

Harkening the Loud Claps: The Representations of *Hijras* in Bollywood, Indian Anglophone

Literature and Life Writings from 1990 to 2020

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Abstract

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Since the 1990s, there has been a noteworthy shift in the way *hijras* are perceived and represented in India. They have become hyper-visible in Indian literature, cinema, media and other digital spaces, and have been unanimously categorized as the quintessential third gender and also as transgender. The reasons for this increased presence in *hijra* representations are many, including globalisation and international funding for NGOs. Interestingly, the 1990s has also marked a time of deep political unrest in Indian political and social life. 1990s saw the rise of right-wing conservative politics, which was based on an exclusionary model of Hindu nationalism, as Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as the second largest political party in India. BJP won the national election in 2014 and continues to remain in power since then, under the governance of the current Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi. The last two decades have also seen a rise in populism in India which has made lives of marginalised communities at a further risk. Within these political tensions, *hijra* representations, as well as their legal rights, have increased. In this thesis, I aim to

look at these contradictions by studying creative representations of *hijras*. I argue that creative representations offer an expansive space to understand *hijra* existence in India post 1990s.

Based on my analysis of *hijra* representations in three mediums – Bollywood cinema, anglophone literary fiction and *hijra* life writings – I manifest the ways in which Hindutva ideologies have been deployed alongside *hijra* presence in these cultural forms. Hindutva ideologies label certain *hijra* subjects as legitimate while others are “relegated as dangerous and excluded from the gates of the Indian nation-state” (Dasgupta and DasGupta 2018, 3). Those who are deemed as ‘dangerous’ are the ones who cannot tap into the narratives of a progressive India. These mainly include *hijras* who are uneducated and belong to ‘othered’ castes and religions or/and are from rural areas. As these exclusionary narratives are represented or reflected in the highly creative and imaginative modes, a better understanding of *hijra* experience in contemporary India emerge. Furthermore, the selected mediums, though highly different from each other in terms of their production, purpose, audiences and circulation, are embedded in discussions of gender, sexuality, religion, caste and nationalism. Therefore, these representations provide an understanding of *hijras* through intersectional experiences which offer a critique of Hindutva ideologies.

I situate this thesis in conversation with area-specific queer theorists and contribute to the broad genre of queer of colour critique. By looking at *hijra* representation in different genres and in their intersection with caste, class, religion and nationalism, I move away from studying *hijras* as an isolated community (like most previous studies have done) to

understanding them as a community rooted in region-specific cultural discourses. Hence, my thesis will open new ways of conceiving *hijra* subjectivities and provide a better understanding of *hijra* existence in the contemporary India under a conservative cis heteropatriarchal regime. My thesis will also be the first major book-length comparative study of *hijra* representations in fiction, film, and autobiography.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Situating the thesis and providing context to understanding *hijras* in post 1990s India

Like most people in India, I grew up listening to *hijra* claps. These are distinct and peculiar to *hijra* community, with palms striking perpendicular to each other and fingers spread wide, creating a loud clap-voice. This style of clapping is a common *hijra* identifier in India as well as in other South Asian regions. These claps had been very familiar to me since childhood, echoing from a prominent *hijra* household just two lanes away from my house in Delhi. My great aunt's house was in the same lane as that of a community of *hijras*, and I was a frequent visitor to that lane to play with my cousins. One of the *hijras* (let's call her Shabnam), used to visit my great aunt every now and then and it would probably have been during those visits that I had my first encounter with Shabnam (or any *hijra* in general). I do not remember this encounter, probably because I was too young or because it was a routine to see her. But I recall that Shabnam was a Muslim as she and my great aunt often prayed together, sometimes asking the kids to pray with them too. The two were friends since the death of my great aunt's husband. Shabnam was the one who helped my great aunt to sustain herself and her six children when she was left with no source of income or savings. Their friendship was generated and sustained through religious bonds and a shared sense of subaltern identity.

This thesis is about *hijra* representations in the mainstream of three cultural forms in India post 1990 – cinema, literature and *hijra* life writings. It uses eighteen Bollywood films, Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, four *hijra* autobiographies and thirteen non-traditional life narratives (including YouTube Channel, blogposts, and interviews) as case studies from 1990 to 2020 to show how these creative representations have provided spaces for counter-narratives to open questions for multiple identifications for *hijra* lives. This thesis seeks to demonstrate why there is a shift in the way *hijras* are represented in cultural forms since the 1990s and how a gender minority community remains deeply connected and effected with concepts of gender, nation and politics. This matters now because *hijra* lives have been deeply affected by national politics and policies in the past decades, which resulted in *hijra* visibility in the mainstream media and other digital spaces. They have started to represent several forms of gender and sexual non-normative existence in India and South Asia, therefore looking at their representations offer an insight into current gender and sexuality-based experiences in India. The introductory chapter outlines why this thesis is important for me, what are the political tensions that emerge post 1990s that affect *hijra* representations, the key arguments that make this research important to discussing *hijra* existence in South Asia, and the challenges involved in doing this research.

In India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and in some other parts of the larger South Asia, *hijras* are understood as a third gender community. Speaking on a live journalism platform, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a *hijra* and a well-known trans rights activist in India, defines *hijras* as “those who identify as neither male nor female but enjoy the femininity of

the world” (“Women of the World” 2017, 00:06:10 – 00:06:16). This is a community which has had a centuries old continuous existence in South Asian literature, culture and society. But *hijras* have often found themselves vulnerable despite the fact that in various cultural texts and mythologies¹, they have held significant positions. Even today, there is a huge amount of variability in *hijra* experiences – from *hijras* in village communities still involved in traditional practices, to *hijras* living in communes and cities, some of whom identify as part of India’s trans community, to *hijras* who have left community-based existence to lead different lives. It is impossible to describe a singular or homogenous *hijra* experience. This thesis does not attempt to offer a definitive account of *hijra* life in India, rather, it focuses on a range of representations which feature and focus on aspects of *hijra* life to offer an exploration of gender and sexuality.

A 2017 Indian Vicks advertisement², where *hijra* activist, Gauri Sawant, played her real-life role as a mother of an adopted girl child, is an example of how there are multiple and differing ways in which *hijras* are represented in India. This ad made Sawant a popular figure overnight as she was widely acknowledged as a *hijra* mother in the mainstream. While the ad intended to be progressive and anti-essentialist by depicting a third gender person having the rights to parenthood, Sawant was critical of the reception of the ad. In a talk show, she pointed out that she is also a mother of three *hijras*, but this aspect of her identity is overshadowed by her role as a mother of a cis female child (Sawant 2017, 00:18:00- 00:29:20). Sawant argues that motherhood is a behaviour that is beyond gender. The ad demonstrates how *hijras* have become visible in mainstream Indian media, but how their presence is often co-opted into conservative models of gender and kinship.

The locality in Delhi where I lived had people from various religious backgrounds who were all economically low-earning families. Everyone else in this locality that I recall was also a migrant from different parts of India. Within this setting, I grew up seeing Hindus going to local mosques to get amulets from the *Maulvi* or Muslims tying a thread on a tree considered sacred by Hindus. *Hijras* also equally participated in these syncretic practices. For instance, the *hijra* who used to visit my great aunt was a practicing Muslim who had also performed *Hajj* and yet she always wore a *bindi* and used to go to specific Hindu temples along with other members of the *hijra* community. This is not to say that *hijra* communities always have access to religious spaces, as a community they have found themselves marginalised by conservative factions of religious communities (Nanda 1999; Reddy 2005). As a community, they stand divided on the basis of gender, class, caste, region and religion who have limited access to the hierarchy of power in the neo liberal and postcolonial India.

Borrowing from Gayatri Spivak's (1988) understanding of the subaltern subject as heterogeneous, I understand these divisions and politics of exclusion and marginalisation as identifiers of subalternity. Identifying *hijras* as subaltern therefore does not suggest that they are an oppressed community but to emphasise that there is a community which has continued to exist over centuries and created "a space of difference", as Spivak says in relation to postcolonial subaltern subjects in an interview (Kock 1992, 45). Within this difference, in relation to the idea of subaltern, different people and communities share a sense of belonging with the *hijra* community. Harkening the loud claps in my title references these politics of identifications. It is used as a tongue-in-cheek phrase as I, a

non-*hijra* person, but who connects with *hijras* on several levels, enters an academic space in the UK to study *hijra* communities. Since these claps are the most obvious performance by *hijras* through which non-*hijra* people identify them, for me in these claps are also hidden many other experiences – experiences of marginalities on several levels, including caste, religion and class. More specifically to *hijras*, the claps are a reference to their shared experiences of community-based existence which has a long history of survival together. These claps are more than just signifiers of *hijra* presence and are symbolic of public reclamations of their community-based existence.

When I enrolled in the BA English Hons programme and studied gender theory and critical race theory in the classroom, I realised how much of the theory we read was relevant to my own lived experience of identifying as a Muslim woman from a low social class and caste background. I became more invested with the politics of intersectionality and subaltern in everyday lived experiences in India as I started to work in 2017 with an NGO based in Delhi, called Aarohan, which aimed to advocate for marginalised sections of society, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds and *hijra* communities. Through my experience of working here, I learnt how significantly related the experiences of gender, sexuality, class, religion and caste are in a community which is mainly understood through the parameters of gender by the mainstream of the dominant cis gender society. During this time, I became conscious of how *hijra* experiences were affected by the rising conservative ideologies under the governance of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) government which came to power in 2014 in India, which targeted various communities for being not Indian enough, including Muslims. There were noticeable parallels that could be

drawn in the lives of *hijras* and Muslims as well as other sections of society who were subject to hostility as they found themselves discriminated against by the conservative government.

The idea of doing a PhD about a non-normative gender and sexuality-based community might come across as contradictory to my religious practices, but from my experience it is in the intersections of so many social constructs and differences, based on religion, race, caste, class, gender, sexuality and more, that helps locate and complicate experience. On a personal level, my research on *hijra* communities advanced my understanding of my identity of growing up in a relatively tolerant lower-class setting as a Muslim girl in Delhi in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to living the life of a middle-class university educated Muslim woman in a far right-wing political environment in Delhi for the last decade.

Most importantly, doing this research allows me to investigate and unpick the issues of power that are inherent in a study like mine, since I share a relationship between being a non-*hijra*, gender conforming, scholar-activist with that of the subaltern subject. This research raises questions of ‘who gets to speak, who gets spoken for, who can advocate for gender equality and who can become an ally?’. Working with Spivak’s notion of the subaltern, it becomes possible to see how different people and communities have different ‘voices’ within a social context, which creates a complex dynamic of speaking for and speaking with. For instance, within the *hijra* community, there are voices that are able to construct a proximity to the powerful and valued ideology in the hierarchy of power,

increasing their chances of climbing higher up that ladder of power. When such ‘voices’ become at the centre of representing *hijra* experiences, they invite questions of authenticity and ‘who gets to speak’. Similarly, when someone like me who identifies as a non-*hijra* person speaks for *hijra* communities, there are various limitations of what my positionality/identity allows me to say or do (as I explore in detail in the last section of this chapter), but these limitations also disrupt assumptions of an ‘authentic’, ‘reliable’ and homogenous account in favour of hybridity.

The issue of ‘who gets to speak, and who gets spoken for?’ also resonates with the kind of texts or mediums that I have chosen for my thesis. In this thesis, I analyse cultural representations of *hijras* in Bollywood, Indian anglophone literature and *hijra* life writings from the 1990s to examine how *hijra* lives were represented in Bollywood cinema, anglophone literature and *hijra* life writings at a time when global movements advocating for sexual minorities were helping to give voice, visibility, and resources to *hijra* communities. Each of the case studies that this thesis looks at, focuses on different kinds of transnational discourses and circulation. These details allow me to investigate following questions: How have the *hijra* community and various voices within the community and those interconnected communities are spoken about or represented? Which mediums represent them as passive and which ones offer them a ‘voice’? Who gets to represent them, and which narratives become dominant in society v/s those mediums that allow *hijras* to speak and represent themselves?

Each of the mediums that I analyse either contribute toward 'voicelessness' or enable *hijra* communities the means to speak. Bollywood is a mainstream mode of cultural entertainment in India which is viewed by all sections of Indian society and is also very transnational. As Bollywood films are widely circulated not just in India, but in other parts of the world, including East Africa, Middle East, Southeast Asia, parts of Europe and a bit of North America. Looking at how members of a specific community in India, and their aspirations, are represented in such a mainstream and widely circulated transnational cinema, tells us about how *hijra* communities are perceived in the Indian mainstream ideologies. Anglophone literature, on the other hand, has limited readership and is transnational in different settings. It is accessed in postcolonial countries where English continues to be a language of power. *Hijra* representations in this medium offer a nuanced perspective on *hijra* lives, allowing for more complex aspects of their identities to be explored in creative ways. Within both Bollywood and novels, *hijras* are represented by non-*hijra* people who are also often gender conforming people and even if their representation is constructed with varying levels of sensitivity, members of *hijra* community hardly become the part of production and dissemination of their own stories and experiences. As such, these mediums relegate *hijra* persons and communities passive within the broader social and cultural systems. On the other hand, life writing by *hijras* often provide a sympathetic perspective on *hijra* existence in India, offering an excellent counterpart to other modes of representations. They emerged in autobiographical forms in the first decade of 21st century as part of *hijra* NGO-based activism and in the past decade, many *hijras* shifted towards non-traditional life writing modes, like YouTube channels,

social networking sites, online blogs and interviews. However, these writings are circulated in specific spaces, mostly in South Asia and in South Asian diaspora in specific kinds of activist circles as this mode is more intimate and closely related to *hijra* activism in India. As such, though these mediums allow members of *hijra* community to speak for themselves, they remain 'hard to reach' narratives. In other words, these digital mediums do not broadcast to people automatically and reach only those sections of society who are looking for these voices. Thus, all the three mediums offer very different forms of creative representations of *hijras* for very different audiences, often inviting complex and tricky power relations. But within these differences, these mediums have made major interventions and changes in the way *hijras* have been represented over the last few decades. These mediums allow me to tie my positionality, of a *non-hijra* person researching *hijra* representations, to the significance of shifting discursive patterns across the selected case studies.

This thesis, therefore, as a whole, embraces Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space theory. Third Space theory allows and attempts to understand the uniqueness of each person and context as a hybrid position (Bhabha 2004, 55). I understand hybridity as the necessarily 'queer' and postcolonial space from which culture might be created. It is utilised as a complex and creative intersectional space of making and re-making identities in this thesis. As a result, there is an underlying idea of multiple layers of power and identity and a move towards trying not to homogenise communities but also the ways in which they represent and re-represent themselves in ways in which multiple mediums represent them. In other words, third space in this thesis is used to understand that complex way in which very

different forms of media, language and platforms are used to represent members of the *hijra* community. It allows to explore the power relationships between the medium and the mode that are used to allow certain voices to take certain shape and reach a certain audience.

In all three mediums, my selection of primary case studies for this thesis was based on the time in which they came out, as well as on the popularity and accessibility of these texts. The period of 1990 – 2020 in India, the timeframe that I have selected for my thesis, has been extremely turbulent. It is a period that I have lived through, witnessing the gradual movement towards an intolerant society; and yet it is also a period in which India has been most impacted by globalisation and international movements, like the trans movement. While India has seen a dramatic rise in right wing populism, it has also witnessed the increased visibility of queer and trans lives in mainstream representation. Notable example of this include: documentaries based on *hijra* lived experiences as a third gender community in India by broadcasting companies like BBC in 2007 and NBC in 2015; mainstream organisations and news channels across the world, including BBC (2014), NPR (2014) and HRW (2015), covered aspects of *hijra* existence in India when Indian Supreme Court legally recognised *hijras* as third gender in 2014; the holy dip of *hijras* in Kumbh Mela (a major pilgrimage and festival in Hinduism) in 2019³ which became the mainstream news in India in 2019, representing *hijras* dressed in saffron with *tilak*; *hijra* characters in popular and mega budget films, like *Super Deluxe* (2019) and *Laxmii* (2020); *hijra* appearance in *Mirzapur* (2018), a very popular OTT Indian web series; *hijra* character as the lead character in *Shakti*, an Indian daily soap drama which was aired between 2016 to

2021; several TV commercials, endorsed by brands like Vicks (2017) and Red Labels (2020), represented members of *hijra* community sympathetically; and *hijra* protagonist in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, one of the bestselling novels around the globe in 2017.

Within the three mediums that I have selected for this thesis, in Bollywood cinema, I identify the dominant tropes of *hijra* representations in seven song sequences and eleven films (released post 1990s) – all of which were big theatrical releases. In Indian anglophone literature, I choose Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry* (2017) as this is the only anglophone novel having a *hijra* protagonist which has been widely circulated in national and global literary markets. The novel was originally published by two US and UK renowned publication houses, Hamish Hamilton and Alfred A. Knopf, and was on the longlist of the Man Booker Prize in 2017. The popularity and fame of the novel has seen it translated and published in more than 30 countries and in 50 languages. For *hijra* life writings, I have chosen seventeen case studies. *Hijra* life writings have become visible in the mainstream only in the last decade and are emerging rapidly, with thousands of Instagram and Facebook *hijra* accounts and pages. I have chosen to concentrate on those life writings which voice intersectional *hijra* experiences (including caste, ethnicity, colour, religion and gender) and have become the mainstream of *hijra* life writings, through active circulations and publications. These include four published autobiographies of *hijras* – *I am Vidya* (2007) by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth About Me* (2010) by A. Revathi; *me Laxmi, me hijra* (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and *A gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey and Manabi Bandyopadhyaya – and thirteen non-traditional modes of life writings. These include – four interviews with *hijra* activists (published in 2013, 2016,

2017 and 2018, respectively), an online article published by Grace Banu, a Dalit *hijra* activist in 2018, an online blog post by a *hijra*-trans activist, Kalki Subramaniam, in 2020, a radio broadcast (NPR) about the life of a *hijra* activist, Abhina Aher, in 2014, two published articles, both in 2020, which resulted from interviews/communications with members of *hijra* community, a documentary which is a compilation of several *hijra* life stories, an online forum run by *hijras*, a joint statement released by several *hijras* and a YouTube series hosted by Soniya Sheikh, an acid attack *hijra* survivor.

An analysis of creative representations of *hijras* help in fleshing out the multiplicities and differences in which *hijras* exist in India and the differing ways in which they are understood, allowing for multiple meanings to generate. As I analyse the key trends in these case studies, I argue that the chosen mediums selectively recognise some formulations of *hijra* identities and behaviours and that *hijra* as a third gender identity is used as an exemplar for various forms of gender non-normative lives in India. As these representations offer creative insights into *hijra* experiences post 1990s, I show how *hijras* are perceived in the mainstream with notable affects from the recent politics of India.

The rest of this introduction is divided in five sections. In the first section, I will give an overview of the history and social role of *hijras* in South Asia in a chronological order, starting from religious and mythological texts to contemporary India. The historicization will help in contextualising *hijras* and understanding their present situation. In section two, I will discuss why I chose India and the period of 1990 – 2020 for this thesis. This discussion will uncover the key political and cultural moments which impacted

hijras during this time in India. I will explain the contradictions between the rise of populist nationalism in India and the increased mainstream visibility of LGBTQ rights in India during the same time. The third section will discuss how I use some of the terminologies around gender, like, *hijra*, queer and trans, in this thesis. This section will place my thesis in a global context as well as relate it to the works of key theorists in the field. In the fourth section, I outline my research questions, methodologies, arguments and introduce my thesis. Finally, I conclude this chapter by summarising my challenges in doing this research during Covid-19.

1.1 *An introduction to the history and social role of hijras in South Asia*

Hijra existence can be traced back to Hindu mythologies and religious texts. These texts are formed by a body of myths and stories found in a range of written texts (including, Vedic literature, *Puranas* and epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) as well as in oral tradition (Newport 2018, 35). In these texts, *hijras* held sacred positions as third gender people (2018, 40). There are many myths and stories about *hijras*, with multiple versions, circulated across different regions of South Asia, hence it is impossible to list down all of them in a brief introduction about *hijra* history. Key sources that discuss and analyse *hijra* mythological stories and religious practices include, Goldman (1993), Williams (2008) and Newport (2018).

I have chosen to highlight only those stories that are widely and repeatedly circulated in discussing *hijra* communities in contemporary India. There are mainly three mythical stories that are repeatedly referred to in most spaces, including, legal and government verdicts, ethnographic cultural studies, *hijra* activism and creative representations of *hijras*. The first story that has been widely referenced (for example see, Roy (2017), Nanda (1999), Reddy (2005)) is a story from the *Ramayana*. When Rama (one of the major deities in Hinduism) returned from 14 years of exile, he found a group of *hijras* waiting for him. The *hijras* in this story ignored Rama's command to not wait for him when he was going in exile because his command was addressed to man and woman. Since *hijras* did not identify as either, they waited for him for 14 years. Pleased with their devotion, Rama blessed *hijras* with the power to bless or curse any human being. This story has great significance in the way *hijras* are understood in India, and even now, *hijras* are considered auspicious by the majority of Indian population.

Hijras collect alms in return for blessings, especially for newborns and newlywed couples. This practice is largely referred as *badhai* and is a reference to the power that Rama granted them in *Ramayana*. A significant point that most of these representations hints toward is the importance of rituals like *badhai* that bind *hijras* with key moments of social reproduction (like, marriage and birth). These moments of reproductions have been the way in which historically *hijras* have partially sustained themselves as a community whose reproduction has been through adoption (as seen in the Vicks ad mentioned earlier). Thus, these practices present a complex relationship in which *hijras* have existed with the dominant non-*hijra* population.

The second story is about the Hindu goddess Bahuchara, who is widely followed by *hijras* in India. Bahuchara, representing fierceness and revenge, is one of the incarnations of Hindu goddess Parvati. There are several oral myths about Bahuchara and the most popular amongst the *hijra* community is the one in which Bahuchara cuts off one of her breasts in order to prevent sexual assault. The cutting off her breast is looked upon by *hijras* as a symbol of immense strength, especially when *hijras* undergo *nirvana*. *Nirvana* is a surgical operation done by many *hijras* involving the removal of male genitals. This operation is usually performed by elders in the *hijra* community (Reddy 2005, 142). In most *hijra* communities, the operation is symbolic of a sacrifice to Bahuchara, to gain strength and courage to face the world as they emerge with a ‘new body’ (Nanda 1990, 44; Reddy 2005, 75). Living Smile Vidya narrates in her autobiography, *I am Vidya* (2007), how when she underwent *nirvana*, she was asked to continuously chant the name of Bahuchara as it would bring her the strength to survive the operation. Within many *hijra* communities, those who have undergone *nirvana* are considered ‘real’ *hijras* and are treated as more auspicious than others (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005).

The third and the last story that is widely circulated invokes a dominant concept of Hinduism, *Ardhanarishvara*. This concept appears in Hindu iconography, *Puranas*, yogic texts and Hindu devotional poetries (Goldberg 2002, 3). *Ardhanarishvara* is one of the many forms of the Hindu God Shiva that he takes by combining with his consort Parvati. In this form which has popular iconographic visuals in most Shiva temples around India, Shiva is depicted as half-male and half-female. This image is symbolic of one of the fundamental beliefs in Hinduism about cosmic unity – the continuation of universe, which

is the unity of opposites (Kinsley 1986, 40-60). The unity of opposites primarily includes the “inseparable” aspects of feminine and masculine, where feminine represents active force and masculine is symbolic of passive force, together creating the universe (Goldberg 2002, 140-155). As these two forces literally combine in Shiva’s *Ardhanarishvara* form, androgyny occupies a significant space in Hindu mythology and is a very highly regarded human form. *hijras*, mostly Hindu, widely use the concept of *Ardhanarishvara* in India to signify their importance in the larger cosmic world as well as to establish themselves at the centre of Hindu tradition and religion (Nanda 1990, 20). The symbolism of *Ardhanarishvara* is dominant in the autobiographical accounts of *hijras*. For instance, in *me hijra, me Laxmi*, Tripathi describes *hijra* community as possessing the powers of both masculine and feminine in generating the energy required for a stable world (Tripathi 2015, 172).

In all these mythological stories, *hijra* significantly contribute to the key concepts of “sacrifice and cosmic unity” in Hinduism (Newport 2018, 46). As *nirvana* is a sacrifice made to Bahuchara, it is believed by many *hijras* that only by making the sacrificial blood to flow during *nirvana*, that a *hijra* truly embodies the *Ardhanarishvara*, powers of both the feminine and masculine (Nanda 1990, 47).

During the Mughal period starting from 16th Century, which marked a different socio-political and religious rule in India, *hijras* continued to occupy the non-binary or the third gender identity but in a different way. During this period, *hijras* were mainly understood and accepted as ‘court eunuchs’. The ‘court eunuchs’ had specific roles to play

which were different from mythologies and religious texts. They were usually referred as *Khwajasarais* and their roles involved being guards of the female section as well as “administrators, military commanders, envoys, intelligencers, collectors of land revenue and managers of business ventures” (Hinchy 2019, 23). They were also employed as advisors to the kings and were considered highly loyal (Arondekar 2009). Though the ‘court eunuchs’ occupied respectable posts and enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, it is worth mentioning that these positions were offered to them only because of their third gender identity.

Several court chronicles from the Mughal era like *Akbar Nama* and *Babur Nama* are a testimony of how *hijras* were understood as third gender and enjoyed political and social agency during this time (Richards 1993; Hinchy 2014; Newport 2018). Additional to this, historical landmarks like *Hijron ka Khanqah* (an Islamic historical shrine of *hijras* in Delhi) are testimony to this history. These explain why a lot of *hijra* representations in contemporary India fall back to this history to highlight how they held respectable positions during Mughal period. For instance, in *The Ministry*, *hijra* characters remember Mughal period as the golden era and remark “this is our ancestry, our history, our story. We were never commoners, you see, we were members of the staff of the Royal Palace” (Roy 2017, 31).

However, the situation changed for *hijras* during British colonial rule. Arondekar’s *For the Record* (2009) and Hinchy’s *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The hijra, c.1850-1900* (2019) are key texts that outline the socio-political role of *hijras*

during the colonial rule. Arondekar's book looks at *hijra* history by reading through the accounts of sexuality in colonial archives; Hinchy's book is ground-breaking in *hijra* studies as it is the first-ever published research which captures the colonial history of *hijras* in the subcontinent. Both their books argue that *hijras* were seen as an ungovernable population and a threat to the British rule during this period.

Hinchy (2019) highlights how the colonial state miscategorized people on the basis of gender and sexuality. This was due to the fact that the colonial rulers could not come to terms with the third gender identities during the colonial encounter and clubbed all non-binary groups as kidnapers, young boy's emasculators and sodomites (2). The colonial rulers started anti-*hijra* campaigns and formalised *hijra* elimination by criminalising them through the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871 (2). Previously in 1860, the British has introduced section 377 in Indian penal code which criminalised homosexual intercourse between men intercourse. Together these laws criminalised *hijra* existence and practices in the colonial India. Arondekar's reading of the first case registered under section 377 in 1884, called 'Empress v. Khairati case' is an exemplar of how the British perceived third gender people. This was a very controversial case during its time as is evident from Arondekar's archival research. Khairati had a biological male body with an enlarged anus and used to dress in feminine clothes. They were accused of sodomy but were never proven guilty. Khairati's case study reveals contradictory commentaries by the judge even though the judge dismissed this case because there was no medical proof against them, and no other factors were strong enough to hold them guilty (Arondekar 2009, 68). In the commentaries, the judge defines *hijras* as those "who form a class by themselves and who

dress in women's clothes and dance and sing and ape the manners and voices of nautch girls' but who like young boys, cows, mares, fowl, and buffalo, are especially targets of adult male penetration" (Bhaskaran 2002, 24). As derogatory as the definition is, Khairati could not be proven guilty as these non-binary activities were so casually carried out that an easy categorisation of third gender into binary roles was not possible and also, the long history of existence of such practices in India did not make these seem criminal (Arondekar 2009, 71). In fact, for a long time during the Mughal period, the third gender groups claimed dancing and singing as their traditional occupation to earn money and get legal claims from the Mughal rulers. They received the court's support for these practices. But these behaviours seemed bizarre and incomprehensible to the coloniser's eyes. As a result, the colonial rule insisted on presenting these groups as barbarous.

Arondekar's reading of *Empress v. Khairati's* case highlights that the experiences of the third gender were understood through sexual behaviours by the British rulers. But as Geeta Patel rightly says, these groups "do not inhabit gender in the usual (i.e., North America and European way)" (qtd. in Arondekar 2009, 91). Hence, people belonging from the third gender groups like Khairati were, as Arondekar says, "sexualized out of view" and were understood out of context by Europeans (91).

Hijras, nevertheless, continued to make their spaces as they survived the oppressive state surveillance by coming together as a well-knit social community (Hinchy 2019, 15). They failed to be entirely exterminated during the colonial rule. But the legacy of the British policies of Section 377 and the Criminal Tribes Act continued in the post-

Independent India, legally criminalising *hijra* population even after 1947. National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India (commonly referred as NALSA judgement) is the judgement given by Indian Supreme Court in 2014 which declared ‘transgender’ people as third gender. The judgement gave ‘transgender’ people of India their citizenship rights and stated that people have the right to self-identify as male, female or third gender. While the verdict decriminalised *hijras* and is seen as a landmark judgment by many, it remains colourblind (a term used by David L Eng in his 2010 book *The Feeling of Kinship* to refer to legal documents when looking at sexual minorities and queer subjects in the US context) to lived experiences of *hijras* in India. Following this judgement, several bills have been introduced in the Indian parliament (all severely criticized by the *hijra* community), with the most recent The Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Bill 2019 becoming an Act. This Act, following from its earlier drafts, mainly targets the *hijra* community-based existence by attacking on their centuries-old practice of initiating new members, which is based on non-bloodline kinship formation. Chapter 5 of this Act states:

(1) No child shall be separated from parents or immediate family on the ground of being a transgender, except on an order of a competent court, in the interest of such child ...

(3) Where any parent or a member of his immediate family is unable to take care of a transgender, the competent court shall by an order direct such person to be placed in rehabilitation centre. (The Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019)

This clause is deeply problematic on multiple accounts. First, while it claims to be “in the interest of such child,” it erases the social realities of *hijra* experiences in contemporary India. Several *hijras* have voiced their concerns through the recently emerging *hijra* life writing practice that reveals how they have feared honor killing by their biological families their entire lives (Aggarwal 2019; Narsee et al. 2020). Secondly, most of the direct violence, harassment, and abuse against *hijras* is reported to occur in government-led institutionalized settings, such as “harassment in police stations”, “police entrapment” and “rape in jails” (PUCL-K 2003, 33-38). Given such a threatening environment, rehabilitation centers will further lead to the exploitation of *hijras*. Sawant, a *hijra* activist, fears that “forceful rehabilitation will put such individuals [*hijras* abandoned by their natal families] in unsafe, abusive situations, pushing them to self-harm/suicide” (Pawar 2018). The ambivalence of the Act’s language doubles these fears, as there is absolutely no provision about how these centers will be operated, making this Act nightmarish for the *hijra* community (Ghosh and Sanyal 2015, 7).

