-normative erotic acts and identities in general and same sex ones in particular, as well as for non-normative performances of gender” (217). This comparative study addresses these lacunae as the Indian queer movement, borrowing from the existent conceptualization of the queer failing to accommodate the experiences of transsexuality contextualized in the psychosocial and cultural realities. As Ahley Tellis points out, the processes entailed are often dissociated from ground realities leading to pertinent questions: “[H]ow many marginalised groups were consulted when the decision to settle with the reading down of Section 377 was taken? How many such groups were active parts of the almost decade-long campaign? Why is it that the queer petitioners’ long case in the text of the judgment only invokes international precedent, a consistent colonial rhetoric of India’s need to modernise and catch up, the sparse, almost non-existent invocation of women, the negligible and agency-less invocation of *hijras*? Why is it that the co-petitioners includes state organisations and none of the key organisations involved in the struggles not just of the groups that come under the Section but also marginalised groups that might be affected by similar discriminatory Sections?” (151) remain unanswered even after the law has been repealed and Indian government has taken a prominent homophobic stance. In the upsurge of visibility of non-

normative sexualities, through social networking sites and certain sections of the broad-casting media, it is but evident that some non-normative sexuality are therefore more invisible than the others. The result is that any progress made through the processes of rendering visibility contributes to token advancements rather than credible ones. Take, for example, the discrepancy in the Indian judicial system pertaining to the queer. On December 29, 2013 the Supreme Court of India reinstated Section 377 that criminalizes homosexuality rejecting the Delhi High Court's 2009 decision. On April 15, 2014 the same institution recognized transgenders as the third gender and recommended the treatment for socially and economic backward classes as mentioned in the Indian Constitution. Evidently, the judgment does not reflect the change in heteronormative social structures but a form of token show of justice with motives other than according human-respect for the queer. The verdict also vindicated the *hijras* as the easier victims of political and administrative manipulation and appeasement. In a February 2015 report titled "India: Enforce Ruling Protecting Transgender People" of the *Human Rights Watch*, it is noted:

Nearly a year after the Supreme Court's judgment, implementation has stalled, even as recent attacks on transgender communities highlight their vulnerability. In particular, section 377 of the Indian penal code, which criminalizes same-sex relations among consenting adults, has made both transgender people and homosexuals vulnerable to police harassment, extortion, and abuse.

The nongovernmental organization Telangana Hijra Transgender Samiti, based in the southern city of Hyderabad, reported 40 attacks on transgender people in the last six months. In several cases, the police refused to even register complaints, the rights group told Human Rights Watch. (Human Rights Watch 2015)

The report also refers to several specific incidents across the country about transgender individual being sexually humiliated by the police, to varying degrees of physical abuse, after the Supreme Court Verdict. In the tussle between the coercively heteronormative Indian socio-juridical structures and the queer activism, with an urban-academic functionality, the quotidian hijra realities are left unattended. Hence, a part of the process of rendering visibility to the queer can focus on locating narratives of transsexuality and intersexuality as the means of articulating and enabling a reading of those very experiences that remain beyond the comprehension of the heteronormative and also the queer as it is now.

The comparative episteme, thus, intended in the juxtaposition of the two texts that derive from differentiated quotidian concerns of gender fluidity challenges the theoretical paradigm. Therefore, it also demonstrates the possibility of looking at the queer not only as the ‘personal’ separated from the ‘political’ but also the ‘emotive/aesthetic/quotidian/erotic’ separated from the ‘intellectual’. The psychosocial is not only found to be individualistic, or even idiosyncratic, as queer theories have already accentuated but rather as an intersection between the historicized and the personalized. A systematic suspicion is, therefore, developed of the Eurocentric (mostly American) queer epistemologies. This is resultant of creating a comparative subject based on the varied (in this case, two) agencies of self-articulation which vindicates the silences of queer theory with regards to, for instance, religion, cultural history and personal faith, aesthetic understandings and political choices. It also brings into focus the merits and demerits of a shared identity base and how the functionality of queer as a gender category cannot be given an unproblematic dismissal, as done by queer theorists. The question of being or doing is no longer important. The more pertinent question is of creating a basis for understanding with a queer episteme that is also inclusive of changes. The comparability of the trans-episteme can be thus posited as the more functional paradigm.

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