Furthermore, there are regional laws which police *hijra* behaviours. For instance, in the Karnataka state of India, Section 36A allowed police to arrest ‘eunuchs’ for suspected kidnapping and sodomy until the last decade. After continuous protests from the community, the word “eunuch” had been replaced by “persons” in the section, but that did not bring much difference to the way *hijras* are treated by police (Hinchy 2019, 255). The presence of such laws is evidence of how the criminalisation of *hijras* persists even to date after Independence. Hence, while the 2014 Supreme Court judgement and the overruling of

the section 377 had been a relief to the *hijra* community amongst other LGBTQ+ communities in India, the community continues to face challenges.

Socially, too, *hijras* continued to be treated with contempt by the majority of non-*hijra* society in postcolonial India. As a result, *hijras* found marginal spaces on the fringes of dominant cis gender society in independent India. Hinchy highlights that in postcolonial India, *hijras* from different religions started to narrativize their existence through Hindu religious and mythological texts to fight against the colonial legacy of criminalization and regain their long-lost position (255). Taparia also recognizes the association of *hijras* with Hinduism as a “struggle for survival and resistance against discrimination” (2011, 173). Since after their continued criminalization, the only way for them to exist as a community in post-Independent Indian society was to “exercise their agency by taking refuge in [Hindu] religion”; they came up as a caste, worshipping the Hindu Goddess Bahuchara (173). Most Muslim *hijras* in India follow Bahuchara and this trend of crossing between faiths by tracing *hijras* back to Hindu mythologies and religious texts not only gave them a place in the society (though only in the margins but still a place to survive and exist where they had a social role to play) but also legitimized their “‘their third gendered’ bodies and roles” in post-independent India (173).

However, even after such attempts, *hijra* existence as a third gender community is received with mixed, often complex responses from the non-*hijra* society in the postcolonial India. For instance, *hijras* are considered auspicious and many people believe in the power of *hijras* to curse or bless. For these reasons, *hijra*’s main source of income

continues to be *badhai*. While on the other hand, some people give money to *hijras* during *badhai* only to maintain their ‘respect’ in society. Since refusing to pay may often lead to *hijras* lifting their saris to expose their bodies or making overtly sexualised gestures and clapping loudly in the *hijra* style to shame the person since *badhai* is usually the only way to earn money other than sex work for most *hijras*.

One of the reasons of why *hijras* are understood in multiple ways is because the very definition of third gender is shifting, not only in the differing ways in which third gender identity was perceived historically, the mixed legacies of which continue in the contemporary India, but also because the multiple ways in which different *hijra* communities practice gender roles. This is evident in the three book-length *hijra* ethnographies available on Indian *hijras* – *Neither Man nor Woman: The hijras of India* by Nanda (1990), *The Invisibles: Tale of the Eunuchs of India* by Jaffrey (1996) and *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating hijra Identity in South India* by Reddy (2005). These ethnographic studies took months and years of studying *hijra* communities. For example: for Nanda, it was 8 months of continuous stay in the year 1981-82 and frequent visits until 1986 (Slijper 1997); Reddy studied the *hijra* community in Hyderabad as participant observer in 1996 and continued her research until she published in 2005 (Howarth 2021). An evaluation of these in-depth studies depicts how *hijras* lead different lives in different parts of India, detailing everyday *hijra* experiences and bringing the multiple aspects of crossings amongst *hijra* practices. Some of these crossing, as they stand, are contradictory on the basis of their religious, gender, historical, cultural or sexual practices, yet most *hijras* in contemporary India live with these contradictions. Therefore, the third gender practices

and behaviours of contemporary *hijras* are not only to be accredited to their gender but also to the faith and everyday practices that they subscribe to.

Contemporary ethnographic studies of *hijra* lives open gateways to the everyday lived experiences of *hijras* by exploring the multiple ways of being a *hijra*. I have divided the knowledge produced from these ethnographies into three categories – *hijras* as a gender-based community; their customs and practices; and *hijra* kinship patterns – offering an insight into the biological, social and cultural differences. Biological factors draw attention to the different ways in which *hijra* bodies are formed and how it impacts their experiences. For instance, a few *hijras* are born intersex, some undergo *nirvana*, while some choose not to, and others are in the process. Social factors include how *hijras* exist, mainly as sex and gender-based groups, within a dominant heteropatriarchal Indian society. The contemporary social position of *hijras* is directly related to how they were perceived by the British during the colonial encounter, as is evident from the works of queer historians like Arondekar (2009) and Hinchy (2019). This is something that queer theorists, like Gopinath (2005), have also identified. Gopinath emphasizes in *Impossible Desires* that “discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration” (2005, 3). Lastly, as a cultural community, *hijras* have their own rules and regulations and practise a unique kinship structure that is different from other communities in India. Together, these factors contribute to *hijra* subjectivities in the contemporary Indian context.

The categorisation of *hijras* specifically as a third gender community is based mainly on the *hijra* practise of *nirvana*. Nanda notes, it is seen as the most essential thing to define a *hijra* identity, as a person only becomes a *hijra*:

... by having their genitals cut off. Emasculation is the *dharma* (religious obligation) of the *hijras*, and it is this renunciation of male sexuality through the surgical removal of the organ of the male sexuality that is at the heart of the definition of the *hijra* social identity (1990, 15).

However, this truly is not the case, as is evident from the lives of several *hijras* in ethnographic works. For instance, Sushila, a *hijra* that Nanda writes about, has not undergone *nirvana* and neither does she want to and still, she is a prominent part of the local *hijra gharaana* (87). Like Sushila, many *hijras* have not undergone surgery but are nevertheless *hijras* in a complete sense. There are others who are born intersex and some who are in the process of undergoing *nirvana*. There are thus multiple articulations of being a *hijra*.

The gendered identity is not only to be seen as multiple, but also as something that keeps changing and is not stable amongst *hijras*. Several *hijras* in these ethnographies experience gender differently depending on different stages of their lives. Before *nirvana*, several *hijras* recount that they feel a lack in their bodies, while post *nirvana*, some feel complete and content, but some do not (Reddy 2005, 50-57). Likewise, many *hijras* are sexually involved with men and women within specific gender roles. For instance, in Nanda's ethnography, a *hijra* named Meera was once a husband to a woman and later had a

romantic sexual affair with a man where she saw herself as a woman (Nanda 1990, 90). Similarly, Hossain's ethnography *Beyond Emasculation* (2021) shows how in Dhaka (Bangladesh), many *hijras* lead an acceptable life where they perform the role of both masculine heterosexual husbands and that of a *hijra*. Nanda rightly notes that "it may be that the 'gendered self' is not internalized in the same way for all individuals, for some sexuality may be the critical aspect, for others, outward role behaviour, for still others, giving birth" (Nanda 1990, 19).

This variety of gender identities among *hijras* can be further witnessed in the apparent contradiction between the lives that Kamladevi, Salima and Meera (all *hijras*) lead in Nanda (1990) and Jaffrey's (1996) ethnographies. While Kamladevi and Salima dress and act like women because they like it, they do not think of themselves as women (Jaffrey 1996, 90). There are others like Meera who identify themselves as women even if they have played the role of a husband (Nanda 1990, 110). The different articulations of *hijra* bodies also often lead to different experiences within the *hijra* community. Some *hijras* enjoy a privileged status, while a few are othered based on their sex. For instance, *hijras* born intersex are usually respected by all and are treated as real *hijras*. At the same time, young *hijras* who do not want to undergo *nirvana* are often bullied for being 'fake' *hijras*. These experiences result in multiple layers of marginalisation for *hijras* who do not follow their community's codes and conducts.

In "Decolonizing Transgender in India" (2014), based on the fieldwork with the *hijra* community in India, Dutta and Roy suggest that *hijra* practices of their gender roles

are complex and add multiple dimensions to their gendered identity. As “*hijras* may elect castration – penectomy and other modes of feminization such as hormonal treatments and yet not wish to socially ‘pass’ as women, even if they are pleased when such passing does occur” (2014, 330). Dutta and Roy define *hijras* as “a well-known term connoting a structured community of feminine-identified persons... may undergo penectomy and castration but also commonly designate themselves as distinct from men and women” as well as other non-normative or trans communities (322). For instance, they narrate an anecdote about one of their *hijra* friends who had to clap in the ‘*hijra*’ style to assert her identity to some people who mistook her for a woman. They narrate several instances to highlight the obvious differences between gender roles practiced by *hijras* to emphasize that *hijras* “have devised trajectories with sartorial, bodily, or behavioural feminization that need not imply identification with social or ontological womanhood per se but, rather, may be expressed as a separately gendered subject position” (330). *hijras*, therefore, have many ways by which they establish their difference from binary gender groups in a manner which also challenges an easy categorisation of their gender roles and practices under a third gender label.

Culturally, *hijras* exist as a lower caste community because of their traditional occupation of performing *badhai*. In India, the caste system is a hierarchal placement of people/groups based on their traditional occupational roles. Taparia writes that *hijras* are:

... a religious cult community reinforcing not only the community’s solidarity but also their rightful place in the occupational schema of the Indian caste system. Like

other jatis [/caste] with a traditional occupation in the pervasive caste structure characterizing Indian society, *hijras* too function like one, with a traditional claim on performing at wedding and birth ceremonies. (2011, 178)

The caste system is practiced in various regions of India irrespective of people's religion, like the *mewat* region of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The Muslim population mainly populates this region yet follows the caste system religiously. However, since the system has roots primarily drawn from Hinduism, it is primarily associated with Hindus. This makes most ethnographers link *hijras* specifically with the Hindu religion as they trace their existence within a Hindu lineage. Nanda defines *hijras* as a "religious community" (1990, 1) and, as Newport rightly points out, "she [Nanda] consistently reads Hinduism as the primary category through which *hijras* must be understood" (2018, 21). However, it is evident from the ethnographic works of Jaffrey (1996), Nanda (1999) and Reddy (2006) that *hijras* belong to different religious groups in India. At the same time, most of them believe in Bahuchara Mata, a Hindu Goddess, and several mythological characters present in *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Taparia reads these factors as representative of "transgression of religious boundaries" (2011, 173). However, syncretic practices in India are prevalent and can be witnessed across regions, as argued earlier. Many *hijras*, including Muslim *hijras*, undergo *nirvana* while 'castration' is prohibited in Islam. Kamal Baksh, a Muslim *hijra* who underwent *nirvana*, highlights that these identities are equally important (Reddy 2005, 70). Baksh performed *Hajj* and yet goes to the annual gathering of Bahuchara *Mata*. Similarly,

it is common amongst Muslim *hijras* to keep their names and follow both Muslim and Hindu religious practices (Tapasya 2020).

Akshay Khanna mentions how *hijras* are also identified based on their class in Indian societies. He writes that when he wore women's clothing, had "long hair tied in a bun" and wore "nail polish" as most *hijras* did, he was not mistaken to be a *hijra* (2007, 161). He admits that his "class is written on [his] body, language and attire", and that if he was to come from a "lower economic strata, I [he] would perhaps have been identified as a *hijra*" (161). Thus, *hijras* are representative of both low caste and class in the subcontinent. The two identities often receive marginalised treatment in India. However, it is worth noting that amongst *hijra* communities, caste plays a crucial role. For instance, in the life narratives of *hijras* who belong to lower castes, it is evident that they face internal marginalisation from upper caste *hijras* (Dalit Camera 2016). These marginalisation result in experiences like: lower caste *hijras* not being elected as *hijra*-heads and always expected to do sex-work while upper-caste *hijras* would be sent for *badhai*. Similarly, these experiences also remain affected because of their skin colours. For example, an upper-caste, fair-skinned *hijra* who is educated is most likely to face less challenges as she can pass as a "respectable" woman (Bandopadhyay 2017, 88). Thus, experiences of caste, class, colour and religion intersect at multiple levels and play an essential part in forming *hijra* social, cultural, and gender experiences in India.

One of the crucial aspects in the formation of *hijra* identity and understanding how this community functions is their kinship ties. Like other South Asian family structures,

hijras also form relationships in a family setup where familial ties supersede everything else. These relationships are not based on blood ties and hence differ widely from the kinship ties in most South Asian families. South Asian kinship ties are usually based on “marital obligations and procreative kinship ideologies... moderated by the logic of the caste system and its concern with the ‘purity of women’... mediated by the soteriological imperative of the *kanyadana* (gift of a virgin) ideal” (Reddy 2005, 145). However, *hijra* kinship groups are more often structured around complex non-biological affiliations. Every person comes individually to the *hijra* community, irrespective of their natal family’s status, class, caste or religion, and acquires a *hijra* identity after joining the *hijra* kinship network.

Within this setting, every *hijra* joins under a senior *hijra*, a *guru* (teacher – a mother-like figure), from the community in order to have a place in this group and “initiation into the community occurs only under the sponsorship of a guru” (Nanda 1990, 43). The ritual of leaving one’s biological parent’s house and joining the *guru-chela* (teacher-disciple) framework marks the beginning of becoming *hijra*. This move gives them the right to access the “*deras* (communes of *hijras*) with a newly assigned name, generally in the female derivative” and make them a member of the clan as soon as they start contributing to the “hierarchical yet symbolic *guru-chela* relationship” (Goel 2016, 539).

Though the *guru* provides emotional and economic support to their *chelas* and forms kinship ties like matriarchal societies, their relationship is not the same as the

idealized mother-daughter relationship in heterosexual communities, which brings in the notion of some kind of unconditional love. Their relationship, like their gender identities which are diverse and multiple, “are conceived of as reciprocal, multidimensional, and mutually satisfying” (Nanda 1990, 45). By providing a place to live and giving money in the initiation ceremony, the *guru* is making it clear that the new *chela* has now accepted their customs and, as the customs follow, will have to give all their income and take care of the *guru* till the end. In this way, the *guru* finds security for their old age, and the *chela* who has nowhere to go finds a place for the rest of their life. This also builds a level of trust, dependency and understanding between the *guru* and *chela*, and more importantly, it creates a hierarchy that further builds respect towards the *guru*. This internal working of *guru-chela* relationship shows a high degree of resemblance to Indian joint families. As Alan Roland remarks, “the person lower in the status relationship within the kinship or work group needs the nurturance and protection of the one higher up, and will therefore show the proper deference and loyalty to the superior in exchange for consideration and being taken care of” (qtd. in Nanda 1990, 46). Nanda suggests that *hijras* are more akin to following this Indian joint family framework seriously, as the community itself is their home and workplace (46). Hence, to survive as a community, which is crucial for *hijra* existence, it becomes very important for them to have such a framework that binds all of them both formally and emotionally.

Hijras also build relationships other than the one based on the primary *guru-chela* network. For instance, they have ‘*dudhbehan*’ and ‘*dudhbeti*’, literally translated as ‘milk sister’ and ‘milk daughter’ which is based on love, unlike the *guru-chela* relation, which is

more like a give and take relation (Reddy 2005, 165). As Reddy points out, such relationships are built to “strengthen ties between *hijras*... widening the kinship network... for an extended, interconnected network of relationships between *hijras* living together” (165). But the *guru-chela* relationship has more importance amongst all bonds that *hijras* create. Hence, the punishment to break any of the regulations laid for the *guru-chela* framework is immediate excommunication from the clan. This means one no longer has a *guru* which is equivalent to “social suicide” (Nanda 1990, 48). Without a *guru*, a *hijra* named Munira says, “that person is not considered a *hijra*” and must live an abandoned life like Madhavi (qtd. in Reddy 2005, 162). Madhavi underwent *nirvana* without her *guru*'s will and was therefore expelled from the community. As a result, she had to live a separate life “on pain of social ostracism”, which made her *hijra* identity questionable (142). Therefore, this relationship is of extreme importance to *hijras* as this gives them authenticity and keeps the clan going. *hijra* identity with all its aspects, especially gender, is therefore intrinsically related to kinship ties which is the basis of this community.

Motherhood is central to *hijra* kinship ties because it binds them into a family unit and because most *hijras* yearn to become mothers, as is evident from all the three ethnographic studies (Jaffrey 1996; Nanda 1999; Reddy 2006). The initiation of new members into the community is experienced as adoption by many *hijra gurus* as it fulfils their desire to become mothers. This is a role that many *hijras* take actively. This is also a role, along with other relationships that *hijras* form based on maternal kinship ties, like that of sisters' and aunts' which places *hijras* within recognisable kinship structures for women in South Asia. These roles are also important in terms of seeing *hijras* as part of the

continuum of women. As discussed earlier, there are many *hijras* from ethnographic books who strongly identify as women, while others strongly identify as *hijra* or trans. For *hijras* who identify as women and want to be mothers, the idea of becoming mothers expands from the right to parenthood to the dominant idea of women as nurturers and mothers in India. In either case, *hijras* desiring to be mothers remain central to challenging the Indian heteronormative standards of motherhood which mainly recognises only women as mothers.

Noteworthy, the ethnographies of Nanda (1990), Jaffrey (1996) and Reddy (2005) do not discuss this aspect of *hijra* identity. While the *guru-chela* relationship is explored in great detail, the discussion is limited to it being a way of forming kinship structures. The idea of motherhood as something which has an emotional appeal to most *hijras* and is vital in understanding *hijra* experiences is side-lined in these works. Given the disciplinary boundaries of ethnographic works, the focus is more on an exploration of how a community/people live their everyday lives through “observation of [their] social practices and interactions” (Maheshwari 2018). The methodologies used within this discipline adopt assumptions and produce information about the practices of a particular group of people/community (Kramer and Adams 2018). Similarly, in the case of *hijras*, the ethnographic works explore their everyday practices of gender and kinship and often leave behind the felt experiences of *hijras*.

Furthermore, these ethnographies have restricted *hijras* to a particular lens. Reddy acknowledges in her ethnography, *With Respect to Sex* (2005), that to define a *hijra*, it is

essential that they are “understood in terms of multiplicity of differences, including those of sexuality, religion, gender, kinship, and class” (224). It is interesting to note that while Reddy argues for a consideration of a plurality of *hijra* experiences, she understands *hijras* specifically through the lens of “respect” in her book. Newport rightly criticizes both Reddy and Nanda, who each categorise *hijras* into specific practices, *izzat* (respect) and religion, respectively (Newport 2018, 26). Newport argues that though they both acknowledge other markers to *hijra* identities, they are invested in constructing *hijras* in specific ways which limit *hijra* understandings. A critical analysis of these ethnographies would flesh out some of their assertions as deeply problematic. For instance, Nanda’s religious framework “has the dangerous potential to depoliticize, indeed, to justify, *hijra* marginalization through Hindu mythology” (Newport 2018, 21). But my purpose to discuss their works is to show how individual ethnographic studies, which took months of intensive fieldwork with *hijra* community have understood *hijras* in different ways, as there are so many ways of being a *hijra* in contemporary India.

1.2 *A shift in the 1990s: Hindutva, globalisation and rising hijra activism*

Over the last two decades, there has been a noteworthy shift in the way *hijras* are perceived and represented in various forms in India. While *hijras* continue to be one of the most marginalised and ignored sections of Indian society, they have become hyper visible in Indian books, cinema, media and other digital spaces, occupying ‘queer’ spaces post 90s.

They are also the point of discussion in gender theory/studies relating to India as well as larger South Asia. The 1990's is also a time when many political and cultural moments took place in India which have changed the way in which people exist and perceive their lived realities in India. Two key events that I discuss in this section that have broadly affected the Indian population during this time are globalisation and the rise of a different kind of political consciousness characterised by Hindu nationalism. As I study the impact of these events on *hijras*, I argue that 1990s mark a historical shift in the way *hijras* exist in Indian societies.

The wake of globalisation in India in 1990s saw a rapid exchange of global economies as the then finance minister Dr. Manmohan Singh initiated economic liberalisation plans in 1991 (“Manmohan Singh’s” *The Hindu* 2016; Pani 2020). As this happened, new ways of representations and fundings became available, the images to represent a progressive global India also changed. Within these changes, the way in which *hijras* were ‘seen’ also changed.

Shraddha Chatterjee in an article “Transgender Shifts” (2018) says that globalisation, after colonisation in Indian history, changed the conception of sex and gender prevalent in India. With colonialization came the belief that a “body” is to be seen “as an aberration that was neither male nor female but something in between, such as an incomplete articulation of either gender/sex” (317). This made groups like *hijras* seem like “figure of absence and lack” (317). Globalisation introduced a number of terms from the West that gradually became associated with *hijra* identities in India. As international NGO

support started to come to India post 1990, *hijras* were fashioned as “men having sex with men” (MSM) (Roy and Dutta 2014, 330). Soon, government documents replaced the use of indigenous terms with the term transgender, and terms like trans/transgender from the West became common vocabulary used interchangeably with *hijras* and other gender-variant groups (330).

Interestingly, many *hijras* saw the association with these terms, especially trans, as something which provides “social or cultural capital” and not something related to “their subjectivities, kinship patterns, or their manifestation of gender non-conformity” (S. Chatterjee 2018, 315). Likewise, many *hijras* call themselves trans only because it is a stigma-free term (Monro 2010, 249). Yet there is also a large *hijra* population who are living in cities, educated, socially and politically aware and privileged, who use the umbrella term trans, along with *hijra*, to establish their place in globalised gender identities. Therefore, *hijras* share a complex relationship with these terms and have found different ways to negotiate depending on the situation.

However, as scholars of gender and sexuality, we need to be mindful of how we understand and define groups and communities, because an easy adaptation of anglophone terms could lead to the decontextualization of Indian gender variant groups. A term like trans, which mainly describes a person’s gender in the West (Hines 2010, 1), may be used for several reasons in specific regions of South Asia, such as, in India, trans has been used by gender and sexual minority groups as a symbol of modernisation and progression. This term is also used in India’s legal documents, such as the Supreme Court’s verdict in 2014.

I argue that in India, region-specific terms need to be understood in light of its place in the global geopolitics as South Asian discourses continue to remain affected by colonialism and globalisation. Regional understanding of *hijra* communities involves a consideration of the multiple identities attached to *hijras*, which complicates their categorisation under one category. While trans is often used to describe *hijra* experiences since the last decade, as I highlight in the previous paragraph; “as an ‘umbrella’ term, ‘transgender’ references a gender identity that defies ‘rigid, binary gender constructions’, where people live in the ‘opposite’ gender role” (Loh 2018, 45). It does not allow sexual identities to be associated with it and “prohibits flexible identification and establishes a bounded ‘transgender’ category in which certain identities appear to fit, namely *hijra* identity” (45). Hence, this link with *hijras* not only created ‘a’ particular stable identity for *hijras* where they “were presented as a subsection of transgender identity, or as [a] group linked to this identity”, but it also excluded other gender variant groups like *kothis*, *zenanas* and trans masculine identities (45).

However, it is crucial to understand that all these gender variant groups are different in their cultural organizations, occupational, gender, and sexual roles. Dutta and Roy rightly point out that the “imagination of transgender as an expansive category for all gender variant practices and identities risks replicating colonial forms of knowledge production or overriding other epistemologies of gender/sexual variance” (Dutta and Roy 2014, 321). For instance, in a definition like Hines’ where trans “denotes a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’”, the specificities and the influences of colonialism and globalization

are subsumed in a more extensive international debate (Hines 2010, 1). Hence, there is a need to reassert identities such as *hijra*, which are otherwise labelled as “merely ‘local’ expressions of transgender identity, often without interrogating the conceptual baggage associated with the transgender category” (Dutta and Roy 2014, 321).

Gender variant groups in India differ verily from each other. For example, a *kothi* is someone who is biologically born with male genitals and shows signs of being effeminate and/or feminine. They are not castrated and often get into heterosexual marriages and are sexually involved with men frequently (Dutta and Roy 2014, 322; Monro 2018, 1230). *Kothis* remain passive during a sexual encounter, whereas *Panthis* are active, generally straight men who indulge in homosexual sex occasionally (Chakravorty 2007, 373). Similarly, *Zenanas*, as described by Nanda, are “effeminate males who are assumed to play the passive role in homosexual relationships”, though they:

... [*zenanas*] think themselves in the male gender, generally wear male clothing, and sometimes may be married and have children. Some zenana may live with *hijras* and perform with them, but they are not “real” *hijras*... [However] some zenana do go through the formal initiation into the *hijra* community. (1990, 14)

Sometimes, *hijras* are also used interchangeably with ‘eunuchs’, but the two are different as ‘eunuchs’ refer to very specific history of Khwajasaras in Mughal courts, as is discussed in the earlier section. Thus, using these terms interchangeably is problematic as it has the danger of de-historicizing their experiences and may also fail to acknowledge the fundamental differences between these identities. Gender fluidity would have been a more

appealing case if the interchangeability (suggesting effortless floatation amongst gender roles) could be used for all gender categories, including binary ones. But since it is only done for the non-normative gender groups, it suppresses the possibilities for the existence of so many gender variants and “fails to comprehend many forms of gender variance relegated to the scale of the local, even though such discourses and practices may actually span multiple regions of South Asia” (Dutta and Roy 2014, 321).

The category of trans, apart from the fact that it can “delimit and define such categories through a model of stable, consistent, and authentic identification” (Chiang et al. 2018, 301), also fails to recognize that Indian gender-variant identities can have “unique norms” of “gender performance” which may be region-specific based on “class/caste” or “caught between colonialization and globalization” and may “blur cis trans or homo trans distinctions” (321). Goel rightly notes that the “uniqueness of the *hijra* community lies in the extraordinary blending of the biological body, gendered identity and sexuality in complex permutations and combinations within a specific social and cultural milieu” (Goel 2016, 537). Both Hossain (2021) and S. Chatterjee (2018) highlight how *hijra* communities in different parts of India and further in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan are all different from each other. S. Chatterjee understands *hijras* based on “distinct interlinked biological, cultural, religious, and geographical specificity” (2018, 312). Hossain’s shows how many Bangladeshi *hijra* communities exercise the role of a husband and fulfil all masculine activities and yet simultaneously live a life of a *hijra*, unlike in India. He brings to the fore the need to pluralise *hijras* and makes a remarkable attempt towards area studies calling out loud for both transregional and transnational attention (Hossain 2021).

It is imperative to note that this discussion about the term trans is not to show in any way that it is not suitable in the Indian context as it would mean to nullify:

... the hybrid postcoloniality that foundationally marks many articulations of ‘Indian culture’...which would mimic right-wing religious and political viewpoints that have denounced the emergence of LGBT activism and identities as a form of corruptive Westernisation. (Dutta and Roy 2014, 323)

Many people belonging to the *hijra* community or other sexual minority communities openly identify as trans today. Furthermore, social media campaigns and activist groups like “Trans India” or “LBGT Events India” point to how the category of trans has become a part of Indian culture. What is most striking in these examples of how trans as a term is used in India is that *hijras* have been unanimously categorized as the quintessential third gender and as trans (Dutta and Roy 2014, 326; Goel 2016, 536; Loh 2018, 45).

Ever since globalisation made specific global vocabulary and fundings available to NGOs in India, being a well-knit social community since colonisation, *hijras* were at the forefront of receiving these aids. Rovel Sequeira explores how these funded NGO spaces in India initiated *hijras* to start *hijra* activism as these international fundings were also “aided by discourses about gender/sexuality rights circulating via transnational NGO networks” (2022, 1). As a result, not only did international gender-based discourses travel to India, but, retrospectively, *hijras* also travelled transnationally representing all South Asian gender non-normative practices and identities. This is evident from the fact that the Indian *hijra* activist Laxmi Tripathi was invited to represent the LGBTQ+ South Asian

communities at a UN task meeting in 2008 and later again at the 20th International AIDS Conference in Melbourne (*JLF Belfast* 2019). Hence, as a result of these transnational travels made by *hijras*, both in ideological discourses and physical journeys, *hijras* became widely accessible as representing the LGBTQ+ South Asian community, which was followed by a sudden interest in *hijra* communities around the globe and in increased *hijra* visibility in all sorts of spaces.

Significantly, in India, while *hijra* activism was emerging and becoming transnational after the nineties, a new political conservative consciousness was also arising. The nineties witnessed critical developments in political Hindutva – a representation of Hindu nationalism, accelerated by the rise of the BJP. However, Hindutva as a political ideology has existed ever since mainstream Indian nationalism emerged (Zavos 2003, 7; Anand 2016, 3). This ideology, as Christophe Jaffrelot explains, is based on an understanding that “Hindus are vulnerable” and feel threatened by religious and socio-economic minorities (1999, 25). At the root of this ideology is a fear that the minority communities are growing rapidly and will soon outnumber the majority Hindus, leading to non-Hindu administration in India.

Othering has long been used in India by Hindu nationalists to separate themselves from socio-economic minority communities and other religious groups. Such an othering is evident in the long-standing Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. Reasons for the conflict (as well as others) range from religious difference to ethno-nationalism. As Hindutva takes from both religion and nationhood to carve out ideas about Hinduism, it regards all minority groups and religious others as foreigners and outsiders – positioning Hindus as a

superior race, with their beliefs immersed in the glory of the Vedic tradition. Vedic tradition outlines the historical religious practices, values and traditions of Indo-Aryan settlers in Northwest India. Caste-based hierarchies practiced in present-day India are influenced from Vedic literature, such as *Rig Veda*. Within this hierarchy, Hindus are classified into four main *savarna* (casts) as follows: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras⁴. There is a fifth caste, Dalit, which belongs to the lowest stratum of caste hierarchy. Dalits were excluded from the four *savarnas*. In present day India, Brahmin and *savarna* are often commonly used as generic terms for all upper caste Hindus, and Dalit is used as a term referring to all lower caste Hindus. Both of these have internal hierarchies, but in this thesis, I use them as expansive terms denoting upper caste and lower caste Hindus.

In Hindutva, the underlying thought of Hindus as superior race intersects with caste, colour, language and region as Aryans were fair skinned settlers in Northwest India. Categorising the other as ‘foreign’, ‘Islamist’ and ‘lower-caste’ are therefore not entirely products of religious difference and intolerance. The dominant Hindu nationalism is connected to theories on race as it draws from Brahmanical Aryanism and colonial racism. These social and cultural constructs support the notion of purity, lineage and hierarchy, framed as democratic discourse by Hindutva that permeates the Indian state. Those who support Hindutva in order to protect it, therefore, create “discursive silences and normalise violence against minority communities by embodying emotions of fear, hate and anger among its participants” (Patil 2017, 28).

Hindutva advocates immediate action to prevent minority rule, even if the actions involve violence. Anand rightly argues, “the proponents of Hindutva mobilize and generate negative stereotypes of [minorities] to legitimise violence against actual [people] living in India” (Anand 2016, 1). It moulds images and narratives from the Hindu religion and uses them as ideological weapons to legitimize violence against other religious groups and minorities. Images from Hindu mythological texts where a Hindu God, like Rama from *Ramayana*, is taking revenge from the ‘evil’ oppressor to maintain the order of the *Dharma*⁵, is used as a framework in contemporary India to position minorities as ‘evil’. Many *savarna* Hindus are influenced by Hindutva to act and save the ‘Hindu *Rashtra*’ (nation). Those who fall outside of the upper caste Brahmanical order are “relegated as dangerous and excluded from the gates of the Indian nation-state” (Dasgupta and DasGupta 2017, 3). This exclusion ensures heteronormativity and essentialist practices of social constructs through upper-caste procreation and Hindu family-oriented ideologies, which are at the heart of Hindutva.

Thus, Hindutva differentiates Indian people on various grounds and a large population gets excluded from the idea of “good citizens” (Dasgupta and DasGupta 2017). Hence, excluding all people from minority religions like Muslims and Christians as well as people from lower castes, including Dalits and Adivasis, non-Hindi speaking Indians and non-binary communities like *hijras* who for a long period of time have lived as lower caste community, practising non-biological kinship structure (as discussed in the earlier sections). Thus, Hindutva has emerged as a conservative ideology which has been seen by many minority communities and progressive thinkers as counterproductive to ideas of

secularism and liberal democracy, imagined at the birth of present-day India⁶ (Hajdar 2018).

Hindutva has been at the forefront of India's current largest political party, BJP, which has been in power since 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. BJP emerged as a national level party in 1980s and has remained as the one of most prominent parties other than Congress in the Indian politics since 1990s. As BJP openly supports Hindutva, the past years have seen Hindutva rising from the margins to the mainstream, also resulting in a rise of populism (Hajdar 2018; Vaishnav 2019). The repercussions of these shifting dynamics in Indian politics and civil society are evident in everyday news on social media platforms. The following instances are just a few examples which have made news during the past years of BJP rule in India – increasing cases of Muslim lynching (The Quint), attacks on churches and mosques (Zompav 2021; Naqvi 2021; Jafri and Madhav 2021; Aswani 2022), state sponsored communal violence (The wire staff 2022; Apporvanand 2022; Swami 2022), institutionalised communal violence in universities, mainly targeting Dalit and Muslim students (Thorat 2016; Dhillon 2017; Nazir 2021; Chennai 2021; Parahsar 2022), government support to Brahmin rapists who raped Dalit and Muslim women (Haq 2018; Aggarwal 2020; Nandy 2020), and introducing different parliamentary bills that attack the rights of different minority communities in India (like, “Rights of Transgender Persons” act passed in 2019 which ostracises *hijra* practices of adoption and *badhai* or “Citizenship Amendment Act” passed in 2020 which risks placing a large number of Indian population, including *hijras*, outside the fold of Indian

citizenship and many others). The rise in populism resulted in increased public support for some of these atrocities against minority communities in India.

Hence, it can be argued that the last two decades have seen a very disturbing shift in the way minority communities have been seen in mainstream India. *Hijras*, belonging to minority communities obviously remain affected by these political and social changes, but in very different ways as compared to other minority communities. Since the *hijra* community is formed of people from different religions, castes, regions and colours, they remain affected on different levels by Hindutva.

However, as stated in the beginning of this section, the 1990s is also the time from when *hijra* become hyper visible in India as well as gained legal citizenship rights through the Supreme Court. Therefore, the rising conservative Hindutva government invites critical attention because the rise in *hijra* activism and their increased representation as third gender community is contradictory to Hindutva. In *Queering Digital India*, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (2018) study the relationship between Indian sexual subjectivities, digital representation, nationalism and neo-liberalism to understand how the digital technologies are used in contemporary India to discipline non-normative desires. They elaborate on 'Digital India', one of the primary agendas of the BJP government which was mentioned in their 2014 manifesto to contest elections. 'Digital India' campaign was launched in 2015 by Modi, representing India's progression in the world of internet. Progression is the key word here that the BJP government uses. The word is used to signify India's development but more significantly, this word also selectively recognises some

people as good Indian citizens. Within this vision, good Indian citizens are those who are involved in productive labour that can help India become digital/progressive (Dasgupta and DasGupta 2018, 1-10). Indian queer subjectivities share an undeniable link with this idea of a good citizen, the productive India Hindu nation and neoliberalism (1-10).

In this interconnected understanding of Indian queer subjectivities and the vision of a progressive India, I argue that the BJP has led *hijra* identities to be circulated as third gender or trans because of two reasons. First, since *hijra* activism and their representation resulted from globalisation as well as led *hijras* to represent India on global platforms, it indirectly served BJP's agenda of maintaining its image as progressive in the global scene. For instance, a widely circulated *YouTube* advertisement titled "The Seatbelt Crew"⁷ (2014) which mainly came across as a progressive *hijra* representation could be seen to homogenise *hijras* within an acceptable Hindutva model that favours the image of a developing India. My analysis of this advertisement also shows how cultural representations are an essential space where *hijra* and the dominant cis gender society interact with each other since *hijra* everyday life continues to remain a 'mystery' to most Indians. In this ad, *hijras* are dressed in smart air-hostess' costumes with little makeup at a traffic signal teaching traffic rules to people. This video went viral on the internet after one of the production team members posted it on *YouTube* with the caption, "We wanted to remind reckless motorists about a very basic safety procedure they'd forgotten. In [a] rather unforgettable fashion" (Mendonca 2014). The advertisement did catch people's attention as it portrayed *hijras* doing 'productive' labour. However, as Arti Gupta has rightly commented, while the advertisement "was transgressive in multiple ways, it is susceptible

to being read as an instance of performative politics, whereby the dominant intention is to portray India as being trans* friendly” (Gupta 2021). Such performative politics leaves behind the real issues that the community faces. For instance, the class-caste divide is a significant issue concerning the *hijra* community. To show *hijras* talking in English and dressing in sophisticated clothes with makeup privileges speaks to the upper caste-class *hijra* experience. The privileged section of *hijra* community is easier to fit within the nationally accepted standards of a productive individual. This is also in line with the 2014 court judgment regarding India’s third gender, which emphasized on “progress of the nation” as a vital responsibility of every individual (Radhakrishnan 2014, 92 *NALSA Judgement*). Such repeated usage of the word ‘progress’ in legal documents with regard to Indian citizens reveals how some citizens are more preferred over others in a democratic state which is deeply invested in capitalist ideologies.

In “Rethinking Homonationalism” (2013), Puar talks about how the discourse of nation and sexual minorities grants certain sections acceptability, leaving others behind. Progression, civilization, and respectability become essential components of national building, contrasting to the perversity of the other (25). In this scenario, most of the *hijra* population is excluded from the space of progression and respectability as they do not participate in the so-called productive or respectable labour. A specific image of *hijra* is normalized to represent India, deflecting actual matters affecting *hijra* lives. Furthermore, the RGBA studios (the production house behind this ad) is reported to have said:

Throw a few agency penmen with *carte blanche* to stir things up. Then add a mad *bawa* and a few eunuchs into a social message-cinematographic mix and it's a recipe for a few laughs to take the edge off what could be a patronising, boring script on an otherwise hackneyed subject. (RGBA studio 2014)

Two contradictory readings can be derived from this advertisement, which invites critical attention and exploration. First, *hijras* are used as a tool to produce something unique and funny, which nevertheless presents them on national TV as embodying the modern and developing side of India. They are accommodated in the imagination of the developing nation. On the contrary, while the advertisement makes *hijras* visible in a seemingly progressive space, it comes at the cost of framing *hijras* in a particular way that does not disturb a progressive nation's image. Within this image, the presence of lower-caste or uneducated *hijras* fits nowhere. In this reading, the presence of *hijras* on national TV feeds into the Hindutva ideologies of the state.

This leads to my second point that while *hijras* became hyper visible in digital media as part of an international LGBTQ+ movement transnationally, in the national laws and policies implemented by BJP government, *hijras* are read down as the quintessential third gender and as trans for the fulfilment of political Hindutva agendas. For instance, in the usage of the term trans in the 2014 National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) judgment and the parliament bills⁸ that followed soon after, the term 'trans' lacks a clear definition which has created a lot of confusion regarding the scope of inclusivity for several gender variant groups in India (Loh 2018, 45). Something similar can be witnessed in the

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which aimed to fund all gender variant groups in India. The definition of trans in this programme excluded “trans masculine identities” and also subsumed indigenous communities “as merely local variants, even if they actually span multiple regions of South Asia and thus belie their containment to the scale of the local” (Dutta and Roy 2014, 327). Both these instances hint at the complexities and negotiations involved in translating and adapting ‘global discourses’ in ‘local contexts’. More significantly, the ways these complexities and negotiations are dealt with are highly motivated by the government and policy maker’s political, religious and class affiliations. In the attempts made to define the term trans in the above two instances, it becomes clear that not only is this an issue about untranslatability, but it also signals out only specific groups as trans while leaving the rest, serving the right-wing Hindutva ideology (Loh 2018, 40). The Supreme Court clarification on the NALSA judgment in 2016 reads:

The grammatical meaning of 'transgender', therefore, is across or beyond gender. This has come to be known as an umbrella term which includes gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and cross genders within its scope. However while dealing with this present issue we are not concerned with this aforesaid wider meaning of the expression ‘transgender’. (qtd. in Loh 2018, 40)

Loh comments on the court’s clarification that the trans category is used as “an application of gender ‘justice’ from certain trans communities at the same time that gender injustices continue against sexuality-based identities, namely lesbian, gay and bisexual communities, who are categorically not recognized” (40). A difference is made based on sex, gender and

sexual orientation, where *hijras* are seen as the most prominent category linked to trans, This, Loh notes, has to do with the “cultural and political context of Hindu Nationalism” as the “collation of ‘transgender’ and *hijra* identities provides a particular ‘Hindu-ised’ historicisation of transgender existence” (42, 47). As Bacchetta hints, this collation is possible because in the mainstream Hindutva ideology, gender-variant identities, in contrast to the non-normative sexual experiences, have never been an issue as their existence can be traced in the Hindu mythological texts (51).

In a section of NALSA judgment describing the roots of trans in India, the judgment relates *hijra* existence in the Hindu mythologies with specific reference to Hindu Gods but avoids any mention of *hijras* during the Mughal era. This not only does injustice to the community and their history, which gained significant acceptance during the Mughal period, but it also ties the *hijra* community’s cultural memory with Hinduism legally. Dutta rightly notes that such selective choosing will “shore up visions of the ideal nation, particularly if these claims themselves be of ‘nostalgic idealization Hindu antiquity’” (qtd. in Loh 2018, 51). This serves the purpose and agenda of the right-wing government by including *hijras* in the Hindutva narrative, but does not challenge the status quo, which ultimately leads to the strengthening of heterosexual transphobic norms. In addition to this, as Semmalar remarks:

... saffronisation of the *hijra* is undertaken: in a bid to prove rather unnecessarily that transgenders are not Western imports, they end up presenting a golden Hindu period where there was no discrimination and a villainous colonial presence from

which the oppression started and ‘this completely ignores the Muslim cultural context’ and the demonstrated significance of Islam within transgender communities. (2018, 51)

Thus, the issue of sexuality within this political debate extends to an affirmation of national identity, as Bose and Bhattacharya accurately highlight that Hindutva extends to being synonymous with ‘Indian’ within right-wing ideology. The Hindutva ideology has formed and advertised “an Indianness that claims to be both ‘traditional’, ‘conservative’ and historically sound”, where “issues of gender and sexualities are often foregrounded as chief markers of identity” (Bose and Bhattacharya 2007, xi). *Hijras* fit well into this discourse, and therefore they are suitable for being classified as ‘Indian’. In government laws and policies, *hijra* existence is justified through Hindu traditions and belief systems, blurring “the uniqueness of *hijra* identities” (Dutta and Roy 2014, 326; Goel 2016, 536; Loh 2018, 45). Thus, *hijra* practices are brought into a Hindu narrative which does not essentially challenge the conservative heteronormativity applied in Hindutva ideologies. *Hijra* lived experiences, like syncretic religious practices and non-biological kinship structures, which challenge Hindutva in several ways, are disciplined.

Hijras are, however, a “social group with a gender and a religion, historical, kinship and class identity” (Taparia 2011, 169). They are bounded and defined by all these factors and their geographical location in the regions of South Asia, as is evident from the ethnographical works undertaken on *hijras*. For instance, as discussed earlier, Taparia (2011) and Hossain (2021) have demonstrated through their works how both *hijra*

individuals and *hijra* communities have multiple identities. The functioning and standards of *hijra* households differ from region to region in South Asia. There cannot be any singular lens of looking at their experiences as they are impacted by so many factors that depend on a specific region and situation. Religious, cultural, historical, social and biological factors are all active participants in forming *hijra* identities. To bracket them simply as third gender or even trans is to limit their experiences.

1.3 *Global sexualities and beyond the gender binary: using hijra/ trans/ queer*

How does one go back to write a history of orientalism in South Asia that is not the history of British colonial orientalism but something that existed alongside or even before that? Let us emphasize here, these linkages are not just of the past but animate the everyday lives of queer subjects. (Arondekar and Patel 2016, 156)

As I have highlighted, *hijras* have become exemplary of third gender in India. Since the 1990s, they have started to be understood as all-encompassing trans identity by the rise in populism and globalisation. However, in this thesis I have been critical of such a homogenising reading of *hijra* experiences. Rather, I use *hijra*, throughout this thesis as an identity to talk specifically about the *hijra* community. Like some of the current scholars studying *hijra* community, including Taparia (2011), S. Chatterjee (2018) and Hossain (2022), I understand *hijra* community as a social category with many variations in their

practices and lived experiences, including caste, class, religion, region and politics. Initiation into *hijra* kinship structures is what unites all *hijra* people in contemporary India, who, otherwise, may not interact on any other practices or roles (as I have discussed in detail in earlier sections). This way, *hijra* for me takes on an expansive category which allows people with multiple backgrounds and practices to come together under the umbrella *hijra* identity. In this thesis, I also use the term queer at several places to talk about *hijras*. In such instances, I use queer as a noun. My purpose of using queer is not to invite the broad spectrum of queer subcultures (like Aunty drag or Rekhti tradition amongst many others) or queer life in India, but to use it as an inclusive and expansive term which allows a variety of meanings to be attached to *hijra* experiences and practices. I have also used ‘queer’ with quotation marks as a verb in this thesis to allude to non-normative behaviours. However, I do not intend to reinforce elite metropolitan hegemonic experiences of non-normative behaviours by using an anglophone term. Instead, by queer, I mean everything which is:

... at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer,’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative ... it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. (Halperin 1997, 62)

In other words, ‘queer’, for me denotes all that which challenges heteronormativity in the context of gender. As I write this thesis in English about a community, a large population

of *hijras* will not be able to read/access my work and my thesis itself remains in a ‘queer’ position. Other than queer and *hijra*, I also use trans (shortened for transgender) in this thesis. I use trans as an inclusive umbrella term to think about experiences of gender non-conforming lives. My usage of these three terms intensifies/reduces as I talk about *hijra* representations in different mediums in different chapters of this thesis. For instance, when I talk about *hijra* representations in Bollywood in Chapter Two, I mostly shift between using queer and *hijra* because these are the dominant vocabularies used by queer film theorists with whom I engage in this chapter. Whereas in discussing *hijra* life writings in Chapter Four of this thesis, I move between using *hijra* and trans because I relate a lot of *hijra* activism to trans activism around the world. Yet, in Chapter Three, in discussing *hijra* representations in Indian Anglophone literature, I find myself using *hijra* as the primary term and being critical of the use of trans as an umbrella term in literary fictions. In my understanding, I shift in my usage of these terms because the context of ‘global’ and ‘local’ invites complexities around using these terms.

Dutta and Roy (2014) and Monro (2018) have rightly highlighted the complexities of *hijras* being used in national politics to represent India globally. Monro argues that while “the importance of globalized human rights framework supporting LGBT people must not be underestimated, the categories ‘LGBT’ are problematic in a globalized context” as these “Western-originated terms” have different “configurations of sexed bodies, gender identities, and sexual act and identities” than the ones present in South Asia, like *hijras* (2018, 1230). She further argues that South Asian countries have since got involved in a three-step process to make sense of their non-normative identities in a global setting. In the

first step, they adapted Western discourses as part of globalization or colonial encounter, which are marketed as global discourses with homogenous assumptions of struggles around the globe; in the second step, they negotiated and ultimately reshaped/redefined these discourses so that they can be used in their national and region-specific purposes as they cannot be used otherwise. Lastly, despite the inversion in the process of including these global discourses into national discourses, they have to reflect it internationally and mark their contribution to building a global nation. In this complex cycle, the area-specific does not become the centre but lies invisible or only in the margins. Since the global discourses allow the national to explore itself, it never takes into consideration the multiple definitions or pluralities that are part of the indigenous identities and thus, places one singular experience in the centre (which is most sensible to the Western readership).

Arondekar and Patel discuss this process by highlighting US centralism in queer theory. As on the one hand, US-centred queer theory is celebrated as “transnational and global”; on the other hand, it is to be blamed for the “torture and deaths of queer bodies” in the regions outside the West (Arondekar and Patel 2016, 152). This contradiction is revealed by area studies as “queer theory mostly speaks to US mappings of queer, rather than transacting across questions from different sites, colluding and colliding along the way” (152). Arondekar and Patel argue that geopolitics has a critical role in both these fields but in very different ways. While in queer theory, geopolitics helped to stretch focus beyond the US, in area studies, it restricted the area and time which falls outside of US framing and has “remained somewhat tied to nationalist coagulations and formulations”, like *hijras* (155). Though the scope of themes like immigration and diaspora in area studies

has complicated this specification of national boundaries, they remain problematic as the issues rendered 'outside' are just an example and never the centre in queer theories emerging from the US. Hence, they too serve the "US political or economic interest" by providing them with the needful information (155).

In the West, sex is seen as "dichotomous and unchanging over the individual's lifetime" (Nanda 1990, 129). In countries like India, sex and gender take meanings other than those accepted in the West. Here, sex and gender become "part of an integrated, undifferentiated whole", which can be changed, and are understood more in terms of a person's "sexual experience or identity" (129). By this, I suggest that it is not about which gender – male, female or other – one identifies, but how one feels and practices specific gender roles inside the social realm, consciously, to assert one's identity.

South Asian queer theorists like Narayan (1997), Gopinath (2005; 2018), Vanita (2002), Mohanty (2003) and Arondekar (2009) have drawn attention to the alternate ways in which queer theory can be utilised within area studies without rendering it to the US centralism. Monro rightly says that they explore the "hegemonic deployment of globalized, classed, capitalized relations in South Asian settings" (2018, 1231). Gopinath asserts that she aims to bring "queer incursion into area studies" which will be an attempt to dismantle US centralism as it will "allow for other histories of global affiliation and affinity to emerge" (2018, 6). She duly takes forward the path that Arondekar (2009) highlights and disorients the centre of queer studies. By focusing on the queer diaspora, she not only tackles the problem that Arondekar (2009) argues is present in area-studies, but also brings

forward those articulations of gender and sexualities which are otherwise “invisible and unintelligible within conventional mappings of Diaspora and nation, as well as within dominant Euro- American articulations of queerness” (6). This is possible because she focuses not on a nation’s larger histories but on the specific regional histories that are a part of everyday life. Gopinath (2018) does two things in her book *Unruly Visions*. First, she ruptures the idea of homogeneity as she argues against the notion of a single history or experience. Second, she criticizes the nationalist discourse from within the area-specific. Her criticism extends to people from within the community influenced by Western ideology as they tend to overlook the everyday, regional experiences. Narayan (1997) also suggests this in the context of third-world feminism in her book *Dislocating Cultures/ Identities, Traditions and Third-World Feminism*. She argues that many third-world feminists apply Western standards to their discourses which have different settings altogether (regional, political, religious, class/ caste based) (ix). In contrast, the focus should have been to write the stories in recognisable voices that can recognize the particular experiences that different groups of women in South Asia undergo and shape these injustices in a movement, a political voice so that they can be heard and changed. Works like these can make the answers imaginable to questions posited by Arondekar and Patel (2016) that I quote at the beginning of this section.

S. Chatterjee (2018) notes that before representing and articulating these experiences, it is vital to acknowledge the ways in which specific categories have travelled from past to present. What is used today “can also carry traces of history”, so to understand the experiences of a community, one needs to understand the past language (313). As they

aim towards universalizing, a part of Western projects is based on an understanding that the Global South does not carry a continuation in language from past to present or certain concepts do not exist in their vocabulary, so these countries need an external framework to provide them the vocabulary to voice their identities. Vanita (2002) severely criticizes this narrative and challenges Euro-American gender studies for thinking that India has no words for same-sex love. She not only points out explicit examples of same-sex love in Indian literary or mythological texts but also points out intertextual references regarding same-sex relationships within texts dated from different periods. This highlights that same-sex relationships existed all along in India and that they were discussed openly in Indian literature. She also reintroduces many terms that were used for such relationships, like “*swayamvarasakhis*” in Hindi, “*dogana*” and “*zanakhi*” in Urdu, meaning self-chosen female friend (2-3). However, these histories got erased or misinterpreted in contemporary India when rewriting of history and tradition took place in colonial and nationalist projects.

I have attempted to take my thesis forward with a region-specific study of sex and gender. I draw on the criticism made by Mohanty (2003), who, like Gopinath (2005) and Arondekar (2009), debunks the idea of a homogenous experience/struggle foregrounded in Western global projects. She is highly critical of how Western feminist projects depict third-world women as homogenous and how they make a mistake by presuming that patriarchal structures and subjugation operate on similar levels. Mohanty calls this “‘The third world difference’ – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries” (2003, 19). She argues how the consideration that “women as category of analyses” in these feminist discourses come with the purpose of

analysing the various cases which can prove that third world women are a “powerless” group, rather than analysing where and why a group of women is powerless in a particular context (23). This leads to shaping histories where only one story, one experience and one struggle exists by putting at stake the fact that ‘races’ and ‘nations’ have not been defined on the basis of inherent, natural characteristics; nor can we define ‘gender’ in any transhistorical, unitary way” (47).

Like the representation of third-world women in Western feminist projects which Mohanty criticises, is the representation of *hijra* community in several projects which approach *hijras* as an exotic community. Jaffrey’s book *The Invisibles* (1996) is an example of one such project. In the book, when Mr. Chenoy, the Inspector, tells Jaffrey about the *hijra* marriages and how the married couples take up the role of a housekeeper and a bread earner, respectively, Jaffrey asks, “the ones we see on the streets are males?” (72). Though she had been to *hijra* households several times before this conversation with Mr. Chenoy, she could still not acknowledge that there are no males or females amongst *hijras*. This shows the depth with which the binary models are internalized in such writings. The way she describes *hijras* for the first time in her book, as “huddles in tattered saris...are old, as old as stones and not pretty...screeching obscenities in husky voices, voices that have a cadence in them...their hands mirror obscene words...lust and of labor” is problematic too (15). It positions her as an upper-class Western-educated woman who has come to study this community. It is the exotic element that makes her explore this community. Throughout the book, she looks at them from various negative, often exaggerated, perspectives, simply to amuse her audience. The adjectives like “anachronism” used by

Jaffrey for *hijras* reveal how her gaze is withdrawing any contextualization of *hijras* to make them more exotic (19).

I. Chatterjee (2002) understands the problematic reaction of Western feminists on third gender existence through a lack in the English language itself, where there is no understanding of the third or fourth gender. She says it is hard for English subjects to understand the variety of gender groups present in India and explores this point through an example from the French General Claude Martin Will (70). Martin's incapability of comprehending the multiplicities of gender made him use both "his" and "her" pronouns for a woman who always wore man's clothes and passed as a "eunuch", which Martin found hard to understand and refers to the person as just a "figure" (70).

This gaze is precisely what theorists like Mohanty (2003), Vanita (2002), I. Chatterjee (2002) and Narayan (1997) are critical of. They favour self-representation in the postcolonial and postmodern world as "writing often becomes the context within which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggles and contestations about reality itself" (Mohanty 2003, 78). Hence, to write about sexualities that are different from those in the 'centre', new ways of thinking must be brought from the 'margins' to the 'centre'.

Sex and gender, thus, as noted earlier, needs to be understood in more pluralistic ways so that all possibilities of gender/sex variations can be acknowledged. Writers like Latham (2017) have demonstrated how such understandings can be made possible. He argues that "sex is not one thing: a static, discrete and biological entity that pre-exists

relations and practices. Rather, sex is emergent; constantly being made and remade in and through particular situations, contexts, practices and encounters” (178). He, like Monro, argues that sex is multiple and unstable. All things make and contribute towards sex, where the contribution itself has to be seen as temporary. Sex cannot be defined or categorized in one way as it is constantly changing depending on the time, place, and situation – as seen in the case of *hijras*. *hijras* go through different stages of ‘trans-ness’ in their lives, changing their identities – such as: before *nirvana*, after *nirvana* or as per their role in sexual relationships. This is possible because “the two-gender principal collapses” making it “possible to discover and explore aspects of sexuality and sexual preference that would be unavailable within the conventional scheme” (Chakravorty 2007, 379).

Latham points out that the non-fixity of sex allows for a wider understanding as it does not limit the boundaries and opens several non-normative possibilities. He demonstrates through his own experience how sex and gender are complex, but in surgical treatment, there is no space for this complexity. As categories, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ shift meanings from culture to culture. While in some places, it is the removal of the male sexual organ which defines gender, in other places, the key gender definers can be the reproductive capacity or demonstration of sexual potency or even one’s occupation (Nanda 1990, 141). Hence, there cannot be any single definition of sex and what must be aimed towards is plurality. To quote Bose and Bhattacharyya, “it is time to recognize multiple sites and discourses as equally valid, and to edge out the heteronormative from the centre-stage it has so ‘naturally’ always occupied” (Bose and Bhattacharyya 2007, xiii). Thus, as I have argued, to recognise these multiple sites will involve using trans and queer

vocabularies in thinking about *hijra* lives as part of trans continuums across the world. The usage will be marked by complexities which is representative of the rich historical, cultural and transnational baggage that each of these terms carry.

1.4 *Creative representations of hijras and introducing my thesis*

Though there are no answers or solutions to the complexities involved in understanding or even defining *hijras*, the closest insights of understanding these complexities are found in creative representations. Creative representations about *hijras* reveal the socio-political and cultural changes that *hijra* lives in India have undergone over the past centuries. Through specific modes in which they appear, the time when they appear, the intensity of their appearance and the reception of their appearance are all telling of how *hijras* function as a social community. For instance, as I have highlighted throughout this introduction, *hijra* visibility post 1990s is representative of how globalisation and Hindutva affected everyday lived experiences in India. A reading of cultural representations produced during this time will also invite critical attention on the multiple identity politics that affect *hijra* lives. Therefore, these representations provide an insight into lived experiences in India, with *hijras* being at the focal point of entry. Sociological or political materials fail to grant access to such intersectional insights, as they mainly focus on one area of lived experience.

A few recent works on *hijra* representations have also focused on multiple identities of hijras, including Gopinath (2008), Newport (2018), Pattnaik (2019), Subramanian (2022) and Jayaprakash (2022), amongst others. My readings of the selected primary texts are indebted to these scholarly works as I borrow some of their key ideas in identifying queer aspects of *hijra* representations. For instance, I use Gopinath's (2008) work "Queering Bollywood" to identify how *hijra* representations come out as subversive, while they remain non-transgressive within the generic conventions. However, differently from these scholarly works, understanding Indian politics and society vis-à-vis *hijra* lives through creative representations is what underpins my thesis. This route of study is important because it allows us to understand concepts of caste, class, sexuality, religion, region and colour with a gendered perspective that does not fall in the binaries. While India has largely been accommodating of syncretic practices until recently, gender has always stood at the margins of these practices in postcolonial India as I have highlighted in my discussions of *hijra* roles in post independent India. Therefore, to read social practices in India through gender will possibly open alternative understandings of Indian society and politics.

In this thesis, I am interested in looking at three modes of cultural representations of the *hijra* community to understand the complicated concepts of gender, nation and Hindutva. I argue that the selected modes of cultural representations offer insightful connections between these concepts and create interruptive forces in the process. These interruptive forces give space for queer developments and hint towards the flawed model on which concepts of gender, nation and Hindutva are built. Thus, on a larger scale, a

reading of these representations helps understand how the dominant hegemonic concepts, the backbone of India as a nation, are inconsistent and refutable.

Key research questions that underpin this thesis are – what are *hijra* creative representations trying to do? What are the creative techniques that they deploy? Do they use reductive stereotypes in a way that undermine some of the innovative forms of the creative enterprise? Or do they open forms of counter-narrative and space to open questions for multiple identifications?

To answer these questions, I identify key trends in the chosen disciplines intending to understand the how, why and what lies behind the creation of these artifacts. I approach *hijra* representations in these mediums from historical, literary and film critics' points of view. Bose and Bhattacharyya suggest that what needs to be done is “to interrogate the ways in which the Indian LGBT subject may be constructed and produced, and identify counter-strategies at work in this project to both collude with and resist globalised sexual economies” (Bose and Bhattacharyya 2007, xv). In this thesis, I am interested in interrogating how *hijras* are produced in mainstream cultural representations and how they construct their stories in their life writings. I aim to examine the multiplicities of *hijra* identities and how they relate to the global discourses currently representing them in literature, cinema and life writing.

This thesis positions itself with the theoretical traditions of postcolonial and queer historical approaches and follows the path of queer of colour critique. The term, queer of colour, was coined by Ferguson, who describes it as:

An interrogation of social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how these formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory and queer critique. (2003, 149)

Queer of colour critique examines the “uneven terrain of bodies and desire” in this world and how some bodies are privileged, and others ignored (Ferguson 2003, 149). My thesis examines *hijras* in a similar context. To see the representation of *hijra* bodies as they are used within political discourses. Within the nationalist and law-making debates, while some forms of non-normative identities are accepted, others are not, marginalizing them further. Projects under queer of colour are often criticized for shifting the focus away from sex and gender; however, as Manalansan suggests, “clearly, that is not the case. Sex is not just the series of fleshy sensorial encounters and practices. Sex is more than that” (2018, 1287). Queer of colour critique is a “methodology, a theoretical position and a political stance” which brings into view new possibilities “in a common search for social justice” (1287). Projects under queer of colour build from a co-existence of other theoretical traditions and welcome interdisciplinary approaches involving translations to look at intersectional experiences. This “mirror[s] the extent to which Trans discourse continues to both draw upon and marginalize knowledges from non-White peoples in both the West and the Majority World” (Pearce et. al 2019, 7). Thus, postcolonial Indian queer historical thinkers provide a rich theoretical position in discussing *hijra* representations in India. These include thinkers like Narayan (1997), Vanita (2002), Mohanty (2003), Gopinath (2005;

2018), Majumdar (2008), Arondekar (2009), Monro (2010; 2018), Puar (2013) and Arondekar and Patel (2016). These thinkers contribute to an understanding of how queer theory can be applied to postcolonial area-specific discourses (as discussed in detail in the previous section).

Following from these theoretical frameworks, my thesis involves translations and brings local discussions to transnational discourses. I shift the assumption from studying *hijras* as an isolated community to *hijras* as a community rooted in region-specific cultural practices. Hence, my project will open new ways of conceiving *hijra* subjectivities under the Hindutva regime.

The rest of this thesis is divided into three chapters. Each chapter examines the representation of *hijras* in specific cultural form. Chapter Two, titled “*Hijras* in mainstream Bollywood cinema post 1990s: Disrupting cis heteronormativity without being threatening to Hindutva ideologies” examines the representation of *hijras* in Indian Cinema post-1990. It focuses mainly on the commercial Bollywood cinema because it has been one of the most influential popular cultural forms through which stereotypes get circulated. My argument in this chapter will be that while post 1990s *hijras* had increased representations which allowed subversive space for queer, non-normative, representations, yet these spaces are also contained and constructed within heteronormative Hindutva ideologies. I will explore this dual operation by identifying key trends in 18 Bollywood films.

The third chapter, “The representation of *hijras* in Indian anglophone literature – An analysis of Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*” examines *hijra* representations in

Roy's novel. I argue that Roy's novel marks a shift in the way *hijras* are represented in anglophone fictions. Roy uses creative and experimental techniques in this novel to allow for counter-narratives to emerge that identify *hijras* through the intersections of religion, caste, class and modernity. Her *hijra* characters are represented as complete literary characters, as opposed to other anglophone works that use *hijra* characters as metaphors and narratives devices.

The fourth chapter, "*Hijra* life writings: Rewriting the self", examines published and unpublished personal accounts of *hijras* available in print and digital spheres. Key sources for this chapter will include thirteen case studies, including *hijra* autobiographies and non-traditional life writing modes. This chapter suggests that *hijra* autobiographies emerged as part of NGO-based *hijra* activism post 1990s and while they offer a much more nuanced account of *hijra* experiences and subjectivities, I argue that the more recent forms of life writings, like blogs, *YouTube* Channels and other online platforms, are more inclusive. These non-traditional *hijra* life writings include experiences of multiple layers of marginalisation, including gender, sexuality, caste, colour and religion. These writings, therefore, are counter-narratives to *hijra* autobiographies that represent *hijra* experiences through the singular lens of gender.

1.5 Queer possibilities and impossibilities: Doing this research at this moment and rethinking about it

With my project, I aim to bring attention to a new gender movement in process. Indian gender and sexuality theorists, such as Vanita (2002), Arondekar (2009), Monro (2010) and Gopinath (2018) suggest that it is time for a re-orientation of 'queerness' with a focus on multiplicities. Not to define and restrict, but to acknowledge that gender and sexuality cannot be understood without context-specific debates, like class, caste, religion, history, and religion. Thus, my analysis of the chosen mediums also involves discussions of the socio-political debates surrounding *hijras* in contemporary India, as *hijra* life writings are a part of ongoing activism that is profoundly shaped and affected by these debates. To write about Indian non-normative identities, it is essential to situate them within a context that is not US or UK-centric. Theorists like Hossain (2021), Dutta and Roy (2014), Loh (2018), Khanna (2007) and Bose and Bhattacharyya (2007) have already highlighted and interrogated the complexity involved in globalizing South Asian non-normative identities (as discussed in earlier sections). I will add to this body of scholarship by looking at how *hijra* representations speak both to area-specific issues and directly to global discourses where global discourses meet region-specific politics, either as an influence or as a result of colonial encounters or globalization. I engage in a critical analysis of these intersections and look at the multiple identities attached to *hijras* in their representations such as religion, biological determination, social, historical and cultural, which shape or are shaped from the larger *hijra* political debates. Looking at *hijra* representations allows us to better understand the politics involved in creating ideologies by national leaders or globally dominating powers and look more closely at how specific laws are affected by these, such as the third gender law in India.

Even though *hijras* remain hugely affected by the intersections of caste, gender and nation, no major study has been undertaken which discusses gender and caste together in understanding *hijra* subjectivities. One of the main aims of my project is to bring into discussion a different approach when discussing sexual and gender variant groups based in India, to take some of the initial steps into acknowledging multiplicities of *hijra* identities.

I realise that one of the major shortcomings of a research like mine is that while it attempts to understand *hijra* existence, it risks placing my voice as a researcher at the centre rather than the voices of *hijras*. When I started my Ph.D. in 2018, I wanted to bring *hijra* voices and perspectives to the centre of my thesis. For this, I had planned to undertake an activist research project with the aim of social inclusivity. Since *hijra* voices have often gone unacknowledged in scholarly works. By introducing *hijra* voices in my project and making them active participants, I wanted to bring new perspectives to *hijra* representations. I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with members of the *hijra* community. These plans were influenced by feminist practice alongside queer theory and were inspired by Naisargi N Davé's *Queer Activism in India* (2012), a key activist research project in the field. My focus was on research questions rather than on the application of research methods under a particular discipline. I wanted to challenge the traditional research approach by questioning its very foundation in practice. As Marjorie Pryse points out, methodologies and categories themselves must be seen as transgressive – “going across, over, beyond, and through, a planful construction” (2000, 113). In this spirit of working through contradictions, I wanted to queer my research questions.

Applying for ethics approval was a rigorous process, and I had to prepare several drafts before it finally got approval. The process of ethics application helped me engage with the messiness critical to my research. I dealt with significant issues, involving complexities of translation, my position as a cis gender married heterosexual woman and other significant practical complications, like, inviting *hijra* members to participate in this research. Planned as activist research, the main challenge that I anticipated was organizing communal gatherings that would need the presence of *hijras* from various backgrounds, religions, ages, and caste. While such gatherings are already taking place in some of the local *hijra* hubs, primarily located in the suburbs, aided by NGOs, my presence as a cis gender woman would most likely be intruding in their personal space. I knew this from my previous experience of working with the *hijra* community under a special transgender project run by an NGO in Delhi (Aarohan) that helped me contact gatekeepers. I had planned to blend practice with theory by proposing to organise semi-structured sessions with *hijras* that would have basically dealt with discussions about *hijra* representations in mainstream films and media.

However, I could never do the planned fieldwork due to COVID-19 and the resultant lockdowns in most parts of 2020 and 2021 in India, which made it impossible to do face-to-face interviews/focus group discussions. Online options were also out of reach because most of my participants would not have a smart phone/good internet connection or simply the time and space to do an interview. Additionally, the pandemic affected many members of *hijra* community in the worst of ways. As they could no longer go for their routine jobs, including *badhai* and sex work, due to COVID restrictions. *Hijra* COVID

patients were last in the list to get medical treatment because of a long history of discrimination (Baumgart and Farooqi 2020; Rashid et. al 2020). Since there was a collective grief in the community, I reconsidered my plans of doing fieldwork.

As a result, the methods and structure of this thesis have drastically changed since I was not able to conduct the planned fieldwork. Nevertheless, my central aim continues to be the same as I unpack the ‘messiness’ involved in the co-existence of *hijra* lives within a Hindutva nation-state by bringing *hijra* experiences to the centre as far as possible. This thesis is written with a sense of responsibility and hope for a better future where *hijras* are represented as people with experiences based on intersectional identities.

Finally, this research thesis is just a part of a large ongoing field of study that still needs scholarly attention. This thesis is limited to *hijra* representations and does not involve other gender variant groups like *kothis*, *zenanas*, *thirunangai* and *panthias*, which are equally significant in broadening the socio-political understanding of sex and gender in India. Also, a different version of this thesis would incorporate *hijra* representations in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and the wider South Asian countries. I hope these gaps are filled in future scholarly works and that my thesis proves beneficial in drawing these connecting lines between the existence of many non-normative gender-variant groups in India and South Asia.

Chapter Two

Hijras in mainstream Bollywood cinema post 1990s: Disrupting cis heteronormativity without being threatening to Hindutva ideologies

In a scene from the film *Raja Hindustani* (1996), Aamir Khan's character, Raja, sings the song "*Sajj rahi teri gali*" (Your lane is decorated) for two gender non-conforming characters, Gulab Singh and Kamal Pasha. Both Singh and Pasha appear in gender non-conforming clothes: Singh identifies as a male and is outwardly feminine, whereas Pasha identifies as female and embodies masculine gender traits. The "*Sajj rahi*" song originally appeared in the 1974 Bollywood film *Kunwaara Baap* where a group of *hijra* characters are seen performing the song. This was the first notable on-screen *hijra* representation in Bollywood. In the film *Raja Hindustani*, just before Raja sings this song, his young friend, Rajnikanth, mockingly comments "*yahan sab gadbad hai ustaad, naram garam hai aur garam naram hai*" (everything is messed up here boss, the sensitive one is tough and the tough one is sensitive – author translation), hinting towards their non-normative gender roles. Both then sing the "*Sajj rahi*" song together. While Singh and Pasha's characters make non-normative gender presence visible in a largely cis dominant film, with the song "*Sajj rahi*" being performed in the context of these two characters, the gender non-normative identities are immediately mislabelled as *hijras*. They do not dress or act like *hijras* but such labelling of gender non-normative people as *hijras* is highly common in Bollywood films.

Non-normative expressions of gender, especially non-masculine and feminine gender expressions by male characters and the failure to exhibit aggressive hypermasculinity, are often tagged with the *hijra* identity in Bollywood. This is made explicit with the use of words like *chakka*, *hijra*, *chikna*, *zanaana* and other obvious references in the film's narrative. For instance, in the film *Shola aur Shabnam*, Kali Shankar (played by Gulshan Grover) calls his brother-in-law a *zanaana* when the latter wants to flee to his village fearing revenge from the hero of the film (*Shola aur Shabnam* 1992, 2:30:30). The fear of facing consequences for his misdoings makes Kali Shankar call his brother-in-law a *zanaana*. Here, cowardice is translated not just to being non-masculine, but into *hijra*-ness (*zanaana* is commonly used as a synonym for *hijra* in many places in India).

Bollywood films are full of such references where several sorts of queer, non-normative, gender non-conforming and non-masculine behaviours and gender roles are translated into variations of *hijra* identity. *Hijra*, as suggested by Gopinath, "becomes a generalized category for all forms of gender or sexual transgression" and remain the "most obvious and common manifestation of sexual and gender transgression in popular film" (2008, 294). Thus, in Bollywood films, the *hijra* community is the most common way to represent several forms of queerness, non-normative gender sexual groups.

Bollywood is amongst the most popular and influential forms of entertainment in India, with hundreds of films released each year. These films are usually 2.30 to 3.30 hours long with roughly the same formulaic plot narration. The plot is often broken mid-way by

fight and song-dance sequences. Within these films, the representation of *hijras* vary from limited roles that are less than a minute long in an entire 3-hour film, to strong main character presence. Mostly, through their representation, the plot evokes laughter by stereotyped depictions and sexual objectification. At other times, they are represented as sidekicks who have a special kind of access to the audience as they are the ones who restore justice within the film. Their representations offer comic relief and are peripheral. At times however, their representations are disruptive in several ways, such as challenging the masculinity of the hero or by presenting alternative non-normative kinship structures. At other times, *hijra* is merely used as an identity to discredit someone's masculinity or to attribute a recognisable repertoire to an otherwise gender non-normative person. Yet, at other times, *hijra* characters appear only in song and dance sequences, without necessarily influencing the main plot. Thus, Bollywood films depict *hijras* in varying roles. In this chapter, I have divided these roles into three broad categories, based on their screen-time and relevance to the main storyline of the film. These are – *hijra* representations in song and dance sequences; in minor roles where *hijra* characters appear for a few minutes in particular scene/scenes or do a cameo role; and in lead roles where they have a prominent screen presence in the film, either as a hero, villain or as a significant supporting character.

Song and dance sequences have an autonomous life outside of Bollywood films and are a significant part of the formulaic nature of Bollywood as a genre. In song and dance sequences, I argue two things. Firstly, *hijra* representations have found space in song sequences because these sequences form “extra-diegetic” spaces within the world of Bollywood (a detailed discussion on this will follow in the next section) (Anjaria 2021).

Secondly, *hijra* characters are represented as sexual excess within song sequences, which provides a subversive undertone to the main plot.

The *hijra* representation within the main plot of Bollywood films became visible only after the 1990s. Reasons for this shift include the influences of economic liberalisation which marked 1990 as an important time for the emergence of a new consciousness in Bollywood cinema with regard to gender and sexuality, as will be discussed in detail in the next section. *Hijra* characters appeared in both minor and lead roles in their increased visibility within Bollywood films. In minor roles, *hijras* are mainly represented as comic relief, sidekicks and as stereotypical characters. I argue that within these roles, the presence of *hijra* characters consistently points toward undermining the hyperbolic masculinity of the hero and destabilises Hindutva heteronormative ideas about kinship. In lead roles, *hijras* are represented as villains or mothers. I argue that in these roles, *hijra* representations lead to emphasising the essential nature of Hindutva heteronormativity and threaten *hijra* community-based existence.

I will identify key tropes used to represent *hijras* in each of these specific categories in a total of 18 Bollywood *masala* films which constitute my case studies in this chapter (see the table below). All these films are produced under big banners and production houses, starring famous actors of the time. These films are also very popular amongst Indian viewers and are easily accessible. The images circulated in these films are easily recognizable. All of them appear on television frequently, and many people have watched them several times. The purpose of watching these films or any Bollywood film is not to

gain a greater social or political understanding, but for entertainment. Therefore, I do not criticize the formulaic structure and themes of these films as they are an integral part of the Bollywood genre which has entertainment as its mission.

<i>Hijras in Song and Dance Sequences</i>	<i>HIJRAS IN LEAD ROLES</i>	<i>HIJRAS IN MINOR ROLES</i>
<p>“<i>Sajj rahi gali</i>” (The lane is decorated) in <i>Kunwara Baap</i> (1974),</p> <p>“<i>Jogi Ji Dheere Dheere</i>” (Monk, slowly slowly) in <i>Nadiya ke Paar</i> (1982),</p> <p>“<i>Dhiktana</i>” (random word) in <i>Hum Aapke hain Kaun?</i> (1994),</p> <p>“<i>Saare mohalle mai halle hogaya</i>” (there is an outburst in the entire locality) in <i>Bhai</i> (1997),</p>	<p><i>Sadak</i> (1991),</p> <p><i>Tamanna</i> (1998),</p> <p><i>Sangharsh</i> (1999),</p> <p><i>Murder 2</i> (2011),</p> <p><i>Laxmii</i> (2020)</p>	<p><i>Maine Pyar Kiya</i> (1989),</p> <p><i>Bombay</i> (1995),</p> <p><i>Raja Hindustani</i> (1996),</p> <p><i>Golmaal Returns</i> (2008),</p> <p><i>Agneepath</i> (2012),</p> <p><i>Mom</i> (2017)</p>

<p>“<i>Chaand sa lalama</i>” (The child is like the moon) in <i>Pyaar koi Khel Nahi</i> (1999).</p> <p>“<i>Tayyab Ali pyaar ka dushman</i>” (Tayyab Ali is the enemy of love) in <i>Amar Akbar Anthony</i> (1977)</p> <p>“<i>Bambholle</i>” (reference to <i>Bholenath</i> (Hindu God Shiva)) <i>Laxmii</i> (2020)</p>		
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Table 1

All the films selected are from Bollywood, but it is worth noting that Indian cinema is not a unified category. It is segmented based on languages and regions. The term Bollywood is commonly used to refer to mainstream Hindi films and is India's largest and most successful film industry. Other prominent industries which are also very large and influential include Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Punjabi cinema (Deloitte 2014, 14). Some notable examples of *hijra* representation from these industries include: the Malayalam film *Arddhanaari* (2012), the Bengali film *Nagarkirtan* (2017), the Tamil film *Super Deluxe* (2019) and the Kannada films *Naanu Avanalla...Avalu* (2015) and *Haftha* (2019).

The Indian film industry is divided between the mainstream films, also called *masala* films, and art house films, often known as the parallel cinema. These genres of Indian cinema have completely different networks of circulation and production and are funded differently. A commercial *masala* film is aimed at a wider audience (investing heavily in the making and circulation of the film) and is released on multiple screens in theatres across the country and globally, marketed and promoted to become box office hits. Art house films or independent films target a specific audience and do not invest much on the production and circulation of the films. Art house films are circulated mostly through word of mouth or social media and are screened in limited theatres or, mostly, during art/film festivals. They are usually low budget productions and very often make good revenue. These two types of films also have very different content. The *masala* films mix multiple genres including comedy, romance, thriller and suspense, and work on Bollywood's familiar tropes such as villain-hero, lost and found plot, song sequences and repetitions. They are primarily produced with the aim of entertaining the masses. Independent/art house films mainly deal with serious content, focusing on particular social practices with a critical view. For instance, in the film *Darimiyaan* (1997), a low-budget film, directed by Kalpana Lajmi, an independent filmmaker who is known for directing women-centric films, the protagonist Zeenat (played by Kiron Kher) gives birth to an intersex child, Immi (played by Arif Zakaria), whom she raises as her brother. A hijra guru named Champa wants to adopt Immi to her kinship network but Zeenat refuses permission. The film, as the movie critic Madhu Jain rightly asserts:

... hits you in the face like a backhand slap—albeit [delivered by] a bejewelled and manicured to glossy perfection hand. Lajmi has trespassed into an area where brave directors have feared to tread: the world of hijras, up close and personal ... There's no airbrushing of reality, no matter how sordid or unaesthetic. (1997)

This film uses the creative mode of film to convey a social message and deals with matters which commercial films often do not highlight. Other notable examples of *hijras* in parallel cinema include, *Daayra* (1996), *Shabnam Mousi* (2005), *68 Pages* (2007), *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (2011) and *Wajood* (2007). All of these films portray *hijras* in creative ways to convey a message.

By choosing *hijra* representations in Bollywood *masala* films, I do not suggest that these are more noteworthy or better than other Indian cinemas or arthouse films.

Independent films or non-Hindi language cinemas are equally important and would provide a rich resource for analysis of understanding *hijra* positioning in India. A comparative analysis of *hijra* representations in arthouse films and *masala* cinema would be an exciting research proposal. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I am restricting my analysis to Bollywood *masala* cinema. This chapter focuses on the messages that are produced when *hijra* characters appear in films that were transnationally circulated, were directed and produced under big banners in the *masala* genre.

Masala films are a significant part of India's popular culture, serving the dual purpose of representing and influencing the masses. Since a large number of South Asian audiences watch Bollywood films multiple times, their influence over the popular culture

and youth become crucial for contemplating current lifestyle, practices, behaviours and trends (Sabharwal and Sen 2012; Bhuyan 2013). In Sabharwal and Sen's words:

... it is very important to understand how the country, its people and its aspirations are represented in the cinema produced in the country. Cinema as a medium of mass communication can be seen at different levels, serving different purposes. It can be an art form, an entertainment, a social document or a social critique. Cinema can be all of these and at the same time be a means to something else – a mirror into our lives, showing us exactly how we function as a society. (2012)

The images circulated through these popular films reach a wide range of audiences, both nationally and globally. I aim to look at the popular Bollywood cinematic representations of *hijras* because they mirror the socio-political attitude towards the community. Therefore, my primary aim will be to see how gender and sexuality has been mobilised in these representations and to examine how the figure of *hijra* de-stabilizes gender performances. I use feminist reading practise to identify key tropes in the selected films for an overall understanding of Bollywood's treatment of gender and sexuality with intersections of other layers of social categories. M. Lazar rightly suggests it is important as feminists to "theorise and analyse from a critical feminist perspective the particularly insidious and oppressive nature of gender as an omni-relevant category in most cultural practices" (2015, 2-3). Therefore, what emerges from this chapter is a feminist concern about the treatment of *hijras* in Bollywood.

Through identifying key tropes in *hijra* representations in the three categories, I will argue that while a large body of these films challenge and undermine heteronormativity, these representations are not always threatening to the Hindutva ideologies that continually uphold patriarchy. Some of the most recognised *hijra* representations in Bollywood films are against the *hijra* community-based existence. But in some ways, these cinematic representations are also completely antithetical to Hindutva ideologies as they have the potential to disrupt dominant gender spaces in Bollywood, and it is that complex dual operation which is contained within moments of laughter or specific boundaries of kinship which have a very fine balance. Thus, these representations can be excessive, subversive or disruptive without being threatening to Hindutva ideologies.

One major reason why these representations are subversive while also being non-threatening to conservative visions of Hindu nationalism is becoming open to attack from extremist groups that have emerged from Hindu nationalism, like Karni Sena, Bajrang Dal and RSS⁹. Other reasons may include the track record of commercially unsuccessful films in Bollywood that have attempted to represent *hijras* sympathetically. An example of this is *Tamanna*, a film directed by Mahesh Bhatt, produced under a mega production house and promoted as a real-life story of a *hijra* raising an abandoned girl child and being a film that sympathises with the central *hijra* character. This film was a box office failure. Whereas *Sadak* was a box-office hit. Mahesh Bhatt, the director of both *Sadak* (1991) and *Tamanna* (1999), in an interview with one of the leading newspapers, *Times of India*, commented:

The first time I dealt with a character who deviates from the prescribed sexual code was in *Sadak* ...The film was a hit, but the perspective on gays was still in keeping with times when movies treated gays as an aberration.

However, in *Tamanna*, I broke that mould with a tale based on a real-life *hijra* who saved a girl from the streets where she was left to die and nurtured her. The film won a national award but made no money. The message was loud and clear; portray gays as villains and comedians. If you project them sympathetically, you will get critical praise, but the public will reject your film. You are what you consume. The Indian nation is still shy of embracing its gays. (Dubey 2008)

Bhatt's critique of box office reception of both his films is telling about the attitude of cis heteropatriarchal members of an audience towards the gender non-normative groups in India. He is right to say that movies which depict *hijras* as villains do indeed prove to be hits. *Sangharsh* (1999) and *Murder 2* (2011) are other examples beside *Sadak* (1999) which had *hijra* villains and proved to be superhit films of their times. The success of these films can be attributed to the depictions of *hijra* villains, which are extremely 'horrific', intensifying the formulaic convention of the films (as I will argue in detail later in my analysis of these films). Furthermore, Gokulsing and Dissanayake suggest that none of "these films attempt to locate the character of the *hijra* within a larger social genealogy of the *hijra* community in India. Also, the sexual life of the *hijra* remains unexplored" (2012, 169). Hence, what comes out of these depictions is a reinforcement of various stereotypes which are prevalent in the subcontinent. They fail to provide any "real understanding of the economic and financial constraints of the community as it exists in the domain of

heterosexual norms” (Pattnaik 2009, 6). In none of the films chosen is the central *hijra* character played by a ‘superstar’, while the other central characters in these films are played by the most popular actors of the time. Meghana asserts that this attitude is mainly a result of:

... how directors of these films are not part of the queer community and assume cis gender people as the only audience. As a result, the trans people’s characters (and I cannot emphasise enough how these roles are taken up by cis gender actors) are made space for by casting them as loud energy-filled super heroes (2020).

Meghana suggests that this has led to very few *hijra* characters getting better portrayals, leaving most unrecognized. Yet, as I have argued, these films are not entirely stereotypical. They provide space to challenge the hyper-masculinities of heteronormative Bollywood heroes. Therefore, identifying the key tropes have helped me look closely at how *hijras* operate as a disruptive force and as stereotypes. On the one hand, *hijras* are part of recognisable repertoire of the Indian existence in Indian cinema. Yet, on the other hand, they have the potential for being queer disruptive figures. They do not necessarily play these roles at the same time. Sometimes, *hijras* are just a stereotype or a sidekick, peripheral to the main plot, but at other times, they are disruptive.

I have divided the rest of this chapter into four sections. The first section will provide an understanding of this larger-than-life cinema and discuss key shifts in Bollywood films post 1990s. The section will offer a broad understanding of the world of Bollywood and specifically, the way in which Bollywood uses particular film images,

allegories and tropes in its treatment of gender and sexuality. This section will offer an understanding of the way I approach Bollywood in this chapter. In the next three sections, I identify key trends in which *hijras* are represented in Bollywood films in specific categories of song sequences, minor roles and lead roles.

2.1 Understanding the Bollywood film industry and representations of hijras: situated in the 1990s

Bollywood emerged as a popular cinema industry in India in around 1947 (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004; Ayob and Keuris 2017). In their book, *Indian Popular Cinema*, K. Moti (2004) have estimated that in these early years of Bollywood's popularity, 10 million people out of an Indian population of around 900 million bought tickets every day on an average and out of these, many of the 10 million cinemagoers were those whose daily income was equivalent to a single ticket's price. These estimations hint toward the importance and popularity of cinema amongst the masses in India. With regards to lower-class and middle-class culture in twentieth-century India, Pavan K Varma (2007) argues that Bollywood played an important role in the lives of lower and middle-class men not just in terms of entertainment but also in providing escape from the frustrations of the real world. A "casual relationship" was established between Bollywood and Indian society which resulted in the films being shaped by the audience's aspirations and practices (Ayob

and Keuris 2017, 36). Thus, with songs and bright costumes, Bollywood films served a middle-class aspiration to a fairy-tale life with happy endings.

Post 1947, Bollywood has been accepted as “formulaic conventions” by Indian masses, which used “older conventions of ancient theatre forms”, including the establishment of many binaries, such as male v/s female, good v/s evil and hero v/s villain in a plot of six songs, ending with the hero “restoring a threatened moral/social order” (38). Within these formulaic conventions, from the initial scenes of most films, characters fall on either side of the good v/s evil binary. The hero, usually a cis male, is shown as a good person merely because he is the film’s hero. There are hardly any complexities or inner transformations attached to the hero’s character. The focus is “on external presentations of emotion rather than character depth or interiority” (Anjaria 2021, 5). For these reasons, Ulka Anjaria, an academic film theorist, rightly calls Bollywood films a “melodrama”, as she outlines:

Aesthetically, Bollywood is characterized by excess: extravagant song sequences, brightly colored costumes, shiny jewelry, expansive sets, heightened emotions, hyperbolic gestures, swelling music, thrilling chases, beautiful actors, and unbelievable plots. It evinces a striking disregard for realism: thus bad guys are really, really bad and good guys are really, really good, and there are few shades of grey; fight scenes look unabashedly fake; songs are lip-synched rather than sung by the actors; and storylines are implausible. (2021, 5)

Similarly, Ajay Gehlawat, another academic film theorist, reads Bollywood as a “fusion”/ “*masala*” (2010, 14-19). These characteristics of Bollywood are known to all its viewers and critics alike. What is interesting is that while a huge population of India visits cinema-halls, eager to watch newly released films, knowing that the film will have the same formulaic narration, the film critics will criticise the films for using same conventions. Criticising Bollywood for being formulaic, anti-realist and melodramatic in portraying events and characters has also been the dominant way of approaching Bollywood films in most scholarly works, including Gregory D Booth (1995), Sheena Malhotra and Tavishi Alagh (2004), Neelam Srivastava (2009) and Gurvinder Kalra and Dinesh Bhugra (2015). Booth justifies the formulaic and anti-realist nature of Indian cinema by finding its root in Indian traditional entertainment culture. However, criticism based on excessive anti-realist elements in Bollywood remain at the centre of his argument.

Scholars like Sudhir Kakar (1981), Ashis Nandy (1981; 1999), Nandini Bhattacharya (2012) and Ulka Anjaria (2021), amongst others, emphasise the value that non-realist conventions have played in the popularity of Bollywood. They argue that it is the melodrama, or what Nandy (1981) calls “spectacle”, which makes Bollywood so relevant and real to its viewers. Through allegory, hyperbole and non-realist elements, spaces that might not be possible to depict in realist cinema without inviting controversies and censorship are easily manipulated. For instance, non-normative gender and sexual expressions, as well as female sexuality, find a comfortable footing in this hyperbolic and melodramatic genre. Kakar writes:

When dogmatic rationalists dismiss Hindi films as unrealistic and complain that their plots strain credibility and their characters stretch the limits of the believable, this condescending judgement is usually based on a very restricted vision of reality. To limit and reduce the *real* to that which can be demonstrated as *factual* is to exclude the domain of the *psychically* real—all that is felt to be the actuality of one's inner life ... Hindi films may be unreal in a rational sense, but they are certainly not untrue. (1981, 14)

What is represented in Bollywood is not the factual or the material reality but a melodramatic reality. This reality “represents emotional states and universal truths” (Anjaria 2021, 12). What the viewers see on screen may not be true in reality, but the emotions and morals that they generate are relatable to many, therefore making these scenes personal and honest for the audience. Such scenes establish Bollywood characters and events as allegorical in nature (Gehlawat 2010; Anjaria 2021). These allegories generally consist of ideas of family, kinship, love, justice, honesty, fate, and heroism and are all aimed at upholding heteronormative patriarchal ideologies.

Until the 1990s, many film critics, including Tejaswini Ganti (2013) and Asma Ayob and Marisa Keuris (2017) identified that the allegories generally resulted from Bollywood's preoccupation with the theme of nationalism. Bollywood played an important part in creating an imaginary space for conceptualisation of the nation-state which was traditional and spiritual against the corrupt, modern and material West. In creation of this imaginary construct of India, specific ideas of family were promoted which focused on

“ideal subservient women and loyalty to ancient traditions” (Ayob and Keuris 2017, 40).

Amongst the dominant tropes that Bollywood used, some of the most common ones include: a hyper masculine hero who is the saviour of women’s chastity as well as Indian values, a defiant woman who meets her match and becomes the ideal chaste woman and the trope of a submissive woman. All these gender tropes promote heteronormativity.

However, there are also possibilities of queer readings within these spaces of heteronormative structures. For instance, a major trope that Bollywood uses in representing some of the women characters is the trope of motherhood. Mothers are often represented as strong, resilient women who are symbols of sacrifice or/and revenge. Such representations of women have been visible since the 1957 classic *Mother India*, where endless sacrifices made by the mother character are representative of her strong and resilient behaviour. This representation also parallels the image of mother as Goddess, representing and safeguarding the nation, prevalent in nationalist discourses (A. Chakraborty 2018). Here, femininity is conceptualised as extremely strong and unbreakable. Motherhood, therefore, emerged as a symbol of powerful femininity in Bollywood films. This reading of women as mothers provides a counter-narrative to the meek and submissive roles associated with femininity. It provides an extremely subversive space for ‘queer’ readings within the conventional storylines of Bollywood films when no visibly queer characters were portrayed.

Though it is important to note that monomaterialism¹⁰ has been the most favoured form of parenting in Bollywood films. Birth mothers are commonly represented as ‘real’ mothers, by repeatedly referring to ideas of breastfeeding and

pregnancy¹¹. Thus, women who give birth and breastfeed are seen as 'real' mothers and these are the only women in most films who are raised to the status of Goddesses, representing the image of Mother India (A. Chakraborty 2018). This way, motherhood is policed, whereby only certain people are validated as mothers. A binary is created where biological mothers are placed on pedestals, and all other forms of parenting are demonised. For instance, stepmothers have been mostly represented as vamps in the majority of Bollywood films, with a few exceptions.

Furthermore, the trope of motherhood, despite the fact it allows for potential 'queer' readings that are subversive to the main heteronormative structure of the plot, has also remained one of the most static tropes intending to silence women characters by confining them within domestic spaces in the overall film narratives (Fatima and Islam 2021, 204). These representations promote the binaries of male-female, outside-inside and home-world, which were predominantly used during Indian nationalist movements. Construction of such binaries in the formulaic structure of Bollywood films played a crucial role in fuelling nationalist ideologies.

Within this structure and ideological placement of Bollywood films, explicit queer desires and gender and sexual transgressions mainly find spaces in the song and dance sequences. The reason for this can be understood as due to the structure of these films, including song and dance sequences, which was inspired by ancient Indian theatrical forms (Ayob and Keuris 2017, 38). Song and dance sequences stand as a separate entity from the

rest of the plot and offer comparatively unrestricted spaces (Gopinath 2008, 285). S. Ghosh analyses that:

Song and dance sequences have been perhaps the most popular and distinctive trope of Bombay cinema. These ubiquitous sequences are elaborately staged fantasies that allow for the free play of conscious and unconscious desires. To this end, song and dance sequences have frequently provided space for the play of forbidden love and transgressive desires. (2010, 56)

Over the years, songs started to be released much before the film releases. In the last few decades, they are released and popularly played on various music channels such as MTV earlier than the film's release. In fact, they earn separately from the film and have become essential for the marketing of popular films (Mehta 2001; Rao 2010; Magazine 2019).

Songs are also played on various occasions, completely unrelated to the context of the film, as a form of entertainment, in order to give them more autonomy. Therefore, Bollywood songs are, as Anjaria defines them, "extra-diegetic" features of the film, which often fall outside of the film's narrative (2021, 63-66). This autonomous status allows film songs to "express hidden feelings and emotions which could not otherwise be expressed" within the censored and formulaic narrative of the films (Rao 2010, 10). Thus, I treat *hijra* representations in song and dance sequels separately from their representations in the main plot.

However, this is not to discredit the importance of song and dance sequences in the overall structure of Bollywood films. S. Ghosh argues that song and dance sequences are:

... integral to the formal aesthetics of much of popular cinema. As powerful vehicles of emotion and aspirations, songs and dances often play out Mikhail Bakhtin notion of the carnivalesque ... It allows those on the margins to move to the centre of the narrative. For this reason, song and dance sequences allow female protagonists a centrality that film narratives usually deny them. Masquerade or the device of performance -within-performance allows female protagonists to escape narrative constraints and indulge in excess, badness, abandon, and revelry. (2001, 211)

In Bollywood films, as I discussed earlier, gender roles are part of Bollywood's formulaic structure. Most of the time, these gender roles are contained within a strong sense of heteronormativity (Gopinath 2008, 294). Being a segment of Bollywood films, song and dance sequences are a departure from these conventions. Characters are allowed to perform outside of their heterosexual identities and normalised gender roles, disrupting the heteronormativity of Bollywood films. Therefore, *hijras*, being representative of traditional India and being non-binary at the same time, found spaces in song and dance sequences early on in Bollywood.

Queer and film scholars, including Gayatri Gopinath (2005), Diana Dimitrova (2010), Shohini Ghosh (2010), Shankuntla Banaji (2013), Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (2018) and Meghana Mehra (2019), amongst others, have argued that post 1990s, a significant shift could be seen in the way non-normative characters, queer practices and desires are represented in Bollywood. These representations of queerness

became more visible in the main storyline of Bollywood films as gender non-normative characters, mainly *hijras*, appeared in varied roles, representing different subjectivities and perceptions. The influence of economic liberalisation on Bollywood changed its depiction of gender and sexuality, among other changes in the formulaic conventions of Bollywood .

As economic liberalisation started in India in the nineties, impacting on India's social and political conditions, the international consumption of Bollywood films increased massively (Ayob and Keuris 2017, 41). A lot of multinational and foreign investments started, resulting in companies like MTV India and SONY television providing "flexible" space in terms of the film's content and not restricting the films to "nationalist themes in the past" (41). Indian bureaucrats, who were involved in Indian economic liberalisation, insisted upon the production of socially relevant films that could cater to an international audience, which was fuelled by an emergence of an Indian diaspora (Ganti 2014, 45; Ayob and Keuris 2017, 42). Furthermore, there were other significant developments resulting from Indian economic liberalisation which impacted on Bollywood, including the proliferation of satellite television and cable networks (S. Ghosh 2001, 215-216).

These interventions resulted in two significant changes (which are interlinked) in the production of Bollywood films. First, they were no longer involved in creating essential binaries between the West and India but were evolving as a new cinema which focused on themes of displacement and a new kind of Indian identity which was not the binary opposite of the West (Bandyopadhyay 2008). Bandyopadhyay suggests that:

... a new genre of Bollywood was made, targeting the Indian diaspora to construct Indian national identity ... [since] Indian diaspora has become a serious market for the Bollywood movie ... being watched by around 3.2 billion people world-wide industry. (2008, 83)

Within these new possibilities, along with the theme of displacement, diaspora-oriented Bollywood films promoted “modernisation”, “urbanisation”, “new ways of living”, “emancipation of women and the rights of minority” amongst other themes (Ayob and Keuris 2017, 43). As a result, new forms of storylines emerged. These were also partially based on an Indian identity, as the diaspora audience mainly tried to connect with their culture through Bollywood. But in these storylines, traditional nationalism (which subscribed to patriarchal structures and binaries) was replaced by transnationalism which translated into a “positive” and “empowering” form where nationalism is constantly redefined (42-46). For instance, in the new storylines, the hero was no longer purely ‘good’ but demonstrated more complex characteristics which do not easily fall into Black and White binaries (S. Ghosh 2010, 56-57).

Secondly, these new storylines were also impacted by the emergence of satellite television, and as a result, moral sensibilities in Bollywood films changed. Critics like S. Ghosh identified the 1990s as an important shift in the way gender and sexuality are projected on-screen in popular Indian cinema, particularly because the television started challenging “heteronormativity by creating space for queer representations” (2010, 56). With satellite television all “sorts of images” were made available in the inner circles of

urban middle-class families (S. Ghosh 2001, 217). These changes were received as a threat to Hindutva idea of Indian tradition and culture, an ideology which was also rising during this time. They blamed satellite TV for corroding Indian values and culture, which was backed by all other forms of nationalisms in India (217). This evoked a level of moral panic, and attempts were made to censor these newly available contents that were labelled as “vulgar”, “obscene” and sexually charged (Gopinath 2008, 315; Anjaria 2021, 141). As continuous and visible attempts were made to safeguard a traditional India by Hindutva, debates about homosexuality, queerness and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality in general occupied more space in the India media (S. Ghosh 2001, 215). As a result, scenes that were sexually charged and depicted non-normative gender groups and sexualities became even more visible on screen.

Songs especially openly discussed sexuality from women’s perspectives and had explicit sexualised dance steps. Songs like “*Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai*” (What is behind the blouse?), “*Sarkayi leo khatiya jaada lage*” (Get your bed closer, its cold) and “*Chatt pe soya tha behnoee, mai tanne samjh ke so gayi*” (The brother-in-law was sleeping on the terrace, I slept next to him thinking it is you) from the superhit films *Khalnayak* (1993), *Raja Babu* (1994) and *Karan Arjun* (1995) are some examples from this period. These songs and dance sequences not just openly depicted and talked about sexuality but granted sexual agency to women characters (Gopinath 2005).

S. Ghosh (2001), Mehta (2001) and Gopinath’s (2005) analysis of songs like “*Choli ke Peeche Kya*” and “*Didi Tera Devar Deewana*” (Sister, your brother-in-law is a lover)

from the films *Khalnayak* (1993) and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (1994), highlight how within an explicitly heteronormative and patriarchal narrative plot structure of the films, the mise-en-scene of these songs represents possibilities of homoeroticism in overtly sexualised visuals. For instance, “*Choli ke Peeche kya hai*” is a duet between two females, who are seen flirting with each other. At one point, one female expresses her desire to get married. The other asks her how should the girl and boy be? To which the former replies, the girl should be like me and the boy like you. Though this song is performed in front of a male audience with the hero’s gaze being prominent throughout the song; in the song when played without the video (which is a common culture), same-sex romantic fantasies can be easily located. As these songs challenged heteronormativity, they provoked much controversy. The song was banned on Doordarshan¹² and All India Radio¹³ (Valentine 2017). Interestingly, such acts only triggered even further popularity for these songs and more discussions on sexuality. It is no surprise that these remain the most popular songs of the 1990s and inspired many other Bollywood films and songs.

However, it is also worth mentioning that in the 1990s, as S. Ghosh (2001) asserts, family films were the most lauded films, as they apparently rescued Indian values and morality from the seemingly ‘corroding’ elements that led to the moral panic. The 1990s films “tend to show duty and family honor triumphing over love” (213). All the blockbuster drama-romance films, like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaenge* (1995), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999) and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999) worked on a similar trajectory of duty and honour. Therefore, certain structural themes continued to exist in Bollywood that formed the moral universe of the film. The moral universe

indicated the morality and order that these films largely conformed to, including romantic love, the most valued theme, as well as kinship, both biological and fictive; patriotism, sometimes overpowering love; and the lost-and-found plot, which helps to strengthen all the other themes, especially kinship (N. Bhattacharya 2012, 33-68; Anjaria 2021, 26-32). These themes are evidence that Bollywood, though with a new set of storylines, continued to work on allegories.

However, within these allegorical themes, heteronormativity and cis normativity were placed at the centre of the film's morality (with the use of hyperbolised gender roles and several reoccurring tropes) and a closer look at these films reveal that these are usually the overarching framework on which Bollywood rests (Anjaria 2021). There are numerous instances within the formulaic structure where cross-dressing, non-normative sexualities, queer identities and homosexual subplots are established powerfully. For instance, in the song "*Didi tera devar deewana*" undertones of possible same-sex romantic flirting emerge in a highly heteronormative overarching plot¹⁴. In films like *Raja Hindustani* (1996), *Pyaar Kya to Darna Kya* (1998), *Kya Kool Hain Hum* (2005) and *Partner* (2007), amongst many others, there is a prominent presence of non-normative characters whose sexualities and gender identities are left uncategorised. There are also increased frequent passive masculine roles played out especially in male lovers (as in *Jaane Tu Ya Janne Na* (2008), *Badrinath ki Dulhaniya* (2017), *De De Pyaar De* (2019), *Love Aaj Kal* (2020) and *Dil Bechara* (2020)) or strong female characters subverting the previous dominant 'domicile' and 'submissive' categorisation, (like strong female characters in *Kya Kool Hain Hum* (2005), *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008), *Mardaani* (2014) and *Gulaab Gang* (2014)). Additionally, there are

gender non-normative characters who fall within the moral universe of the film (as in the films *Kya Kool Hain Hum* (2005), *Partner* (2007) and *Pyaar kya to Darna Kya* (1998)); explicit gay representations, apart from the obvious male-friendship centric films (as in *Kapoor & sons* (2016), *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Shubh Mangalam Zyada Savdhan* (2020)); and visible *hijra* representations within the predominantly cis heteronormative films.

All the above examples of counter trends of non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality are far from being treated as exceptions. Rather, they are exemplary of how “Bollywood can and does function as an innovative form of popular cinema” which gives way to queer non-normative possibilities (Gehlawat 2012, 84). I am not suggesting that Bollywood as a market product changed because of the political and social shifts post 1990s. Instead, I have suggested that Bollywood continued to have its own language, meaning and structure where exaggerations, hyperbole, coincidence, repetitions, metatextuality, melodrama and extra-diegetic breaks in the plot were still the dominant tropes in the formulaic genre and crucial for understanding the many subjectivities that Bollywood represents (N. Bhattacharya 2012, 3-7; Nandy 1981, 90). What changed was that these tropes allowed not just space for potential ‘queer’ readings of specific Bollywood characters and settings, but the very language of Bollywood created space for queer, non-normative characters to be visible on-screen (Gopinath 2018, 10). In other words, the “rendering of queer is neither wholly unrecorded, nor is it a contemporary development”, but it is the exclusive ways in which films engaged in “queer dialogue” that changed (Dasgupta 2015, 90). Hence, while the dominant tropes remained largely the same in Bollywood films, it is the unique way filmmakers started to deploy them within the

innovative formulaic framework of the films that marked these films as different. These resulted in a change at the core of the moral universe of Bollywood films. It is mainly post-1990s that the formulaic structure of Bollywood has allowed multiple forms of queerness in the form of repressed and hidden representations of non-normative gender and sexual identities to become more visible on screen.

As these developments simultaneously progressed within Bollywood films prominently in the 1990s, a significant rise in *hijra* presence could be located. The first film to represent a *hijra* character in a lead role in Bollywood was *Sadak*, released in 1991, followed by three other *hijra* films in the decade. These appearances are connected and are central to the debates that I have highlighted above. Thus, a study of *hijra* representations in post-1990 Bollywood is vital in understanding gender and sexuality as they come across in contemporary Bollywood.

2.1.1 *Approaches to engaging with Bollywood in this chapter*

Film scholars and critics have engaged with Bollywood in various ways (Nandy 1999; Gopinath 2005; Banaji 2007; V. Mishra 2013, Dasgupta 2015, Anjaria 2021). For instance, until recently, most Bollywood film critics, including Shukla (2005) and Kazmi (1999), have drawn meanings from Bollywood films by focusing on elements that highlight it as a majority appeasing cinema. Kazmi notes, in Bollywood, the audience's political and moral

desires are privileged by “‘preferred’ meanings over ‘excluded’ meanings, thereby reinforcing the ‘given’ of the system, and referencing out all potentially oppositional connotations” (1999, 216). Contrary to this view, I am more interested in focusing on the elements which possess potentially subversive queer meanings and undercut the dominant gender discourses of the film. The dominant discourses, undoubtedly, support patriarchy, hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, cis normativity and upper-caste Hindu nationalism (V. Mishra 2013, 13-33; Anjaria and Anjaria 2008, 128). Yet, the creative interventions open subversive queer spaces. V. Mishra emphasises that:

... the great strength of Bollywood Cinema ... will always lie in its capacity to carry deconstructive or transgressive moments ... in its interstices, which is why the Bombay film can endorse the dharmik order even as it accommodates the modern and transgresses that order. (2013, 33)

While V. Mishra (2013) places the binary opposition between dharmic and modernity quite simplistically, for the dharmic is now modernised in numerous formations, he is right to pay direct attention towards, as Daiya notes, to “the transgressive elements in Bombay film that challenge and undo its meta-narrative of Hindu ideology” (2011, 291). In other words, to understand Bollywood films as a genre, as a cultural production, it is important that the elements which have difficulty in being absorbed within dominant systems like *hijra* characters or other non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality are taken into account. For instance, the appearance of a *hijra* character in a film for a few minutes invites

critical questions regarding their purpose in the film – how do they affect the film’s narrative? Why are they there? What function do they serve?

Nandy argues that Bollywood films are “distorted histor[ies] of our own desires” which “not merely shapes and is shaped by politics, it constitutes the language for a new form of politics ... That is why the most absurd moments of popular cinema often can be its most poignant” (1999, 12-13). It is within these absurd moments, or what I call creative interruptions, queer desire and articulations are encountered. Taking these creative interruptions into account can displace the dominant narratives with new gender subversive politics.

In order to identify queer desires within these moments of creative interruptions, film scenes must be studied in their individual moments. Anjaria (2021) has been critical of deriving meanings based solely on a film’s ending. She states that if a film ends with the union of the hero and heroine, it is often concluded that the film establishes heteronormativity. To overlook all other elements, especially the possible subversive scenes that took place during the course of the film, which did not meet their end, results in conclusions like “Bollywood films are not politically progressive” or do not have many queer articulations (168). However, it is crucial to understand that the main plot, where the hero meets the heroine followed by some tensions which are eventually resolved in a marriage scene at the end, is the formulaic structure of most Bollywood films. This plot remains constant and does not really tell the viewers anything different whereas it is the

breaks and the transgressive moments that disclose the gender norms with which the film conforms.

It is also worth noting that while the main plot may conform to gender roles, these gender roles must “be seen as part of the formula apparatus of Bollywood films – in other words, they exist in part so they can be innovated upon to produce new plots even over formulaic structures” (Anjaria 2021, 170). This is particularly witnessed in most adult comedies. For instance, in the adult comedy, *Kya Kool Hain Hum* (2005), gender non-normative queer-identifying character Kiran gets to eventually unite with her male boyfriend, D.K, towards the end of the film. While the film’s main plot is about the two heterosexual couples, Kiran’s story emerges as a significant subplot in this film. Through the comic genre of the film, Kiran’s gender non-normative practices are introduced as a confused identity. Still, her romantic attachment with D.K, which eventually has a happy ending, establishes them within the film’s moral universe. Such plots create queer spaces within conventional Bollywood structures by disrupting gender roles and normative sexualities.

Additionally, within the framework of several Bollywood films, there are moments when the expected gender roles are overturned by the protagonists and are used instead to exercise their own queer desires. An example of this would be a scene from *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) where Rahul (played by Fawad Khan), belonging to an elite family, is caught talking over the phone with his partner. He tells his mother that he is talking to his girlfriend, which makes his mother happy. As a result, it becomes easier for him to talk to

his same-sex partner more freely over the phone. Here, Rahul uses expected heteronormative behaviours only to overturn them. This is just one instance out of many where expected gender roles, which are generally valued in the overall structure of the Bollywood films, are twisted in exciting ways while keeping the formulaic structure intact.

In *Impossible Desires*, Gopinath (2005) invests in locating multiple sites within mainstream Bollywood where queer desires and pleasures can take place and emphasises the importance of such projects. Since *hijra* characters have been the most prominent ways through which non-normative gender identities are made visible in Bollywood films, it is important to look closely at the different articulations that have emerged vis-à-vis *hijra* references in order to understand the multiple meanings that are produced and the ways in which they have ‘queered’ the world of Bollywood.

2.2 *Hijras as excess: song and dance sequences*

... [song and dance sequences evoke] queer, non-heteronormative desire ... falls outside the exigencies of narrative coherence and closure, it can function as a space from which to critique the unrelenting heteronormativity that this narrative represents. Furthermore, the unmoored quality of the song-and-dance sequence ... makes it particularly available for queer viewing strategies. (Gopinath 2005, 101)

Some of the most memorable *hijra* appearances in Bollywood films are present in song and dance sequences. In this section, I will be identifying key tropes in the chosen songs (see

table 1) and argue that *hijra* representation in these songs offers subversive spaces within the film plots. Amongst the seven songs, five represent *hijras* based on their cultural practice of *badhai*. These are: “*Sajj rahi*” (1974), “*Jogi Ji Dheere Dheere*” (1982), “*Dhiktana*” (1994), “*Saare mohalle mai halla hogaya*” (1997), “*Chaand sa lalama*” (1999). The other two songs represent *hijras* in different contexts: “*Tayyab Ali pyaar ka dushman*” (1977) portray *hijras* in a comic love scene when the film’s hero tries to persuade his girlfriend’s father to accept their marriage. “*Bambholle*” (2020) places *hijras* as devotional dancers to a song with dramatic music dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. In this song, *hijras* are represented to possess powerful and destructive elements (a reference to popular visuals and myths attached to Shiva), exhibiting their dedication to Shiva’s *Ardhanarishvara* form. I identify that in all these songs, *hijras* are represented within the regular trope of celebration in Bollywood films. Specifically, all the songs, with the exception of “*Bambholle*” (since it emerges from a film where *hijra* characters have a prominent role), are placed within storylines that celebrate the heterosexual plots. This trope is used in most Bollywood films, with a few exceptions, and represents Bollywood’s commitment to heterosexuality (Gehlawat 2013; Pandit 2019; Priya 2022). However, from my brief analysis of two of these songs (which can be applied to the remaining six songs), “*Jogi Ji*” and “*Dhiktana*”, I argue that these songs offer subversive spaces within the main plots of the films.

In the song “*Jogi Ji*”, from *Nadiya ke Paar* (NKP), a *hijra* character appears during the *Holi* celebration, which is placed right after the scene when Gunja’s (the female protagonist played by Sadhana Singh) sister gives birth to a baby boy. During this festivity,

Gunja dances with her female kin and friends, and Chandan (the protagonist played by Sachin Pilgaonkar) dances with the *hijra* among his male friends. As the lyrics of the song follow, Chandan addresses the *hijra* as a *Jogi* (a monk) and requests her to help him meet his beloved while flirting with the *hijra* throughout the song. Chandan hugs the *hijra* romantically towards the song's end, imagining her to be Gunja. All the men around them laugh as Chandan hugs her, and for a moment, the *hijra* becomes uncomfortable before everyone around pulls them apart. In this song the appearance of a *hijra* represents their traditional role of performing *badhai* during occasions such as childbirth. This traditional role is utilised as a deviation from the heterosexual desires as the song explicitly shows erotic desire between a man and a *hijra*, potentially subverting the heteronormative plot of the film.

NKP is a film that epitomises values like sacrifice and family honour. Chandan and Gunja are ready to sacrifice their love when the family decides to marry Gunja to her deceased sister's husband, Chandan's brother. Within the film, there are several moments when Gunja is revered as an epitome of a traditional women carrying 'true' Indian values. Within this overarching heteronormative narrative, the song "*Jogi Ji*" has the potential to rupture the dominant order of the rest of the film. Though heteronormativity is reinforced towards the end of this song as Chandan is taken aback upon realising that it is not Gunja but the *hijra* he is hugging. The song, however, provides space for visible queer non-normative sexual desires. The song's ending is akin to the structure of song and dance sequences as they are spaces for creative fantasies within the film that eventually break to return to the 'real' world of the film (V. Mishra 2009). Similarly, in this song, the hero's

romantic affection towards the *hijra* is put to an end to re-enter the heteronormative world of the film. Thus, the duet between Chandan and the *hijra*, acting as a comic scene, opens subversive queer readings of the plot.

Interestingly, NKP was re-made into *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (HAHK) in 1994, twelve years later, starring Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit, which turned out to be a blockbuster. HAHK follows the same narrative as NKP. In fact, the placement of most songs in the film's narrative remains the same in HAHK, with new song lyrics and projection of mis-en-scenes. The song "*Jogi Ji*" is replaced with the song "*Dhiktana*" in the newer version of the film. This time, the new-born baby's celebration coincides with the *Diwali* celebration. A group of *hijras* appear in vibrant shiny saris during this celebration for *badhai*. It is worth noting that the *hijras* in this song are not hypersexualised in their mannerisms. They dance around the male members of the family who also interact with them fondly. This can be seen as reproducing the stereotype that *hijras* make sexual advances toward all men, a reason why most men within 'respectable' settings do not want to encounter *hijras* publicly (Mal 2018). In the context of the song, such mingling becomes possible without deeming the male members of the family 'immoral' because of the song and dance sequence setup. Outside this space, such mingling would have possibly turned these male members either into comic characters or placed them outside the film's morality. Thus, these songs place *hijra* characters outside of the normative moralities, evoking queer desires, and disrupt the heteronormative discourses prevalent in these family films through the subversive undertones attached with *hijra* representation.

However, an alternative argument could be made that the placement of *hijras* in these songs could possibly mark them as ‘immoral’ since these songs do not necessarily establish a critique of heteronormativity when seen in their entirety. For instance, later in the “*Dhiktana*” song, the new-born child’s father arrives and the *hijras* circle around him asking for money. As the child’s father checks his pockets, the new-born’s maternal grandfather gives money to *hijras*. On this, the male members present in the scene (child’s father, paternal grandfather and uncle) express their happiness. This scene, very subtly, establishes a patriarchal practise where a woman’s father is traditionally expected to bear all the expenses. Similarly, “*Jogi Ji*”, it could be argued, reaffirms patriarchal structures at the end when Chandan feels embarrassed after hugging the *hijra*. Therefore, while the song and dance sequence allow *hijras* to be visible in Indian cinema, their position remains ambiguous as they deny “*hijra* subjectivities by fixing the *hijra* as a symbol of gender and sexual deviance” (Gopinath 2008, 295). These occurrences could mark them as ‘excess’, ‘debased’ and ‘immoral’. Also, since there are hardly any other gender variant people depicted in song and dance sequences, *hijras* have become the essential representation for several kinds of non-normative gender identities. These non-normative gender expressions remain confined to *hijras* performing their traditional role of *badhai*, as *hijras* are portrayed mostly during marriage and childbirth in these songs. *Hijra* presence in these songs has the potential to limit them to gender identities, often ridiculing them through hypersexualized gestures.

Additionally, song and dance sequences are seen to corrode Indian values and aesthetics in nationalist discourses. S. Chakravarty argues that much of the debate around

'pure' Indian culture against a hybrid culture was centred around film songs and dance numbers, as "nowhere was the bastardization...more apparent than in the realm of film music and dance compositions" (1993, 74). Song and dance sequences, in this sense, do not only fall outside of the rest of the film's narrative in Bollywood, but they also work on a different ideological level. They go against the dominant narrative of the film and are, thus, easily categorised as 'debased' and representative of an 'inauthentic' version of Indian culture.

All viewers of Bollywood films will identify that in song and dance sequences, the female actresses or dancers (including the back dancers) are dressed in "sexy clothes" and exhibit overtly sexualised behaviour compared to the rest of the film (Nijhawan 2009). In fact, since the 1990s, an explosion of foreign women dancers is seen, mostly White and blonde, as extras in Bollywood dance sequences to perform overt sexualised dance steps (Rao 2010, 12). In the more recent films, there is an outbreak of item songs which have famous female actresses dancing often on 'sexist' song lyrics. "*Munni Badnam Hui*" (Munni has become dishonourable) with Malaika Arora as lead dancer, "*Fevicol se*" (*With a glue stick*) featuring Kareena Kapoor and "*Chikni Chameli*" (Sexy Chameli) led by Katrina Kaif are some of the examples among many others which have misogynist lyrics and hypersexualised bawdy dance moves. Nijhawan (2009) does an analysis of how item songs are transgressive and are importantly placed in the film's main plot as disrupting elements.

Hence, while songs are often targeted as corroding Indian values, they are extremely transgressive as song and dance sequences do not operate like the rest of the film.

Therefore, to argue that *hijra* appearance in song and dance sequences potentially as sexual access categorises them as 'less' Indians than the other characters of the film, since *hijras* do not occupy a place outside of these songs in most films, is not justified. Furthermore, as I argued earlier, it is not how a song ends that is of significance, rather it is how *hijras* are depicted during the length of the song that should be taken in consideration. This perspective allows us to locate the ways in which songs, as discussed above, puncture the heteronormativity of these films through *hijra* appearance. Despite being short and brief, they carve spaces for non-normative gender and sexual desires on screen. The readings of these two songs can likewise be applied to the following songs: "*Sajj rahi gali*", "*Chaand sa lalama*", "*Saare mohalle mai halle hogaya*", "*Tayyab Ali pyaar ka dushman*". It is important to note that each of these songs is placed in unique storylines and can have multiple subversive meanings (for instance, "*Sajj rahi*" celebrates the welcoming of an adopted abandoned boy-child). An analysis of these individual songs will expand the scope of understanding of how 'queerness' emerges in many forms through *hijra* representations in song sequences.

The representation of *hijras* in the "*Bambholle*" song is different from the above listed songs as *hijras* are not portrayed performing badhai or celebrating heteronormative unions. Rather, it is a devotional song to Lord Shiva and is a celebration of *hijra* community. It celebrates the power of destruction that Shiva and his devotees, here *hijras*, represents. This song is part of the film's plot. It is placed just before Laxmii, the central

protagonist, is about to take revenge for her murder. Through this song sequence, Laxmi's revenge is justified as a righteous act. Like Shiva, *hijra* are represented as embodying powers of destruction only to maintain justice and order in the film. This song portrays *hijras* as extremely powerful because they become agents of enacting justice in the film's world. This song is also powerful since it is the only song which represents one of the most popular Bollywood actors, Akshay Kumar, in the role of a *hijra*. By representing Kumar as a *hijra*, all the other *hijras* in the film are placed inside the morality of the film.

Additionally, as *hijras* are significant characters in all the songs listed, they acquire a space in the moral universe of these films. Anjaria notes, "if a character gets a song, it means he or she is a moral character. Conversely, villains rarely get song-and-dance numbers" (2021, 58). By moral character, Anjaria means those characters whose moral ideology is also the ideology of the film, so these are mostly the hero and the heroine of the film or other well-meaning characters. When *hijras* are represented as central characters in the films, they also become well-meaning characters and fall within the morality of the film as they celebrate the cause of the hero and the heroine in these songs. Being moral characters, *hijra* make space for alternate gender expressions within the dominant cis normative narrative. Thus, while *hijra* representations in song and dance sequences constrain their identities and place them as sexual excess, what comes forward is an existence of non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality which puncture the deeply heteronormative narratives of the film and provide subversive spaces.

2.3 Hijras in minor roles: as comic characters and sidekicks

Other than song and dance sequences, *hijras* appear in minor roles, either as cameos or as supporting characters, in the main plot of several films. In these roles (see table 1), I identify *hijras* as representing who help in restoring the moral universe of the films. In *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989), a *hijra* appears briefly to bless Prem, the hero (played by Salman Khan), to reunite with his lover Suman (played by Bhagyashree Patwardhan). Romantic love between a heterosexual couple establishes the moral universe of this film. In *Bombay* (1995), a *hijra* character appears during Hindu-Muslim riots and helps a child to reunite with his parents, the hero and heroine of the film (played by Arvind Swamy and Manisha Koirala). In this film, peace and heteronormative family structure are at the centre of the film's morality. In *Agneepath* (2012), *hijra* characters help the cause of Vijay (the hero, played by Hrithik Roshan) to fight the villain. Hero-villain trope is at the centre of the moral universe in this film. *Mom* (2017) is story of a rape victim and *hijras* help the character of Devki (played by Sridevi) to take revenge on her daughter's rapist. In this film, *hijras* are portrayed as helping to restore justice, which is the moral universe of the film. Other than these, I have also included two films where some characters do not identify as *hijra* explicitly but with the common trope of cross-referencing and repetitions of gender roles within Bollywood films, they are established as *hijra* characters. These films include *Raja Hindustani* (1996) and *Golmaal Returns* (2008). In *Raja Hindustani*, the two non-normative characters are established as *hijras* through a reference to the "*Sajj rahi*" song

(as I have argued at the beginning of this chapter). In this film, the two characters support the cause of the heterosexual union between the hero and heroine of the film (played by Aamir Khan and Karishma Kapoor). In *Golmaal Returns*, the three male-leads (played by Ajay Devgan, Tusshar Kapoor and Shreyas Talpade) cross-dress in feminine clothes and through specific references to their bodily gestures and remarks like “ye log” (these people), which also appear with reference to the two non-normative characters in *Raja Hindustani*, are categorised within a broader *hijra* category. This film also utilises *hijra* identities/characters within the dominant trope of reunion of the hero and heroine (Ajay Devgan and Kareena Kapoor). Within all these tropes which are marked by heteronormativity, *hijra* characters appear as comic relief or sidekicks in supporting roles. I argue that while these moments of appearances are short in duration, the necessity for these appearances raises important questions about *hijra* representations in the heteronormative framework of films post 1990s.

In a scene from the film *Golmaal Returns* (2008), the three male protagonists, Gopal (Ajay Devgan), Lucky (Tushar Kapoor) and Laxman (Shreyas Talpade), dress in female attire to enter a women-only sale in a mall. They wear flashy make-up and express themselves loudly. On an explicit level, this is a comic scene that derives its comedy from the fact that the three heroes cross-dress and behave in a gender non-normative manner. This is a typical scene found in many Bollywood films where male characters cross dress and behave in a particular way, with exaggerated feminine gestures to evoke laughter. The comic element in such settings derives from the fact that the hero (who is usually the epitome of masculinity) cross dresses and uses mock stereotyped gender behaviours.

Retrospectively, these scenes also challenge the hero's masculinity. Movies like *Chachi 420* (1997), *Aunty number 1* (1998) and *Apna Sapna Money Money* (2006) are laden with examples of such scenes where female cross-dressing is engaged with. However, in most of these films, cross-dressing does not translate to *hijra* identities. Rather, they are represented as female characters and have a very different role to play¹⁵.

Among the scenes where cross-dressing hints towards *hijra* identities is, however, the mall scene in *Golmaal Returns*. In this scene, the gender identity being mocked is obviously that of *hijras*. Though Lucky and Gopal do not dress or act like *hijra* and can represent a range of other non-normative trans identities, Laxman's mannerisms, particularly the way he claps his hands, are representative of *hijras* in a parodying manner. Laxman also calls Gopal his mother, which links them in a kinship bond. I bring forward three possible arguments from this scene.



(This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons)

First, since this scene does not help in the development of the narrative plot of the film it can be argued that the reference to *hijras* is only used as comic relief just before the story is about to become intense (because in the next scene, the three heroes find themselves in jail). Without doubt, the scene is placed in the narrative to evoke laughter through the obvious cross-dressing theme in Bollywood. The humour of this scene comes from the fact that the three men dress in women's attire with gestures that are representative of *hijras* and trans-women and the 'disgusted' look with which the cis gender heterosexual female heroines see these characters. When these men, cross-dressed in feminine clothes, talk about their desire to be with Gopal, Gopal's wife, Ekta (Kareena Kapoor), exclaims rather disdainfully: "Gopal in logo ko bhi jaanta hai...chee!" (Yuck! Gopal even knows these people) (*Golmaal Returns* 2008, 1:35:40 – 1:36:05). While Ekta does not name who these people are, the audience immediately understands the reference and knows exactly how to react. Use of words like "these people" are immediately associated with *hijras* because of the obvious references in previous films that represent *hijras*. To not name non-normative gender characters, hence indicating them as *hijras* is a common feature in Bollywood. For instance, *Raja Hindustani* uses the same strategy for labelling its two non-normative characters. Similarly, in other films, like *Maine Pyar Kiya*, the audience immediately knows that the character represented is a *hijra* because of the disdainful reaction of other characters in the film and the sexualised bodily gestures by which *hijras* were represented in previous films. On the one hand, the refusal to name these characters could mean that Bollywood is open to alternate forms of non-normative gender existence. On the other hand, it could also suggest that several forms of non-normative identities are

subsumed within these representations. Either way, the presence of this scene gives space for non-normative gender expressions.

Secondly, I argue that scenes like this where cross-dressing comes across as *hijra* representations intended to evoke laughter, consistently undermine the hero's extreme hyperbolic masculinity. Since the hero, dressed in women's attire in a manner that represents *hijra* identity, desires a male partner, he ruptures the moral universe of a film based on monolithic heterosexual marriage. In such instances where characters cross dress and acquire *hijra* identities, their interactions and associations with other characters in the film destabilise heteronormative procreative ideas about kinship which are symbolic of masculinity in Bollywood.

However, the masculinity is soon restored in most cases. For instance, in *Golmaal Returns*, in the very next scene which follows the cross-dressing, the three men appear urinating together in public. This act of men standing and urinating in public is often presented as a symbol of male friendship/bromance. Superstar Aamir Khan posted a picture of himself and Salman Khan on his Twitter handle in 2014 with the caption "*Do dost ek jhaad pe susu kartein hain toh dosti badti hai*" (Friends that pee together, stay together) (author translation). The practice of urinating together as a symbol of male friendship and standing while urinating in public is strongly connected with masculinity in many regions in South Asia. Many such acts which are "produced and structured through specific practises of everyday life" reinforce masculinities (Sanam 2011, 20). In Bollywood, scenes that focus on men urinating are as common as an act of violence and aggression to

represent masculinity (Rajendran 2017; Iyer 2021). In fact, there are several scenes in Bollywood films when urination is connected with gender identities. For instance, in the film *Darmiyaan* (1997) a young child (who is brought up as a boy while he was born as an intersex) sits to urinate while all his male friends of his age stand and urinate. This act makes everyone call him a girl. Similarly, in another film, *Masti* (2004), Amar Saxena, the hero (Riteish Deshmukh), kisses a transwoman not knowing that she is a trans. Later, he sees her urinating while standing. This makes Amar realise that she is a transwoman and he rushes to clean his mouth. This scene illustrates disdain towards trans people and reaffirms the hero's hypermasculinity. Through the repetitive usage of such scenes in Bollywood films, the act of standing and urinating becomes a symbol of masculinity.

Reinforcement of masculinity right after a scene which potentially destabilises it in the first place is typical of how Bollywood functions with regard to gender representation. As I argued in previous sections, reinforcement of heterosexuality and masculinity towards the end of individual episodes is part of the conventional framework of Bollywood. To situate our readings of queer spaces on the basis of how they meet their ends can often lead in marking these spaces as regressive. What is worth noticing is the way in which even within the highly heteronormative space, *hijra* presence questions ideas of masculinity, even if it is short lived. As in the above discussed scene from *Golmaal Returns*, while the three heroes' masculinities are restored, the queer undertone in the cross-dressing scene created a space to disrupt their masculinities.

Finally, through this scene the film seems to be hinting, very subtly, at a political assertion that women-only spaces also include trans women and *hijras* since, just before this scene, the three men came across the advertisement about this sale in a newspaper which clearly stated that it is for ‘only women’. The fact that the three men came here dressed as trans women and *hijras* is a bold stance in and it is not the only time that this film makes a political assertion. In another comic scene, a gender non-conforming person tries to kiss Laxman when both are in a lock-up and on being refused a kiss, the gender non-conforming person says that even the government has allowed this behaviour now. While this scene portrays gender non-conforming people through reductive stereotypes, these brief scenes create space for discussions regarding non-normative desires.

While *Raja Hindustani* and *Golmaal Returns* use *hijra* characters as comic reliefs which disrupt the hero’s masculinity, *Bombay*, *Agneepath* and *Mom* represent *hijras* in the role of supporting characters who become agents of retribution and social justice. In *Mom*, *hijras* help Devki, the protagonist, in taking revenge on one of the rapists who gang raped her daughter. The *hijras* avenge her by castrating the rapist. On the one hand, this can be read as reproducing a reductive stereotype by representing *hijras* using ‘castration’ as a way to take revenge, which implies negative connotations for their cultural practices. On the other hand, since this film purposely uses *hijras* to avenge the rapist by castrating him, stereotypes are overturned. Rather than being reductive, *hijras* are represented as people who bring justice and maintain the moral universe of the film. Furthermore, this film invests in representing *hijras* sympathetically by portraying a respectful relationship between Devki and the *hijras*. Earlier in the film, through a very brief scene, the audience is

informed that Devki worked as a social activist who taught *hijras*. The *hijras* whom she had taught now had their own business. The purpose of this scene is to build a level of trust between *hijras*, who become justice bringers, and Devki. In doing so, the filmmakers have been careful not to portray *hijras* as a community involved in criminal acts. Rather, they avenge Devki's daughter's rapist because they think the rapist needs to be punished.

Similarly, in *Agneepath*, *hijras* are shown supporting Vijay Deenanath, the hero (Hrithik Roshan), as they help him save his sister when she is being auctioned in an open market. The *hijras* appear in large numbers with knives and daggers to attack the crowd of men who have gathered as participants in that market. Likewise in *Bombay*, a *hijra* character appears in the middle of the violent Hindu-Muslim riots and gives protection to one of the twin sons of the lead couple. In all these scenes, *hijras* have appeared in support of the lead protagonist.

There are two possible readings that can emerge from these instances. First, these films can be seen as restricting *hijra* to the roles of sidekicks who cannot emerge as heroes, no matter how good their deeds are and how strong their representations. An interesting analysis of the representation of *hijras* in *Agneepath* is:

Hijras shown as clever, scheming people is okay. But as violent mobs? Dagger and knife-armed killers? Come on! Get a life! I know we've not portrayed Hijras in Bollywood for quite some time, but then comes this ghastly, scary image of the queens. Don't compare them with the buggers in *Ninja Assassin*. (The Cathartist 2012)

The above analysis is right in pointing out that this is probably not the best of representations and that *hijra* lives remain unexplored when they appear as sidekicks. It must be noted however, that in the way Bollywood functions and uses certain images, this reading is far too reductive as it limits any further exploration of these representations. On the contrary, a more complex reading of the presence of *hijras* in these films suggests that as sidekicks, *hijra* representations can demonstrate nuanced readings of Bollywood. For instance, *hijras* carrying daggers and knives in the scene from *Agneepath*, does not necessarily depict them as violent, scary or ghastly. Since *Agneepath* is an action crime film, it is supposed to be violent. Even the hero of the film is extremely violent and kills many people during the length of it. Yet, he remains on the ‘moral’ side of the film and is representative of ‘good’ in the good v/s evil binary. The film’s image of *hijra* carrying daggers and knife, thus, cannot be seen in isolation. Rather, it is meaningful to ask why the directors chose to use *hijra* characters in these particular scenes and what it means to have them on the ‘moral’ side of the film?

In all three films, *hijra* characters could have been easily replaced with cis gender characters. In *Agneepath* and *Mom*, help from mafia gangs would have been an easy alternative and in *Bombay* anyone could have saved the young child. The presence of a *hijra* character in these scenes hints towards a conscious attempt by the film makers to create deliberate queer spaces. Though these spaces do not get much screen presence in the overall film, they are successful in representing *hijra* characters inside the film’s morality. The overall narrative plot follows the same scheme of things found in most Bollywood films – villain v/s hero or good v/s evil. What is different is the way in which the film

makers decide to destroy the evil. By giving this role to a character representative of the *hijra* community, they are marked not only as being important but also as challenging the heteronormative masculinity of the heroes, since the hero needed *hijras* to bring social justice. Thus, these appearances make *hijras* a significant part of the film's ideology by representing them as sidekicks and comic characters and their presence has the potential to disrupt heteronormative masculinities.

2.4 Hijras in lead role: as anti-heroes and mothers

Amongst the five films (see table 1) that I have chosen where *hijras* appear in a lead role, a plot summary of the films shows that *hijra* characters are presented in two very different types of role. *Sadak* (1991) is an action-romance-thriller where the *hijra*, Maharani (played by Sadashi Amarpurkar), is a villain. Maharani is a brothel owner who keeps several *hijras* under her and attempts to make Pooja (played by Pooja Bhatt) a prostitute in her brothel. *Tamanna* (1998) is a drama film which is based on a real-life story of a *hijra*, Tikku, who raises an abandoned girl child. *Sangharsh* (1999) is a psychological thriller, whose central character, Pandey (played by Ashutosh Rana), a *hijra*, is one of the most horrific depictions of a *hijra* character in Indian cinema. He is a murderer and kidnapper of young boys. The plot unfolds as he kidnaps another boy. Pandey nurtures him like a parent in the movie, but with plans for slaughtering him later to gain immortality. In *Murder 2* (2011), an action-based murder mystery, the *hijra* villain, Dheeraj Pandey (played by Prashant Narayanan), is

a frustrated eunuch who abducts women in order to kill them mercilessly. He is part of a *hijra* household where he undergoes *nirvana*. *Laxmii* (2020), the most recent mainstream *hijra* representation in Bollywood, is a comedy horror and the plot revolves around the soul of Laxmii, a *hijra* (played by Sharad Kelkar) which possesses Asif (played by Akshay Kumar) in order to take revenge on her murderers. Laxmii parents another *hijra* in the film and educates her. Out of these films, three (*Sadak*, *Sangharsh* and *Murder 2*) portray *hijra* characters as the villain in the film, while the other two (*Tamanna* and *Laxmii*) represents them predominantly in the role of mothers. I identify that both roles utilise the common trope of representing *hijras* through kinship structures. I argue that though these films offer space for non-biological and non-cis parenting by portraying *hijra* characters as mothers in lead roles, which have potential for building powerful and subversive plots, these films deliberately use *hijra* kinship structures to criminalise *hijra* community-based existence and in the end reproduce reductive stereotypes in the strongest terms.

Family/kinship is one of the most common and valued tropes in Bollywood, used repeatedly across all genres, including “drama, comedy, political satire, horror, crime, [and] thriller” to realise the storyline of the film (Bhandari 2020, 75). Parul Bhandari explains that:

... in the crime-genre, the criminal-gang or organization is set-up around a family, or the protagonist inclination to criminal activities is explained as emanating from a trauma of being from a broken family. In the horror genre, unfulfilled desires of a family member or their mistreatment is often shown as the cause of haunting ...

[The realist genre] have used the prism of the family to depict and discuss social and political dystopias. (75)

However, in the case of *hijras*, differently from the familial ties formed by heteronormative bonds, kinship ties are criminalised and used as a major trope to evoke fear and ‘disgust’ against the *hijra* community. In my analyses of these five films, I discuss what image comes forward when *hijras* are represented in these specific roles, how that effect is achieved and ask what that tells us about *hijra* representations in lead roles.

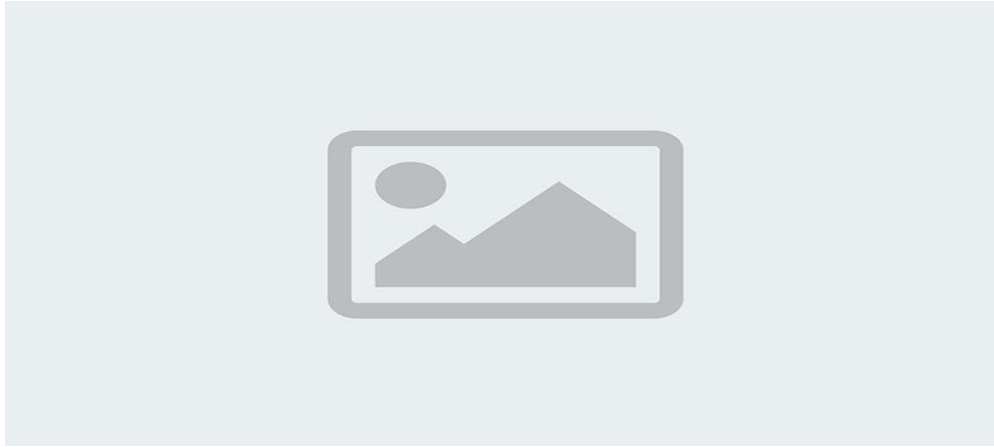
In the three films (*Sadak*, *Sangharsh* and *Murder 2*) where *hijra* characters are explicitly identifiable as villains, a pattern emerges where *hijra* kinship ties are projected as criminal to support their villainous roles. In *Murder 2*, Arjun (played by Emraan Hashmi), a greedy ex-police officer, is given a mission to solve the case of missing female sex workers. He finds out about Dheeraj, the suspect, and sends a sex worker as bait to catch him. When he fails, he approaches Dheeraj’s family and friends to find out about his past life and the reasons behind his heinous acts. Dheeraj’s biological family tells Arjun that they have disowned him because he is a ‘monster’ and used to torture his wife mercilessly. An ex-co-worker who used to make statues with Dheeraj tells Arjun that Dheeraj is not a normal human being, “*Insaan nahi hai vo, haivaan hai. Aatma nahi hai hai uske andar*” (He is a not a human, he is a devil. He does not have a soul) (author translation) (*Murder 2* 2011, 1:30:00-1:30:13). He had met Dheeraj two years before when Dheeraj was fine, but, he says, something happened to Dheeraj and he started making statues of devils instead of Gods. Dheeraj also killed the owner of the shop.

This subplot around Dheeraj's past life is highly significant in two ways. First, it fulfils the need to build coherence in the narrative by connecting the mysterious aspects in the plot. It provides answers to why Dheeraj kills young girls. Secondly, this subplot opens the possibility of humanizing the villain, since the viewers are also interested in discovering Dheeraj's past life. However, this possibility is closed as soon as the details appear in the narrative. Words like 'monster', 'devil' and 'a soul-less creature' used to describe Dheeraj by his family members are heavily loaded negative terms. Instead of humanising, the subplot only furthers Dheeraj's criminality. This is conventional of Bollywood when depicting its villains. T. Ghosh asserts that the "stronger the villain, the more charismatic becomes the image of the hero", hence the larger-than-life character of the villain (2013, 7). In this film the hero, Arjun, is not an upright person. He is greedy and an atheist – both are unacceptable in the moral world of Bollywood. However, he also donates money to a Church for orphans and therefore does not neatly fall on either side of the good v/s evil divide. Similarly, the hero of the film *Sangharsh* must also have an evil side since he is a prisoner. These are not unique portrayals of the hero. As argued in the first section of this chapter, the past two decades have witnessed a significant change in the way a hero is depicted (T. Ghosh 2013, xiv). Since the hero is no longer an entirely 'pure' or a 'good' man, the villains need to be depicted as extremely cruel to make the hero of the film look morally upright (S. Ghosh 2010, 57). In such framings, any possibility of empathising or sympathising with the villain is lost.

Hence, when terms like ‘monster’, ‘devil’ and ‘soul-less creature’ are used for the villain, they help in depicting the him. as worse than the hero of the film. T. Ghosh observes that the villain makes sacrifices and suffers humiliation “for ensuring the so-called poetic justice” (2013, 4). When *hijras* in these three films are portrayed negatively, it contributes to the film’s overall formulaic structure. However, what is disturbing is the placement and representation of *hijra* kinship ties within these roles. For instance, in *Murder 2*, Dheeraj’s criminal acts are justified through his initiation into the *hijra* community, where he joins the *guru-chela* framework. During the police investigation, Dheeraj recounts that in order to overcome his sexual desires, he underwent *nirvana* when he joined the *hijra* community two years before. In the film’s plot, Dheeraj starts killing young girls after undergoing *nirvana* because he becomes sexually frustrated. As this mystery is unfolded, scenes from Dheeraj’s memory feature on the screen, where *hijras* are dancing in front of a goddess. He recalls:

... *Ek raat sapne mai devi aayi thi (clapping sounds) usne kaha mujhse aise karne ko (a naked Dheeraj screams in deep pain). To mai Nirmala naam ke ek hijre ke paas gaya aur usko bola ki mujhe apne jaise bana de. To usne bana diya.* (2011, 1:33:45 – 1:34:20)

[One night the goddess came in my dreams (clapping sounds) She told me to do this, Ko (a naked Dheeraj screams in deep pain). So, I went to a *hijra* named Nirmala and asked her to make me like herself. So, she made me]. (author translation)



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In the mise-en-scene, Dheeraj appears in a red sari in a dark background showing the statue of Hindu Goddess Bahuchara in the flickering lights of *diyas* and *pooja* fire, accompanied by other *hijras* who all are wearing flashy clothes and excessive jewellery. The *hijras*, including Nirmala Pandit (Dheeraj's guru and also the head of this particular *hijra* clan), are all clapping, dancing, and waving *chimta* (a musical instrument) to create the jingling sound amidst the dark, loud, dramatic and suspenseful background music. As Dheeraj narrates the scene, the focus of the subplot is not on Dheeraj's past life and how he became a criminal, but rather the focus is on *hijra* community-based practices. The ceremony of *nirvana* is portrayed misleadingly and alarmingly. It has been represented as a way for men like Dheeraj to overcome their sexual frustrations.

This subplot also criminalises *hijra* kinship ties by attaching structural horror to the familial ties which *hijras* form with each other. Nirmala Pandit, Dheeraj's guru, the one who saves Dheeraj from the police, participates in Dheeraj's *nirvana* ceremony along with other *hijras*. *Hijras* support for each other through their kinship ties comes across in this

film as support for Dheeraj in becoming a ‘monster’ overnight who kills women and creates devilish statues (referring to Bahuchara’s statues). This support is further shown as negative through devotion to Bahuchara as Dheeraj mentions he was following *Mata’s* commands. In different modes of *hijra* representations – including ethnographic studies undertaken by Nanda (1999) and Reddy (2006), discussed in chapter 1, and *hijra* autobiographies, discussed in chapter 4 – Bahuchara is understood as a deity, symbolising strength and patience, from whom *hijras* seek inspiration when undergoing *nirvana*. In contrast, Dheeraj’s initiation into the *hijra* community represents Bahuchara as a ‘demon’ deity. Positive symbols of strength and patience are overturned negatively. All elements in the mis-en-scene, including the music, light, statue and background characters, attach horror, crime and suspicion to *hijra* culture.

The use of *chimta* in this scene is particularly notable as it reaffirms the horror attached to *hijra* culture several times in the film’s plot. Whenever Dheeraj murders a girl, he uses a *chimta*. *Chimta* is one of the instruments that is widely used in India during most Hindu pooja rituals. In this film, when it is used by members of the *hijra* community to offer a sacrifice to their deity, it is associated with criminal acts. Everyday acts of worship and kinship ties are turned into objects of horror. Furthermore, this is the only space in the entire film where several *hijra* characters appear on screen together, making this a potentially powerful scene. Since each of the *hijra* in this scene worships the ‘demonic’ idol that Dheeraj makes – the idol of Bahuchara (whom *hijras* worship all over India) – and celebrate Dheeraj’s sudden decision to join the community, the negative representations have the potential to demonise all *hijras*. The horror of *hijra* culture and their community-

based organisation is reinstated via objects that *hijras* use in their inner familial celebrations and through the entire structure of the *guru-chela* relationship.

A similar representation of *hijra* kinship ties can be seen in the film *Sadak*. In this film too, a group of *hijras* are portrayed as involved in criminal acts together. Maharani, the *hijra* head, owns a brothel, the central location for crime scenes in the film. Interestingly, Maharani houses several young *hijras* in her brothel, who all take part in the crimes that Maharani commits. Likewise, in *Sangharsh*, the practice of young members joining *hijra* communities is implied through the criminal act of kidnapping young boys by the central *hijra* character. In all such representations, *hijra* community-based existence, which is formed on intimate ties between *hijras* as *guru-chelas* or sisters, are mis-portrayed and depicted as being involved in criminal acts.

There is also inter-film cross-referencing, which uses specific film images to connect with previous *hijra* characters of Bollywood. These references are easily identifiable by the audience as they are repeatedly used in popular films. For instance, in *Murder 2*, Dheeraj makes a specific horrific noise to scare the policemen towards the end of the film. The same noise has been made by the *hijra* character, Lajja, in *Sangharsh*. Another example of an image circulating across these films is the repetitive image of *hijras* being shown as fanatics. Like Dheeraj, Lajja's character is represented to be devoted to the commands of Goddess Kali. Kali is associated with death, sacrifice and destruction in Hindu mythology. Likewise, in the most recent *hijra* representation in the film *Laxmii*, *hijra* characters worship Shiva (see reference to the "*Bambholle*" song in the song and

dance sequence section). All these Gods share the symbolism of fierceness and power.

These symbols are extremely important in relation to conceptualising how Bollywood films have represented *hijras*. As worshippers of these Gods, *hijras* could potentially be seen as associated in several different ways with symbols of destruction. For instance, as discussed in the introductory chapter, destruction is also a symbol of generating positive energy with reference to Hindu God Shiva. When *hijra* characters are portrayed as embodying such powers, they have the potential of being represented as powerful agents of retribution and of social justice.

This reading can specifically be applied to *hijra* representations in *Laxmii*. The *hijra* character, Laxmii, dies fighting for her land where she wants to build a hospital. Later, she possesses Asif's body in order to take revenge on her murderers. As the song "*Bambholle*" is placed just before she takes revenge, it represents *hijras* as possessing positive energy. Thus, the revenge becomes a symbol of justice and *hijra* characters become the agents who bring it. In this way, a subversive space is created. However, these spaces remain restrictive since most films, especially those which represent *hijras* as villains, portray these complex symbols of destruction and justice negatively in relation to *hijras*.

2.5 *Hijras as Mothers: Queer kinship*

In addition to their leading roles as villains in Bollywood films, *hijras* are also prominently represented as mothers. In these roles, *hijra* characters are portrayed sympathetically and

are placed within the film's moral universe. *Tamanna* and *Laxmii* are two films where the central *hijra* character is represented through the trope of motherhood. In *Tamanna*, a *hijra* named Tikku (played by Paresh Rawal), parents an abandoned girl child, Tamanna (played by Pooja Bhatt), who was left to die by her biological father. Tikku nurtures her, against the will of his cis gender friend and members of the *hijra* community with whom Tikku had lived in the past. In *Laxmii*, the *hijra* character, Laxmii, adopts a *hijra* child, Geeta, at the age of fifteen. Laxmii educates her so that Geeta does not have to beg. As non-biological and non-cis parenting are given space by representing *hijras* as mothers, these films break the preferred role of conventional mothers. They are commendable as they represent *hijras* as mother since, non-biological mothers, including non-cis mothers, offer “space for radical and original ways of living that challenge the primacy of patriarchal and heterosexual structures” (Reed 2018, 4). The characters of Laxmii and Tikku demarcate potentially explicit disruptive ‘queer’ spaces as they form the moral universe in these films. They are the mothers who can fight, resist and persist even after beaten down by heteronormative patriarchal structures.

However, through my analysis of Tikku's and Laxmii's characters, I argue that despite being sacrificing and resilient mothers, the films do not represent *hijras* as heroic in the role of mothers. In fact, differently to powerful mother characters in films like *Mother India* or *Mom* (where women are represented as the heroes of the film), *hijra* as mothers are represented as characters that deserve pity. Furthermore, they are represented as having become mothers only by rejecting *hijra* community-based existence (similar to *hijra* representations in the role of villains). Thus, while these representations attempt to offer an

alternate model of motherhood by representing *hijra* as mothers, these films fail to sympathise with *hijra* cultural and social practices since they represent *hijra* as characters that deserve pity.

In *Tamanna*, *hijras* are understood as a social community. One of the *hijras* in the film refers to *hijra* community as *jamaat*, literally translating to a social group of people. Tikku in this film is no longer a part of *hijra jamaat* and works independently as a makeup artist. But he is referred as a *hijra* throughout the film because he once lived as a member of the *hijra* community. He is referred to as a *hijra* by his friends and he accepts that he is a *hijra* but does not consider himself as part of their community-based practices. He wears gender non-conforming clothes, keeps shoulder-length hair, uses male pronouns and has a distorted voice which is a combination of masculine and feminine pitch. Compared to other *hijras* in this film, Tikku's character does not come across explicitly as *hijra* or feminine but is represented as a contrast to the hyper masculinity of Bollywood's heroes.

The first scene of the film opens with Tikku wailing in a loud shrieking voice for his dead mother. Tikku acts as a stereotypical 'effeminate' man and is loud and feminine in his gestures. The diegetic sound in this scene, very clearly, establishes the difference between Tikku, a *hijra*, and a 90s Bollywood hero. His mannerisms invite sympathy and pity for his hapless character, which are in direct contrast to the bravery and strength represented by most Bollywood heroes. From the very initial scenes, he emerges in these contrasts.

Loneliness is a major motif used in creating Tikku as an unfortunate character in this film. An entire song emphasizes Tikku's loneliness. However, differently from other Bollywood films where loneliness brings either heroic wisdom or leads to a sudden change of the hero's destiny¹⁶, in the case of Tikku, loneliness is used to belittle his character. In one scene, Tikku's only friend, Saleem, consoles him after his mother dies. Saleem reminds him that because Tikku is different from other people, he must live his life alone. While this scene may be an attempt to sympathise with the sufferings of *hijras* who do not live in a community, the overall representation of Tikku in this film suggests that his loneliness and gender identity are interrelated. In a later scene in the film, when Tikku refuses to send Tamanna to a boarding school, his friend says:

Apna akelapan door karne ke liye bachi ko barbaad kar raha hai...Tu saala hijra ka hijra hi rahega...Baap banna seekh...takleef jhelna seekh (Sadak 1991, 00:26:55 – 00:27:15).

[To get over your loneliness you are destroying the life of the...you rascal will always remain a *hijra*...learn to be a father...learn to face struggles]. (author translation)

Three things are established in this scene which run throughout the film's narrative. First, parenthood and being *hijra* are represented as mutually exclusive. It is suggested that *hijras* are alone, selfish and weak, and hence they do not have the ability to parent a child. Secondly, for a *hijra* to become a parent, the *hijra* must learn how to be strong and resilient. It is suggested that a *hijra* can only become a parent by sacrificing their *hijra* community-

based existence. Tikku is represented as a *hijra* father because he lives outside the *hijra* community-based existence. Tikku curses those who live as members of *hijra* community and calls their profession ugly and dirty. Through his character, the rest of the *hijra* community in this film is negatively portrayed. His character is given space in the film's morality only by dishonouring the *hijra* community. Thus, the film does not come as a critique of the structural denial of reproductive justice for gender non-normative people; rather it is a reinforcement that members of *hijra* community who follow hijra tradition and culture cannot be parents.

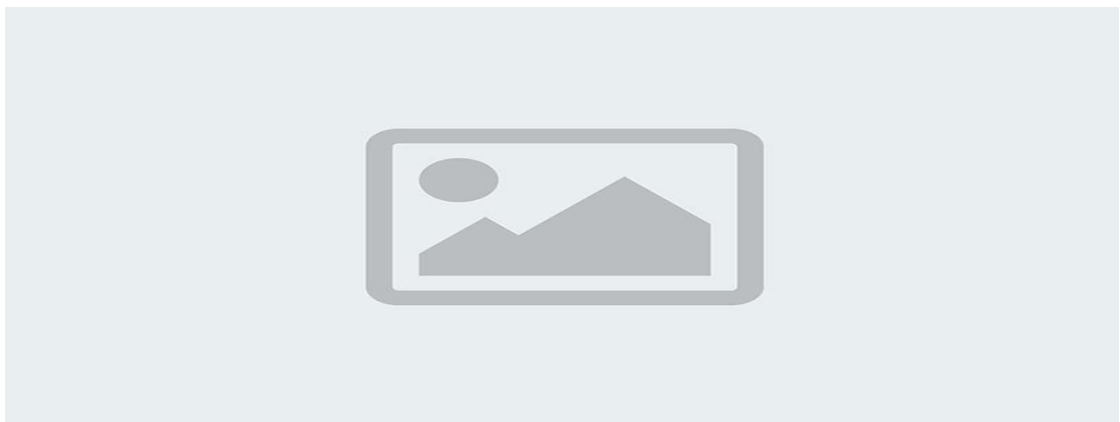
Thirdly, this scene conforms to the general misconception in Indian societies that to be a *hijra* is 'dishonourable' and 'disdainful'. This idea also comes across very sharply when Tamanna learns that her father is a *hijra*. She is bewildered and 'disgusted'. She says:

ye mere abbu nahi hosakte... mujhe ye sochkar hi ulti aati hai ki is aadmi ne mujhe kabhi chua bhi hoga, in haathon se mujhe khilaaya bhi hoga. Mere abbu aise nahi hosakte. Ye aadmi ek hijra hai (Sadak 1991, 01:05:30 – 01:06:21).

[He cannot be my father...I feel like vomiting even upon thinking that this man would have ever touched me, played with me with these hands. My father cannot be like this. This man is a *hijra*]. (author translation)

Tamanna's 'disgust' and anger is not because she learns she is an adopted child or that her biological father left her in the garbage dump to die, but from the fact that a *hijra* has raised her. Her furious reaction about Tikku, a *hijra* being her parent, invites attention towards the favourable form of parenthood. Non-cis parenting is unintelligible to her. She

repeatedly questions Tikku's role as a parent, "How can he be my father? He is a *hijra*" (author translation) (01:06:23). Here, parenthood becomes conflated with gender. Tamanna reiterates the widely accepted societal belief that only cis gender persons can be parents. For her, the labour, efforts and emotions invested by Tikku have no meaning. However, it is important to note that her understanding is met with disagreement in the film as Tikku's friend slaps Tamanna for talking disgracefully about her father. Yet, the manner in which Tikku appears in this particular scene is approving of his 'disgracefulness', in a way dishonouring and demeaning his character.



(This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons)

Tikku comes forward into flickering light from his hiding place, revealing a hapless person in tattered non-binary clothes with shaggy hair and smudged lipstick. This appearance detaches Tikku from a respectable portrayal and confirms to the 'disgusted' identity suggested by Tamanna. Tikku's physical portrayal suggests that he agrees with whatever Tamanna says about him since he is unable to confront her. While the audience's sympathies are with Tikku, it comes at the cost of representing Tikku as a 'pathetic'

character. In Tikku's portrayal here it is worth drawing parallels between how *hijras* were commonly associated with 'disgust' and 'filth' in colonial times. Jessica Hinchy argues that the British during the colonial rule were adamant in portraying *hijras* as "dirty", "filthy" and "contagious" beings, associating *hijra* parenting with "disgust" (2019, 47). In the present time, in the film, similar links are drawn between *hijra* parenting and 'disgust' by portraying Tikku as a hapless character.

Thus, while the overall narrative plot of the film tries to sympathise with Tikku's identity through his experience of parenthood, it fails in this creative endeavour as the film demeans Tikku's character by portraying him hapless, miserable and 'filthy'. While towards the end of the film, Tamanna accepts Tikku as her parent; the individual scenes and the overall depiction of *hijras* in this film frame *hijras* negatively. Furthermore, it can be argued that Tikku is recognised as a parent in this film only because he parents a cis gender heterosexual child. This would not have been possible if Tikku had raised a *hijra* child as most *hijras* do in the subcontinent. Thus, in using motherhood as a major trope to represent the *hijra* protagonist, this film never acknowledges the real-life practices of *hijra* communities where adoption/parenting is common. The moral universe of the film is therefore based on prioritising heteronormativity even if Tikku as a parent is placed at the centre of this morality.

There is a change in terms of who gets to become a parent in the more recent film that represents *hijra* using the trope of motherhood. *Laxmii* depicts a *hijra*, Laxmii, parenting another *hijra* child (Geeta) and recognises her labour, efforts and the emotions

attached. However, I argue, this film is contradictory in its creative enterprise of representing Laxmii as a *hijra* mother and in its overall portrayal of *hijras*.

Laxmii is probably the first mainstream Bollywood film to show the plight of a young child who does not identify with the gender assigned to her at birth. In a brief scene in this film, the audience is informed that Laxmii's biological parents disowned her at a young age because of her gender non-conforming practices. She is then adopted by a Muslim man, Abdul. Abdul also had a child with mental disability. Later, Laxmii, though still young and in her mid-teens, adopts a younger child who also practices gender non-conforming roles. Laxmii educates her and she eventually becomes a doctor. This subplot is rich and powerful on several levels. First, it projects the stories of abandonment of several *hijras* in the subcontinent who practice non-normative gender roles. Second, it recognises gender as a social construct and disapproves of common representations about *hijras* in films¹⁷ (that portray *hijras* as sympathetically) where intersex people are mostly portrayed as *hijra*. Lastly, this plot hints towards possible solidarity among different marginalised groups, which include, *hijra*, Muslim and disabled people. The subplot, in this regard, is a major step in recognising many different forms of *hijra* experiences and in building solidarities which have potential to disrupt the overarching heteronormativity of Bollywood films.

However, the strong, possibly sympathetic, depiction which starts to develop in the subplot is not fully utilised in this film. Rather, the depiction of *hijras* raises alarming questions throughout the film, which cannot be ignored because they remain the dominant depiction of *hijras* in this film. Despite the trope of motherhood being used to sympathise

with *hijra* characters, the film mocks *hijra* gender roles in some of the worst ways of all Bollywood films.

The narrative in this subplot is loosely structured. How Laxmii meets Geeta and how they related to each other as mother and daughter remain unanswered in this film. To show young Laxmii parent a child without fleshing out the necessary details seems a desperate attempt by filmmakers to use motherhood as a trope to sympathise with Laxmii. This entire subplot lasts less than 15 minutes in a 2-hour 15 minutes film. What surfaces on the screen outside of these 15 minutes is the character of Asif (played by Akshay Kumar), possessed by Laxmii, mimicking *hijra* mannerisms. These result in the representation of stereotypes with overtly exaggerated feminine behaviour, such as hysterically applying henna. These scenes, evoking the humour in this film, demonstrate *hijra* gender roles and behaviour in a derogatory manner and contradict the subplot of the film. Apart from repudiating *hijra* customs, it mocks *hijra* gender identities.

Furthermore, in this film, Laxmii is structurally placed outside of the *hijra* community-based practices and culture, in a similar way to Tikku in *Tamanna*. Continual attempts to distort *hijra* kinship ties can be located in both these films. Both *Tamanna* (1998) and *Laxmii* (2020) represent *hijra* characters as mothers by erasing their community-based existence in the *guru-chela* framework on which they essentially form kinship ties. Neither of them represents the central *hijra* characters as being based on this framework. Instead, the *hijra* parent in both films is someone who does not essentially belong to the *hijra* community. Tikku left the community because he wanted to live a

respectable life and *Laxmi* has a missing plot element regarding *hijra* communities. Thus, it can be argued that while *hijra* characters are represented as mothers, the films create stereotypes about *hijras*. Only a certain *hijra* population, which includes those who have left *hijra* tradition and practices, are recognised as parents, mocking the larger *hijra* community.

Conclusion

In all the three categories in which *hijra* characters appear in Bollywood films that I have analysed in this chapter, the films undoubtedly create a significant space for *hijra* existence which disturbs the dominant heteronormative spaces of the films. My analyses of *hijra* appearances in song and dance sequences and when they appear as sidekicks suggest that there is a lot of subversive and queer space created through these representations. Queer non-normative desires and fantasies take flight and puncture heteronormative kinship structures and ideas of hyperbolic masculinities. In song and dance sequences, *hijras* emerged as sexual excesses because of the ‘queered’ position that song sequences hold in the formulaic nature of Bollywood films. Minor roles allow *hijras* a certain level of freedom behind the mask of representing them as comic characters and sidekicks. The changes in Bollywood, especially since the 90s, have made the creation of these spaces possible.

However, in lead roles, *hijra* characters are represented negatively by overturning the trope of motherhood and kinship ties. Most of these films consume *hijra* characters within the hero-villain trope. The plot of these films present mise-en-scenes that deliberately invest in highlighting *hijras* as ‘miserable’ characters, categorizing them as the other of the hero or explicitly as villains. As a result, they reproduce reductive stereotypes against *hijras* and criminalise their community-based existence. I have argued that within these representations, many subversive plots emerge that puncture heteronormativity of Bollywood films (for instance, there are slight opportunities for representing *hijras* as agents of retribution and social justice by depicting them through the powerful imageries of mother and God), but these opportunities are overturned as these plots are mainly contained within overarching Hindutva patriarchal structures which do not necessarily go beyond accepting restrictive versions of *hijra* existence.

Overall, this chapter has shown that *hijra* representations are contained within an overarching heteronormative framework of the film industry, while being sexual excessive and disruptive of this framework at the same time. In this dual operation of disrupting and conforming to heteronormativity, an homogeneous *hijra* identity is formed with specific film images and symbolisms attached to it. These identity markers become the common knowledge about *hijras* amongst the vast number of Indian cinemagoers. Therefore, the increased *hijra* representations over the past two decades are crucial for understanding how Bollywood films have portrayed *hijras*.

Chapter Three

The representation of *Hijras* in Indian Anglophone Literature – An analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)

Introduction

Arundhati Roy, the author of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), said, in one of her interviews, that she has always wanted to:

... experiment. I wanted to write a book in which I don't walk past anyone, even the smallest child, or woman, but sit down, smoke a cigarette, have a chat. It is not a story with a beginning, middle and an end, as much as a map of a city or a building. Or like the structure of a classical *raga*, where you have these notes and you keep exploring them from different angles, in different ways, different ups, different downs. (O'yeah 2017)

The Ministry is the experiment that Roy had long desired to make with her writing. She describes it as parallel to “the structure of a classical *raga*”. *Ragas* are patterns of notes used in Indian classical music where each movement in the note is associated with a specific mood, climate, and time of day, amongst many other things. Their structures shift from being “symmetrical” to “asymmetrical”, “mixed” to “circuitous” to “compound” as the movement of the notes change (Sadhana 2011). Hence, every up and down in the *raga* has a structural significance which denotes several things and not just the sound of the music. In the above quotation, Roy asserts that *The Ministry* is like the structure of a *raga*,

wherein it has multiple layers and invites several meanings. She has experimented with the style of novel writing as a musician does, by changing the notes in a difficult *raga* to explore a variety of meanings. Furthermore, the metaphor of a classical *raga* could also be a reference to Roy's non-linear story-telling style. Like music and rhythm, the plot of *The Ministry* flows unevenly in multiple directions.

This novel was highly anticipated not only by her readers but also by the literary market ever since her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), created a literary sensation by winning the Man Booker prize. *The Ministry* was also on the longlist of the Man Booker Prize (2018), a finalist in the National Book Critics Circle Award (2018) and was shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize (2018). Translated into fifty languages, it gained attention from reviewers and critics from around the world.

As Roy suggests in her interview, the book is like a map of a city that pictures the lives of several people, major and minor characters, with no definite beginning or end. Among the many stories that this novel tells is that of Anjum, a *hijra*, who is one of the central protagonists. Anjum is born intersexed in a Muslim family in Old Delhi and joins the *hijra* community at the age of twelve. This novel clearly identifies *hijra* as a social community. As Anjum joins the *hijra* household and becomes a *hijra*, the novel captures glimpses of *hijra* lives, showing how normative ideas of gender and sexuality are challenged. Later in her life, Anjum adopts an abandoned girl child (Zainab) and fulfils her desire to become a mother. As the story unfolds, her perspective on her identity evolves. She gets caught in the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 and realizes how her religious and gender

identities intersect. Here is a crucial moment in the plot as Anjum confronts her identity as a Muslim *hijra* in front of a Hindu mob which wants to kill her. The mob eventually lets her live because she is a *hijra* (referencing the traditional belief that *hijras* have the power to curse). This confrontation makes Anjum feel rejected for her gender identity. She leaves the *hijra* community and moves to a graveyard located on the outskirts of the city. There she opens a guest house, which she names *Jannat* (paradise) Guest House. Here she meets new people who have been rejected by the dominant cis heteropatriarchal Hindutva society. During her stay at the graveyard, Anjum becomes politically aware of the country's larger issues, such as caste-based inequality and discrimination, and begins to engage in the protests at Jantar Mantar in Delhi. Here, Anjum meets Tilo, a Kashmiri girl, who is one of the central characters in the novel. Tilo brings an abandoned child, who is later named Miss Udaya Jabeen, to her flat. From here, the narration shifts to Tilo's past life – her lover – Musa, her husband, her landlord, and several other characters. The readers are also introduced to the story of Saddam Hussain who is the first permanent guest in Anjum's guest house. Saddam was a Dalit who converts to Islam after his father was killed by a mob while suspected of killing a cow. He changes his name from Dayachand to Saddam Hussain because he idolises the way former President of Iraq, Saddam Hussain, accepts his fate when about to be hanged (he kept Saddam Hussain's video saved in his phone). He wants to accept his fate with the same kind of bravery and is waiting to avenge his father's murder. Significantly, with all these stories of the "unconsoled" (whom Roy names as the dedicatees of the book) the novel ends on a happy note. In the last scene, Anjum roams in the night around her guest house with Miss Udaya Jabeen, as the narrative voice asserts –

“things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to” (Roy 2017, 438).

It is important to note here that Anjum’s story is not the sole focus of this novel. Throughout the plot of *The Ministry*, the narrative shifts from highlighting “brutal casteism to neoliberal fantasies, from the Emergency to Gujarat’s pogrom, from queer politics to Ghalib’s grave, from the Narmada Bachao Andolan to Dantewada” (Lahiri 2017). The narrative moves in and out of different characters’ lives and distorted stories, breaking chronology as it narrates a fictional account against a highly unstable political background. To narrate these stories, this novel uses three metaphorical and allegorical landscapes – *Duniya* (the world), *Khwabgah* (the house of dreams) and the graveyard. Though these landscapes have concrete geographical existence in the novel, each of them works as a metaphor for representing specific ideological spaces. *Khwabgah* is the house of *hijras* in this novel, literally translating into the house of dreams. Everything outside of *Khwabgah* is referred to as *Duniya*. *Duniya* represents the cis heteropatriarchal society where inequalities and injustices exist on the basis of caste, religion, gender, sexuality and class, amongst other social categories. In contrast, *Khwabgah* is pictured as a romantic vacation which is away from all these inequalities. Geographically, it is situated just a few lanes away from Anjum’s natal house but is represented as a completely different world. The two are represented as binary opposites. In contrast to *Duniya* and *Khwabgah*, the graveyard is representative of a third space which is outside of the binary placements. The graveyard is an ideological world serving as the political battlefield for voicing Roy’s political commitments.

Within these allegorical landscapes, the narrative of *The Ministry* continually shifts to the nation, as individual stories of minor as well as major characters such as Zainab and many others, are introduced abruptly. In telling Anjum's story, the narrative shifts to national politics at various points. For instance, in a scene where inner lives of the *hijra* household are narrated, the plot is halted and a new paragraph begins with references to 9/11 and its impact on Indian politics:

The planes that flew into the tall buildings in America came as a boon to many in India too. The poet-Prime Minister of the country and several of his senior ministers were members of an old organisation that believed India was essentially a Hindu nation and that, just as Pakistan had declared itself an Islamic Republic, India should declare itself a Hindu one. Some of its supporters and ideologues openly admired Hitler and compared the Muslims of India to the Jews of Germany. (Roy 2017, 41)

Here, in criticizing the current Indian Prime Minister, Modi (whom she calls "*Gujarat ka Lalla*", the son of Gujarat, and the "poet-Prime Minister") and his Hindutva ideology, Roy directly comments upon the real-life political environment to argue that *Duniya* and *Khwabgah* are interlinked even though they are constructed as binary opposites. Roy works through allegories to voice her political commitments. In these instances, amongst several others, the narrator side-lines the main plot and foregrounds Indian politics taking on the role of a political writer. Key Indian political issues that this novel raises explicitly through the use of political language include the ideologies of the BJP, Islamophobia, Kashmir's

freedom struggle, Maoist Communism and Narmada Bachao Andolon. These are also the themes that Roy has been highly vocal about in her essays personal interviews.

Ever since the publication of her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy has emerged as a political and subversive writer. She has been highly critical of Hindutva ideologies in her political essays and other non-fiction writings. Most of her political writings such as *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), *Walking with the Comrades* (2011) and *Capitalism: A Ghost story* (2014), offer hard-hitting criticism, especially of the increase in capitalism, the Hindutva regime (essentially RSS and BJP) in India and the restrictions on free speech. As a commentator on Indian politics, she has repeatedly stated her concern about the lack of a collectivised voice of different minority groups in India. Significantly, in *The Ministry* (her only fiction work after years of Roy's political activism), most of her political convictions remain central to the novel. As the plot unfolds to create a space (the graveyard) where several people from marginalised communities come together and form a collective voice.

The passage from the novel quoted above, shows that the narrator becomes a device used by the author, Roy, to voice her political convictions. From being poetic in her literary style, the narrative voice changes to highly polemical language of political writing in the novel. The third-person omniscient narrative voice becomes Roy's political spokesperson to voice her political commitments. Like Roy's political writing, *The Ministry* becomes polemical. As a result, the narrative voice, hyper-conscious as it is, is never stable. At times, it becomes the narrator of the fictional plot, while at other times it becomes Roy's own voice to criticise and comment on political issues. It shifts therefore from being highly

sympathetic (especially when representing people from the marginalised communities) to “lush without pretence or affectation”, to “humor” which is at times enjoyable, while at other times is “an irony so pitch-dark it’s barely detectable” (Miller 2017).

Roy agrees that her novel is indeed centred on Indian politics. In an interview, she acknowledges that an incident from her days of activism in Jantar Mantar, an open place in Delhi where people from all parts of the country come to protest, triggered her to write this novel. The Jantar Mantar episode is also the climax in *The Ministry* (O’Yeah 2017) since from this episode, Anjum develops an interest in understanding experiences from different minority communities. She meets powerful people from various minorities and builds friendships with them. Throughout this episode, Roy unravels many stories and creates solidarity amongst several marginalised communities.

Furthermore, most of the scenes in this novel are situated in Delhi and Kashmir. Both these states are politically active spaces in India. Delhi is the capital and Kashmir, the largest military-occupied state, is the most disputed land within Indian boundaries. Through the novel’s geographical situated-ness and real-life political issues that trigger most of the important actions in this novel, along with Roy’s refusal to hide her political commitments, the stories that unfold reflect an enriched political engagement, making *The Ministry* a political fiction.

This chapter makes an attempt to understand *The Ministry’s* rich involvement in contemporary Indian national politics as part of Roy’s experimental form, using several different strategies in a novel of 438 pages to narrate individual stories as a way of weaving a sexual-national history. Through Anjum’s story, *hijra* lived experiences in 21st century

India are represented. This novel experiments with fiction writing to narrate experiences of gender, religion and caste in 21st century India through the story of a Muslim *hijra*, whereas all earlier works of anglophone fiction used *hijra* characters as metaphors or narrative tropes (as will be discussed). This chapter traces a shift in the representation of *hijras* from being metaphors within the dominant theme of conceptualisation of a nation-state in anglophone literature to Roy's depiction of *hijras* as complete literary characters with intersectional experiences. I argue that *The Ministry's* success lies in representing lived experiences of *hijras* in contemporary India through its experimental form.

The chapter is divided in five sections. The first section discusses key anglophone novels that have represented *hijras* to establish a difference in the way *The Ministry* represents them. In this section I suggest that most anglophone novels use *hijras* as metaphors and narrative tropes. The second section discusses *The Ministry's* experimental style, form and technique which has provided a space to represent multiple forms of experiences and identities in a single piece of work, making Anjum at the centre of the plot. This section appreciates Roy's literary techniques and her attempt to create spaces for multiple identification for Anjum's character. The final three sections are an analysis of the use of the metaphorical and allegorical world of *Duniya*, *Khwabgah* and the graveyard to represent *hijras* in the novel. These sections tease out several instances from the novel in order to discuss how Roy's creative enterprise offers a counter-narrative from the *hijra* community.

3.1 A brief analysis of *hijra* representations in other Indian anglophone literature

The representations of marginalised communities have increased extensively in anglophone Indian literature compared to when it emerged as a genre. Anglophone representations of marginalised and oppressed communities, including Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, women, lesbian and gay communities, have flourished in the past decades. In fact, a few even have a separate sub-genre such as Muslim and Dalit literature. Amongst all these emerging sub-cultures, “the transgender has the least representations in literary narratives of the sexual subalterns” in Indian anglophone literature (Kidwai and Vanita 2000, 19; A. Chakraborty 2018, 386).

In particular, *hijra* communities lack literary visibility in anglophone literature “despite their ancient and contemporary visibility at religious spaces and stories” (Chanana 2011, 49). Both indigenous and regional literature, as well as anglophone literature, have excluded the existence of *hijras* in Indian society (Choudhari 2009, 1; A. Chakraborty 2018, 386; Kidwai and Vanita 2000, 202). Choudhuri rightly suggests “the figure of the dissident sexual citizen in India has been, by and large, written out of history and visibility” (2009, 1). Kuhu Chanana laments the invisibility of *hijra* representations “in terms of both production and consumption” in literary spaces (2011, 49). While gay and lesbian fictional representations have occupied literary spaces since early this century, *hijras* appear as protagonists in few fictional representations.

Sarah Elizabeth Newport has made a list of all anglophone novels that represent *hijras* (2018, 13). Evidently, there are only nine novels which have prominent *hijra* characters. These are *Delhi: A Novel* by Khushwant Singh (1990); *City of Djinnns: A Year in Delhi* by William Dalrymple (1993); *Bombay Ice* by Leslie Forbes (1998); *The Impressionist* by Hari Kunzru (2003); *River of Gods* by Ian McDonald (2004); *Habibi* (2011) by Craig Thompson; *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil (2012); *The Parcel* by Anosh Irani (2016); and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy (2017). This list of novels includes writers of Indian and outside Indian origin. Given the huge corpus of anglophone novels that emerge each year, nine novels stand nowhere close to the place that *hijras* occupy in Indian society.

It is important to clarify that there are many novels in English which have minor *hijra* characters who appear very briefly, as in Rushdie's *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), John Irving's *A Son of the Circus* (1994), Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) and Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1899), amongst others. Nevertheless, *hijras* still have the least representations amongst other sexual minorities in literary fictions, considering their hyper-visibility in South Asian societies.

Chanana understands this invisibility in terms of "bi-phobia" (2011, 46). As *hijras*, occupying a third gender space, refuse to bow to any "clear-cut dichotomy", it presents a "crisis of meaning" for cis gender people (46). In most of their representations, *hijras* are either portrayed as hyper-sexual women or homosexuals, rather than third gender. Such a "dual identity of man and woman is so conspicuous within an individual that it evokes

terrible anxiety”, giving birth to “bi-phobia” which is more complicated than “homophobia” (2011, 50). Due to such derogatory understanding of third gender, *hijras* are often represented as hyper-sexual, conflated with homosexual identity in most fictional representations (Kidwai and Vanita 2000, 202; Vanita 2002, 7). Chanana says that these representations attempt to negotiate their non-normative identities within the binary gender model. As a result, such representations have the risk of representing *hijras* as mere cross-dressers.

However, irrespective of Chanana (2011), I understand *hijra* invisibility in Indian anglophone literature as being a result of the dominant theme of conceptualisation of the nation-state in this genre. In Indian anglophone literature, the theme of nation had been predominant. While the second generation of anglophone writers in India started giving voice to several marginalised sections of Indian society, the theme of nation persisted. But even in these broader literary spaces, *hijras* have very little voice. In other words, even with writers writing about marginalised communities, *hijras* were still considered insignificant within national imaginations.

It is telling that amongst the nine novels that represent *hijras*, most represent them as othered identities. These writings marvel at *hijra*'s gender and sexuality and often misportray them, particularly the novels by writers who are not of Indian origin. For example, in *Bombay Ice* (1998), a *hijra* is defined as a “man pretending to be woman ... Or man who has no ... equipment that is making man” (Forbes 1998, Kindle Loc 264). Roz Bengal, the protagonist in the novel, re-iterates this understanding of *hijras* at several points in the novel. Once, she visits one of the *hijras* and exclaims “it was impossible to believe she had

once been a man” (1998, Kindle Loc 1805). This bewilderment and an almost shock-like state on conceptualizing *hijras* can also be seen in *City of Djinnns* (1993) and *River of Gods* (2004). Western writers, as Newport’s criticism suggests, usually eroticize *hijras* and construct them in a particular manner for the consumption of a Western audience (2018, 14). These novels situate India as an exotic land and *hijras* become a metaphor for representing this exoticism.

Writers of Indian origin demonstrate an understanding of *hijra* existence but continue to use them as metaphors within the themes of diaspora, displacement or re-living history. *Hijra* representations in *Delhi* (1990), and *Narcopolis* (2012) are subsumed within the history of Delhi and Mumbai. While *Delhi* explores the historical past of Delhi, *Narcopolis* explores the drug and opium history in Mumbai. *The Impressionist* (2002) uses *hijra* identity to explore the theme of displacement in a novel where the central character travels from colonialisied India to the coloniser’s land. The *Parcel* (2016) uses *hijra* characters to explore the theme of displacement amongst the inhabitants of Kamathipura, one of India’s largest red-light areas, because of real estate traumas in Mumbai. All these novels use *hijra* as a narrative trope and a metaphor, leaving little scope for development of *hijra* characters.

The Parcel is set in the first decade of the 21st century and portrays the life in Kamathipura. The author, Irani, reveals in an interview that he had been fascinated by the inhabitants of Kamathipura, as he grew up in Mumbai (Writers Trust 2016). The novel is a result of his infatuation and presents an account of the impact of the rising AIDS awareness and the government’s redevelopment policy in the late 1990s in Mumbai, which affected

the life of people of Kamathipura. While this plot is narrated through the story of a *hijra* protagonist, Madhu, the narrative is an attempt to portray lived realities of the sex trade amidst the changing structures of 1990s India. The novel is very informative but does little to explore the life of Madhu and as a result, lacks sympathy with her character. Instead, as Emily Donaldson's review succinctly phrases it, *The Parcel* shows:

... the exhaustive, sometimes vivid detail with which Irani depicts *hijra*, brothel life and the world of sex trafficking suggests much research. But knowledge, or rather the impulse to share it, can be a mixed blessing for fiction, and that often proves the case here. This being a novel seeking to answer, rather than provoke, inquiry, the feeling of fullness we get by the end is ultimately more pedagogic than aesthetic.

(2016)

From the very first chapter of the novel, *hijras* are depicted as third gender. Madhu, the *hijra* protagonist, understands herself as "Neither here nor there, neither desert nor forest, neither earth nor sky, neither man nor woman" (Irani 2016, 2). However, in the plot of the novel, Madhu's identity as a *hijra* gets lost as lives of many secondary characters are explored. These characters are inhabitants of Kamathipura, like Madhu, most of whom are involved in sex work. Their narratives place the realities of the sex trade at the centre of this novel and the character of Madhu ends up being a narrative trope to explore these lives.

Likewise, in *The Impressionist*, *hijra* identity is solely used in the plot to accelerate the development of the protagonist, Pran. *The Impressionist* was the debut novel of Kunzru and was received well by critics. Kunzru received the Betty Trask Award (2002) and

the Somerset Maugham Award (2002) for the book's publication. It is set during the time when the British were strengthening their control over India and Mughal rule was coming to an end. Though there are several narrative tropes that Kunzru plays on in this novel, like the trope of changing identities, name and travel, I argue that in using *hijras* specifically as a narrative development trope, Kunzru establishes *hijras* as stereotypical characters without any in-depth characterisation. *Hijras* are depicted only in the first part of this novel when Pran lives with court *hijras*. In the novel, many stereotypes about *hijras* (like kidnapping of young boys) are validated by contextualising them in the pre-Independent India. For instance, in a scene where Pran is travelling with two *hijras* in the train to Fatehpur, reductive stereotypes regarding *hijras* are reinstated. The narrative voice states:

He [Pran] looks across the carriage at the pair of too-tall women, with their raucous voices and strong jaws and exaggerated way of walking. The women smile back. Then he remembers something else, a really bad thing, the other thing everyone knows about *hijras*. They are eunuchs.

Involuntarily he cups a hand to his lap. The two *hijras* watch him intently. Their smiles broaden a little, as if they know what he is thinking. (Kunzru 2002, 72)

In this scene, as *hijras* smile when Pran puts his hands over his private part because he fears 'castration', the novel conforms to the stereotype of *hijras* as kidnappers of young boys. By placing this myth in an historical setting, the novel is also reproducing these stereotypes by situating them in the past. This scene also highlights that *hijra* identity in this novel is understood through the act of 'castration'. The overall depiction of *hijra*

remains centred around these stereotypes. For instance, the first mention of *hijras* by the omniscient narrator, whose voice is privileged throughout the novel, describes them as “frightening women-men” who have “odd voices, raucous warbling falsettos which grate on the ear” (71). When contrasted with the significant social place that court *hijras* enjoyed in Mughal period, this description seems bizarre. Rather, it hints toward a possible overlap between the societal prejudice against *hijras* in post-Independent India, the time when the novel is written, and the time it is situated. In historicizing these attitudes, these prejudices are given validation.

Narcopolis, written by Jeet Thayil, uses the *hijra* character, Dimple, to explore the world of opium in Mumbai and like *The Impressionist* reproduces reductive stereotypes about the *hijra* community. In the novel, Dimple is represented as someone who was forced to join the *hijra* community at a young age but continues to identify as a *hijra* when grown up. In a brief subplot, the narrator tells that Dimple was born a male and her mother sold her to *hijras* because of poverty. Dimple was forcefully ‘castrated’ by *hijras* and made to do sex work. After a year of doing sex work, this novel portrays Dimple’s character somatically at the cost of criminalising *hijra* communities. In the subplot when the narrator discloses Dimple’s past, he tells us:

A woman was called, a famous Daima, Shantibai. There was singing and dancing and whisky. The Daima told me to chant the goddess' name and she gave me a red sari. She made me drink whisky. I hated the taste but I drank it. They gave me opium. Then four of them held me down. They used a piece of split bamboo on my

penis and testicles and held me down. The bamboo was so tight I felt nothing, until afterwards, when they poured hot oil on my wound. That was when I felt the pain
(Thayil 2012, 66-67)

This incident is described as the most traumatic in Dimple's life. This novel not only consumes *hijra* characters within the central theme of opium in this novel, but mis-portrays *hijra* community-based practice of *nirvana* in order to dramatize the dark world of opium. *Hijras* are understood through 'castration' and as sex workers in this novel. Their identity as a third gender is completely ignored.

In contrast to these novels, *Delhi* represents its central *hijra* character, Bhagmati, in terms of third gender. However, the novel emphasizes *hijra* sexuality and uses it as a metaphor to discuss the narrator's attachment to Delhi. In telling the semi-historical accounts of Delhi, Singh draws upon the popular representations of *hijras* by introducing several *hijra* characters over the span of 700 years of Delhi's history, from the rise of Taimur to anti-Sikh riots. It historicises *hijra* existence in the pre-colonial past. Singh is one of the celebrated Indian writers, also a journalist, historian, politician and critic, who was awarded with the Padhma Vibhushan and Paddma Bhushan¹⁸. His writings are widely read in the subcontinent, placing *Delhi* and *Train to Pakistan* (1956) on the list of best Indian novels in the *Hindustan Times*, one the leading newspapers in India (Jain 2014). Also, his short stories such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (2007) have been a part of Indian CBSE's (a national level board of education in India for public and private schools) prescribed syllabus for schools all over India, which indicates Singh's respect in India.

Interestingly, Singh is also a writer who openly talks about sexuality. I argue that in this novel, Singh has used *hijra* characters as a metaphor for sexual excess in order to talk about the sexuality of the protagonist, Singh.

Delhi is an historical fiction written in the first-person narrative voice, with multiple narrators in the entire length of the novel, telling Delhi's history since 1265. The most prominent character in this novel, other than the narrator-protagonist Singh, is a *hijra* character named Bhagmati – a larger-than-life figure who holds together the entire plot. However, Bhagmati is never offered a voice in this novel which otherwise has numerous narrators. She is represented by the narrator-protagonist, Singh, who is both innately and explicitly a misogynist. Singh is an educated, financially stable man who goes on foreign trips and speaks English and is symbolic of a progressive India in the novel. Bhagmati, on the other hand, is referred to as “a low-born, Hindustani-speaking, hijda whore, who obviously catered to perverts of the working-classes: domestic servants, soldiers, policemen — at a couple of rupees a shot” (K. Singh 1990, 36). Singh describes her as “the all purpose man-woman sex maniac”; a “strange creature”; “stupid”; and a “horrible bitch” (30, 28, 39, 103), in comparison to European women and “Westernized Indian memsahibs” (36). In this comparison, Singh hierarchically categorizes *hijras* as uneducated, unrespectable, immoral, lower caste and as sex-workers. Similar to *hijra* representations in Bollywood songs, she becomes representative of all excess, immorality and impurity. The portrayal of her character naturalises these excesses.

This novel, however, is not a simple reproduction of these practices since it provides Bhagmati with an important place in the text. Newport suggests that Bhagmati's

character is a “ghostly figure when necessary, haunting the edge of the narrative” (2018, 206). In the novel, Bhagmati is presented as a narrative device to unravel Delhi’s historical past as Singh, the protagonist, narrates key historical events to Bhagmati. Bhagmati becomes the connecting bridge between past and present, tradition and modernity, glorious and corrupt. She is useful for the narrative because her character is mouldable to the changing moods of Singh, from fulfilling his sexual appetite to his intellectual desire for uncovering Delhi’s history. Bhagmati’s character, therefore, fulfills the needs of this text to talk about contemporary Delhi and its historical past in one narrative.

The idea of haunting (persisting at the margins), malleability (fluid like gender), and excessive (cannot be contained in traditional representation) could be a useful way of imagining an historical continuity of queer life in Delhi with the character of Bhagmati at the centre of queer representation. However, Bhagmati’s characterisation and that of other *hijras* situate the continuity of queer life from pre-independent India to post-independent India in terms of “derogatory”, “sexual”, “lecherous” and “filthy” beings (K. Singh 1990, 98, 225, 226, 229). Other than Bhagmati, the only significant *hijra* character in this novel, Basant, is similarly described as “filthy”, “foolish” and “a lecherous being”, having a kind of gendered deficit – a “shortcoming” (225, 226, 229).

Basant is presented as a sex lunatic. His sexuality throughout is associated with filth and dirt. Words like “dirty finger”, “calloused hands”, “dirty towel” and “stinking misshapen”, amongst others, are used to describe Basant (105). Similarly, Bhagmati (the *hijra* of the contemporary Delhi) is described as a “sick, scruffy hijda”, “a strange creature” and a “horrible bitch” who has “pock- marks”, uneven yellow tooth and is “bawdy” in her

manners (1, 39). There is a repeated sense of filth and disease with which these *hijras* are associated. Jessica Hinchy explores how the British during the colonial rule were adamant in fixating *hijras* as filthy and contagious beings who were polluting the rest of the country (2019, 44). When Singh uses similar representation of *hijras* in an historical work of fiction, stereotypes become reaffirmed.

Furthermore, Bhagmati's own construction as a character detracts from her role as a narrative device. Her character is reduced to a metaphorical figure in order to talk about Delhi's history. She is represented as a one-dimensional character, with everything coming down to her sexuality and immorality. While it is likely that there is more to Bhagmati and her life than Singh, the reader knows nothing about any other aspects of her life such as education, her source of income, kinship ties or interests and dreams. To present queer characters based essentially on sexual identity risks perpetuating the misconceptions that circulate in the dominant society. More importantly, when these novels present *hijras* within the theme of nation and diaspora, *hijras* become excess, the binary opposite of progression.

In her book *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses how representations of "third world women" often characterised and united marginalised groups based on negative attributes, such as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimised, etc" (2003, 22). A similar reading could also be applied to *hijra* representations in Indian anglophone novels. Here, filthiness, lecherousness, kidnapping and being sexually deficient unite *hijras* as a community. Such representations invite investigation into what Chow calls "absence and presence,

primariness and secondariness, originality and derivation, authenticity and fakeness” (qtd. in S. Chatterjee 2018, 70). As limited aspects of Bhagmati’s identity (and that of *hijras* like her) are overrepresented, larger experiences are marginalised. In all these representations, *hijras* are represented as an homogeneous group, without any significant variation in their lived experiences. They draw upon and capitalise on the popular beliefs about *hijras* that have existed since colonial times, as kidnappers and criminals. Thus, these fictional narratives reproduce reductive stereotypes about *hijras*.

However, in *The Ministry*, the most recent representations of *hijras* in Indian anglophone fictions, *hijras* are not used as a metaphor or symbols to talk about nation, although the novel is embedded in national politics. Instead, Anjum is present in the novel as a complex fictional character undergoing developments as the events unfold, inhabiting concrete realities. Through Anjum’s character, Roy brings to our attention the experiences of Muslim *hijras* in the subcontinent. These experiences, as one reads the novel, are placed within a context which is mostly influenced by the regional and national politics of contemporary India (as discussed earlier in the chapter).

Roy argues in an interview that in the Indian subcontinent, caste, radicalism, freedom of speech, family, religion, societal status, and national and regional politics together contribute to how one experiences their gender (Naqvi 2022). She further says, “I think of gender as a spectrum. I’m somewhere on it, you are somewhere on it, everyone is somewhere on it” (Naqvi 2022). She reads gender within a wide range of experiences, where each person experiences it differently. This understanding informs Roy’s representation of *hijras* in *The Ministry* as a wide range of non-normative characters, who

mainly associate with *hijra gharaanas*, and come to represent gender and sexual experiences of *hijras* in the novel.

3.2 *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: an experimental novel*

How

to

tell

a

shattered

story?

By

slowly

becoming

everybody.

No.

By slowly becoming everything. (Roy 2017, 436)

These lines feature on the cover page of *The Ministry*. This novel is an attempt to become ‘everything’ as it narrates many stories through the life of Anjum, using many narrative forms, methods and techniques. These include moving in and out of the stories of the central character, breaking the dominant linear narrative style, using multiple narrative devices like prose and poetry, juxtaposing genres like magical realism and social realism, setting the novel in a deeply politically active background, using words from multiple languages in a predominantly English written novel, and setting-up plots in different locations. All these elements together make Roy an experimental writer who has created in *The Ministry*, as in a *raga*, many notes where each note has a story to tell. In this way, the novel becomes ‘everything’ as it opens up space for several lives and experiences to co-exist.

In her non-fiction works, Roy remains engaged with India’s national political and environmental issues while maintaining silence on her views on gender and feminism. In *The Ministry*, however, everything comes-together in one place. Fiction writing, Roy claims, is “too beautiful to be utilitarian”, hence, she does not hesitate to highlight important issues she has come across and feels strongly about, in her writing (Channel 2018). Her experiments with the literary form of the novel offer a complex space in which Roy can voice her concerns through fictional characters and plot.

Roy claims that “the chaos” of *The Ministry* is “planned” and deliberate and which she has achieved through experimenting with its style, narrative, structure and voice (O’yeah 2017). She wanted to challenge the style of novel writing, “what a novel can and should do” (Channel 2018). Roy is critical of the categorization of literature into singular

units. For her, fiction is “too beautiful”; it is like “a prayer, a song” which has the power to encompass the whole world within itself (Channel 2018; O’yeah 2017). Her fiction is therefore deliberately made complicated. She is against the domestication and cataloguing of fiction writing where the readers find themselves at ease. In an interview, she expressed her feeling that the purpose of literature should be to represent the real world as it brings itself to people, not by beautifying it (“Democracy Now”, 6:30:00- 6:31:00). All the elements used in her novel are an attempt to represent the experiences of Anjum and other characters living in 21st century India.

As this novel deliberately makes its structure chaotic by representing many experiences at the same time, it makes the reading experience complex. Due to the experimental form of *The Ministry*, the novel has been, largely praised but also condemned by literary critics. It is regarded as a “fascinating mess”, “a riotous carnival” and “a large canvas” (Sehgal 2017; Aitkenhead 2017; Kanjirakkat 2017). Others complain that Roy’s experimental writing resulted in “neither a beautiful creative work”, as a novel should be nor as “powerful” as her political essays (C V 2017). While some have described the novel as a “meditation on the state of the nation”, because of its engagement with politics (O’Yeah 2017), others have argued that “there is just simply too much going on...[which] causes the novel to end up being literal, not literary, swinging between the imperatives of a history teacher and tour guide” (Lahiri 2017). Kathleen Rooney has her reservations about the novel and feels that the “narrative threads ... slip from her [Roy] hands, leading to a bewildering lack of momentum and focus” (2017), and Filippo Menozzi describes it to have “Too much blood for good literature” (2019). These reviews about the novel shows that the

world of *The Ministry* is indeed complex. This chapter asserts that Roy's experimental form is deliberate, voicing the complex and intersectional experiences of sexually marginalised lives in contemporary India. These experiences are shaped by the complex ways in which gender, caste, religion, nation and politics communicate and intersect with each other.

Roy's position as a woman writer in the late 20th century (initially a fiction writer in 1997 and as a political essayist soon after) is significant in framing the way she uses literary styles and techniques to carry out a sexualised narration of contemporary India. While a part of this experimental form is influenced by Roy's political activism, it is also shaped by Roy's place as a woman writer in the late 20th century. Roy emerged as a writer in a deeply patriarchal literary culture where writings about nationalist discourses were dominant (Parmar 2018, 37). In the second half of the 20th century, Indian anglophone fiction was dominated by postcolonial themes of "claiming back their essence and re-establishing their broken identities in the context of the newly gained independence from colonial empires" (Grobin 2011, 93). The visibility of women writers in postcolonial writing, especially in English, is connected with feminism and feminist movements in India (Ghosal 2005, 793). While there were writers like Ismat Chughtai, Maheswati Devi and Amrita Pritam, who showed radical feminist views in their works in the early and mid-20th century, most of the literature was written by men.

Feminism as a political movement in India, in its present-day form, which raises an awareness in women's consciousness, did not achieve a visible footing until the end of the 20th century (Anagol 2017). Some of the earliest Indian anglophone women fiction writers, like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande (to name a few), inquired

into the lost sense of selfhood, and presented women's conditions in postcolonial India. The next generation of women writers included Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair and Kiran Desai (amongst others) who "challenged the traditional concepts, values and the way of life, and finally began to question the untouchable issue of gender roles" (Grobin 2011, 95). These writers were the first to "create independent women characters" and responded to overarching postcolonial and national discourses (98).

Roy writes at a time when Indian women writers, through the lens of feminism, were thinking about gendered reality in a way which responded to the generalizations made about sexuality and gender by certain postcolonial writings. This is important when thinking about Roy's fictional characters in *The Ministry* since many of these characters represent a historic sexual minority in South Asia. It is no surprise that Roy recognises herself as a feminist writer and invests in the complexities of gender as much as she does in the nation in her representation of *hijras* through different forms and styles.

Several types of narrative techniques are deployed by Roy to respond to the socio-cultural conditions in which she locates Anjum's experiences as an Indian Muslim *hijra*. Anjum's character tries to locate an identity for herself because she is not accepted in the world that she lives in. This world is represented of a Hindutva nation state and a neo liberal 21st century India. It has no place for people like Anjum who are uneducated and do not generate social capital, along with identifying as Muslims and practicing gender non-normative behaviours. Her identity has become complexed and nuanced because Indian identity has its basis in the national ideology of the state but because she is ostracised by her community and the society as a whole, she tries to create her own reality. This theme of

disconnectedness and quest for identity has also been commonly used across genres in postcolonial literary writings to capture individual consciousness. Academic Ananya Jahanara Kabir identifies the following techniques in different genres:

Poetry, with its penchant for expressing a consciousness far more individualistic than that which prose writing would proclaim to express; non-fictional writing, including the autobiography, with its claims to serious and factual discourse about the nation undercut constantly by the shaping 'I'; academic writing, most spectacularly historiography and cultural criticism, that declares new modes of critical self-assessment for the postcolonial subject; and, of course, other novels, that would perhaps share less of this one's transparent and self-proclaimed non-chalance, but would proffer no less valid modes of surveying the postcolonial terrain. (2012, 413)

In *The Ministry*, Roy uses these techniques, essentially used to explore postcolonial experiences, to narrate the fractured position of an uneducated Muslim hijra in the 21st century India. Short poems are used in the novel to explore the felt experiences of characters, like in the poem quoted at the beginning of this section. Non-fictional writing modes, which include political commentaries, are another way to relay the lived experience of *hijras*. Roy also employs multiple modes of narration to narrate these experiences. When communicating details about Anjum's life, Roy predominantly uses characteristics from three genres. These are – social realist, magical realism and bildungsroman. Each of these produces specific literary effects in relation to the representation of a sexual, gender and religious minority in contemporary South Asia. By mixing these genres, Roy is able to

deliver a multifaceted account of Anjum's experience in order to enhance our understanding of gender politics behind the representation of *hijras* in India.

The bildungsroman is a highly structured form which is used to narrate the journey and growth of the protagonist. In Suzanne Hader's (1996) view, the growth and development of the protagonist are "both 'an apprenticeship to life' and a 'search for meaningful existence within society'". When Roy uses this genre to narrate the protagonist's transition from Aftab to Anjum, Roy situates Anjum's journey as a quest for identity. The novel starts with Anjum living in a graveyard, followed by a flashback of Anjum's life. The flashback technique creates space for developing Anjum's character as her childhood is narrated. Within this subplot, Anjum's family discovers that Anjum is intersex and she eventually joins the *hijra* community after some years. Contrary to most *hijra* representations, this novel invests in a sympathetic portrayal of Anjum's initial discovery of her identity. The readers are informed that Anjum's childhood was traumatic for her parents. Anjum, on her part, enjoyed her dancing lessons. Though she left school at an early age, the narrator does not describe the reasons. The innocence attached to childhood creates a space for the reader to empathise with her character. As the plot advances and Anjum joins the *hijra* household, she is caught between different identities. Her identities as a *hijra*, a Muslim and an Indian, shape what she experiences in the metaphorical world of *The Ministry* (to be discussed in detail in the next section).

Through the use of the bildungsroman generic conventions, Roy chooses to focus on how Anjum's character makes sense of herself when she is caught between multiple identities. This creates challenges because the bildungsroman genre is usually written in a

linear mode, which does not accommodate a complex narration of multiple experiences. However, in *The Ministry*, Roy is successful in combining different genres and conventions to relay the multiple experience of her protagonist, Anjum.

As Anjum's personal experiences are shaped by the socio-political conditions of *hijras* in contemporary India in the metaphorical world of *The Ministry*, Roy uses aspects of realism and anti-realism in the novel. Her use of realistic techniques brings attention to the lived realities of *hijras*. For instance, at various places in this novel, the narrator directly offers social commentary on the impact of globalisation on the *hijra* community. The narrator discusses how the introduction of new vocabularies, like transgender, changed Anjum's position from "number one spot in the media" to being no longer significant (Roy 2017, 38). In such instances, the language used by the narrator appears unconventional and very descriptive; it helps us to understand the changing socio-political environment in the economically liberal India. Roy's own political understanding of the existence of gender non-normative groups comes across in these instances. She represents *hijras* as a traditional third gender community in India which has existed for centuries and this style of narration helps in creating a sympathetic view of the plight of *hijra* communities. Her understanding challenges other anglophone literary representations about *hijras* which portray them through criminalised subject-positions.

Anjum's experiences are, however, not only limited to her gender identity, as discussed earlier. She belongs to a minority religion, which is imagined as the other in the dominant Hindutva nationalist framing. Roy masterfully deploys elements from magic

realism in her framework to voice the multiple forms of marginalisation that Anjum's character experiences. Roy is not the first Indian writer to use magic realism in a political novel. Salman Rushdie (1981) in *Midnight's Children* has been highly successful in representing India's socio-political conditions through the use of magic realism. He uses magic realism to narrate the post-independent Indian socio-political conditions. As a genre, magic realism has mostly been associated with cultures that are on the fringes of the mainstream (Slemon 1995, 10; Siskind 2012, 834). Postcolonial thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak identify magic realism as an evolving genre in which to narrate postcolonial experiences (Bhabha 1990; Spivak 1990). Bhabha calls it "the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (Bhabha 1990). It is a genre, as Slemon argues, that invites "imaginative reconstruction in post-colonial cultures ...[and] the recuperation of lost voices and discarded fragments, those elements pushed to the margins of consciousness" (1995, 16). By rendering the fantastical in an ordinary narration, it opens an alternative door into telling the stories of the suppressed, and often unheard voices. By blending magic and social realism, Roy attempts to represent the neo-liberal reality of sexual and religious minorities in the subcontinent. Through elements of social realism, Roy shows pain and discrimination but also the creative potential, where readers see joy, tenderness and vulnerability. This blend is used by Roy to understand what it means to be pushed out to the peripheries and marginalised positions. This novel, therefore, is a brave attempt to represent how *hijras* make sense of themselves as a marginalised community.

In *The Ministry*, Roy's use of these genres dislocates dominant stories found in postcolonial literary novels and provides a way forward for an alternate set of stories which

narrate different kinds of experiences. These experiences are ‘real’ but surreal because they are mostly unacknowledged by the mainstream. One of the scenes in the novel that capture these surreal experiences is from an episode in the graveyard, where Anjum builds the *Jannat* (paradise) guest house. Most of the rooms in the guest house are built literally above her friend’s graves. She talks to her dead friends as if they are alive. Likewise, her guests also talk to these graves and together they occupy the room of the guest house. However, this is narrated in a very ordinary fashion within a very realistic setting. For instance, when Tilo comes to live in the guest house, the narrative voice tells us:

Saddam and Anjum showed Tilo the room that they had readied for her on the ground floor. She would share it with Comrade Laali and family, Miss Jabeen and Ahlam’s grave. (Roy 2017, 304)

Tilo becomes a living companion of the dead people lying underneath the graves of her room. Soon after this scene in which Tilo arrives in the *Jannat* guest house, readers are introduced to the empty graves of martyrs in a real Kashmiri graveyard. This graveyard in Kashmir has no dead bodies buried but is a sight of inspiration for young Kashmiris to fight for their struggle for freedom. In contra to this is Anjum’s residence in the graveyard in Delhi, which does not resemble a realistic setting. The narrator describes how Anjum’s appearance in the graveyard has drastically changed from how she used to be. She looks unreal, but in the *Jannat* guest house real bodies are buried and living humans inhabit it. The parallel use of these two graveyards can be seen as a deliberate literary device deployed by Roy to question what counts as real and authentic in a world where only

selective narratives are prioritised. In this case, Anjum's graveyard (which looks unreal) may not have martyrs buried, yet it represents real issues pertaining to experiences of minority communities. By merging these binaries between the dead and the living, real and surreal, Roy creates porous boundaries where people can exist outside of the rules and regulations drawn by mainstream society.

Roy's use of magic realism is a way to connect different stories, set in different locations and time frames. She uses this frame to show how real concrete experiences of one form of marginalisation have the potential to travel across time and locations. For instance, in the above scene, the graves of dead *hijras*, which became home to abandoned living *hijras*, are a way in which the living *hijras* continue to remain a part of *hijra* community. In contrast to this is the martyr's graveyard in Kashmir, which is intended to be a legacy of the Kashmiri struggle. Many Kashmiri freedom fighters yearn to enter this graveyard as martyrs. The irony is that even if they become martyrs, like Tilo's lover, they will never be able to join the graveyard because no dead bodies are buried there. As a result, they will not be remembered as martyrs in Kashmir's history and will fail to continue the legacy of buried martyrs. Whereas the legacy of dead *hijras* in Anjum's graveyard, whose struggles are not glorified by anyone, continues as Anjum inhabits this place.

Roy also uses magic realism as a setting to unite the voices of those who are treated as social outsiders. Magic realism offers a "positive" and "liberating" space to narrate the fragmented stories of postcolonial existence (Slemon 1995, 21). All the central characters

in the novel – Anjum (a *hijra*), Saddam Hussain (a Dalit who is an outcast from his society), Tilo (an independent woman with no caste and no family), Musa (a Kashmiri involved in the Kashmir's freedom struggle) and Udaya Jabeen (an abandoned girl child of a Maoist Communist and a low-caste woman who was raped) – mainly belong to the marginalized section of the society. Roy uses magical realism to connect the stories of the underrepresented, offering liberating spaces to these characters. For instance, when Tilo's lover Musa died in Kashmir's freedom struggle:

Tilo would grieve deeply at Musa's passing, but would not be undone by her grief because she was able to write to him regularly and visit him often enough through the crack in the door that the battered angles in the graveyard held open (illegally) for her. (Roy 2017, 437)

In this scene, Tilo and Musa, the dispossessed, find their voices and a way to form their union after Musa's death in a *hijra* graveyard. Musa's body was not physically present in the graveyard, yet Tilo found a "crack" in the *hijra* graveyard (437). In this setting, the struggles and legacies of Kashmiri martyrs are magically placed in the *hijra* graveyard. The struggles of *hijras* and Kashmiris are united into a common struggle for recognition and acceptance in Indian societies and in mainstream national politics.

Roy's use of magic realism is unique. She does not use magical realism to talk about a metaphorical conception of India or postcolonial experience. Instead, she uses elements of magic realism to narrate the complex ways in which characters, having their individual stories and struggles, relate to each other and experience reality. The experiences

of her characters are based on concrete existence, not on metaphorical ideas. As a result, Roy's characters exist as people do in the real world. They speak different dialects and languages and express themselves in many ways.

To represent these characteristics, she also uses various forms of writings, such as prose and poetry, and words from different languages in a largely anglophone novel. Words from languages including Urdu, Hindi and Kashmiri appear in the novel. Her use of these languages re-establishes the regional and cultural situations of her central characters. Roy uses these languages mainly when the incident described is emotionally charged. For example, in the scene when Anjum is caught by a Hindu mob, the mob shouts:

Mussalman ka ek hi sthan! Qabristan ya Pakistan!

Only one place for the Mussalman! The Grayeyard or Pakistan!...

Ai Hai! Saali Randi *Hijra*! Sister-fucking Whore *Hijra*...

Nahi yaar, mat maro, Hijron ka maarna apsgthagun hota hai.

Don't kill her, brother, killing *hijras* bring bad luck. (Roy 2017, 62)

The use of the original language (Hindi) in which these words would have emerged, if in the real world, could be a way for Roy to contextualise her narrative. It can also be argued that Roy uses language in ways that bring attention to the constructed-ness of language. As in the above quotation, the narrator uses Hindi words that are immediately translated into English. A possible reason for this could be the obvious global readership of the novel. Or

it could be that this fusion of different languages is used as a tool by Roy to deconstruct the use of linear language, style and narrative to express gender behaviours.

Anita Felicelli (2017) acknowledges that *The Ministry* “emphasizes the liminal spaces, the space outside conventional language and power”. In narrating the experiences of people who are placed on the fringes of mainstream society, language fails to provide a complete and stable model in this novel. It is challenged by people who refuse to become part of the *Duniya* (mainstream heteropatriarchal world), who resist the ones in power and who create an alternate reality. For instance, in the initial pages of the novel, even before revealing Anjum’s gender identity, Anjum’s name is re-read in multiple ways. The Man who Knew English once told her if her name is spelt backwards, it reads Majnu. Listening to this, Anjum laughs and exclaims “What will they do when they find that Laila may actually be the Majnu and Romi was really Juli?” (Roy 40). Anjum plays with the idea of naming the gender. However, later when the Man Who Knew English tells her that he made a mistake and that her name spells Mujna backward, which doesn’t mean anything, Anjum replies:

It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Rumi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. *And* Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anything else you would like to invite? Everyone is invited. (Roy 2017, 4)

Here, language is multiplied, ripped apart as the word is spelt in different ways in order to make sense of Anjum’s identity. Anjum challenges the unidimensional way of

understanding the world and asserts, rather unapologetically, that her existence is beyond language. Language is held as insufficient to describe a person's identity, especially when it falls outside the binaries. For all the experiences that Anjum has had, witnessed, and survived, she does not feel constrained to be defined in just one word. The fragility of language is exposed. By only adding two new alphabets to her name, she becomes everything – far from the gender she was born with or had lived as. She even becomes Laila and Majnu, the famous love icons from Indian folklore. The use of misnaming to uncover meanings in the text and a way of controlling people is a postmodern device that appears in many fictional works. Naming and re-naming are ways of exercising power. In the scene quoted above, Anjum trespasses on the boundaries of binary gender and becomes 'everything' as she plays with the idea of re-naming herself.

Through the language and form of this novel, Roy captures the attention of readers by trying different forms and techniques that deal with the rupturing of the conventional narrative mode. In narrating the life of Anjum, the language and form of this novel becomes an important tool to highlight the constructed-ness of gender. The in-between space and the idea of porous borders and flexibility, which are among the central themes of the novel, are explored with reference to non-normative identities. As Anjum becomes 'everything', she attains the freedom she was denied in the *Duniya*. The impulse of not being bound by the conventional binary language system is a powerful way of resistance, a step towards freedom (Felicelli 2017; Ross 2019). Roy's novel recognizes this impulse and challenges conventional language with a mixed narrative style.

Through its language, form and narrative style, *The Ministry* makes a robust political assertion that a singular lens is not sufficient to capture *hijra*'s lived experiences. Hence, Roy brings voices that speak different languages and uses multiple narrative styles and genres. In this discussion it has been argued that the devices and techniques that Roy employs in the novel are well curated and provide a progressive space in which to portray marginalised communities. This progressive space uses three metaphorical and allegorical landscapes to show the complex ways in which Anjum experiences her identity as a Muslim *hijra* in the socio-political conditions in 21st century India. These landscapes are the places which Anjum inhabits in the world of *The Ministry* and they represent different phases of Anjum's life.

3.3 *Khwabgah – the world of secrets and unknowability*

Khwabgah is the house of *hijras* and most of *The Ministry*'s plot unfolds here. It represents *hijras* sympathetically by representing itself as a world of secrets. Before introducing *Khwabgah* to the readers, the narrator gives a glimpse of one of its residents, Bombay Silk. She is the first *hijra* that this novel represents:

One spring morning Aftab saw a tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez buying bangles from Mir the bangle-seller who doubled up as caretaker of the Chitli Qabar ... Aftab had never

seen anybody like the tall women with lipstick ... He wanted to be her ... He followed her down the street all the way to Turkman Gate and stood for a long time outside the blue doorway she disappeared into ... Whatever she was, Aftab wanted to be her ... Like her he wanted to shimmer past the meat shops where skinned carcasses of whole goats hung down like great walls of meat; he wanted to simper past the New Life-Style Men's Hairdressing Salon where Iliyaas the barber cut Liaqat the lean young butcher's hair and shined it up with Brylcreem. He wanted to put out a hand with painted nails and a wrist full of bangle. (Roy 2017, 18)

Bombay Silk is represented as someone who is highly desirable and different from others. This passage is full of similes and comparisons. Even the most mundane things, like the barber giving a haircut, are exoticized as Aftab fantasizes of becoming like her. The narrative creates a fantastical world out of the most ordinary things. Whatever she touches or does, turns beautiful. Even lifting her *salwar* (female trouser) becomes a desirable act. She appears like a heroine of a glamorous 90's Bollywood film, who is both desirable and exotic. She is made sense of through comparisons and contrasts, indicating the struggle for appropriate vocabulary. Interestingly, all the things she does, the places she visits, or the clothes she wears are prohibited for ordinary women in her area. Her difference from ordinary women makes her existence understandable. When not compared to a woman, the narrator says she becomes whatever she is, suggesting again a lack in vocabulary. Most of the things that she is shown doing in the street are the ones that the ordinary men in Shahjahanabad do, but the narrator is careful not to compare her with a man. She is associated, compared and contrasted only to the womankind. This presents to the readers,

especially the Western readers, an image of *hijras* which is more understandable in terms of woman-like or third gender identity.

This world is represented through elements of fantasy – the street that goes to the Turkman Gate is made into a fantasy world, and Bombay Silk is the fairy who disappears into it. The reference to colours in this passage, particularly ‘bright lipstick’ is significant. Lipstick has been repeatedly referred to in this novel when portraying *hijras*. For instance, when Anjum becomes a permanent resident of the *Khwabgah*, she wears “bow-shaped Madhubala mouth of glossy-red lipstick” (26). Or, when she returns from Gujarat after facing the Hindu Mob, “She emerged hours later, in her normal clothes, with lipstick” (47). Lipstick in this novel is used as a visual marker of *hijra* identity. More importantly, it is used as a metaphor to represent the bright, colourful and happy lives of the residents of *Khwabgah*. In a novel that narrates several experiences of marginalities, it is crucial to note that the lives of *hijras* in *Khwabgah* are represented through fantasies, and bright and happy colours. It may be suggested that *Khwabgah* is representative of a world which relies on non-realist principles, which eventually led Anjum to leave this world. Within this reading, use of lipstick can also be seen as a trope to represent the ‘fake’ and ‘deceptive’ nature of *Khwabgah* which accommodates only those things which are bright, shiny and fantastical. Lipstick has also been identified to represent “fakeness” in many forms of fiction writings, including, trans life writings (Sereno 2005). However, in the overall placement of *Khwabgah* in this novel, Roy purposefully uses it as an allegorical setting which is representative of a dreamland. The use of lipstick and bright and shiny colours are motifs to represent this world of fantasy which actively refuses to participate in the activities of

Duniya. These motifs can therefore also be read as empowering the *hijra* community-based existence in this novel.

Other than lipstick, this novel uses motifs of secrecy and of binaries to represent *Khwabgah*. *Khwabgah* is introduced in the novel as a world with “its dreams and its secrets” (Roy 2017, 6). In several fiction writings on *hijras* (for instance, *Bombay Ice*), the *hijra* community is represented as one with deep secrets or as having links with the underworld. In all such novels, the *hijra* community is represented through unknowability. Secrecy, as the literary critic Matei Calinesco states, is “conscious” and ‘deliberate” in literary fictions and is an “important link in the chain of communication” (1994, 444). In *The Ministry*, the narrator uses secrecy as a motif to show that there is an unknowability to the reality and experience of sexuality that can never be reduced in language. So, it is withheld from language and the social which offers a counter space. Not knowing the secret demonstrates that the reader, or even the narrator, does not know everything about the community and their experiences. In this novel, *hijras* deliberately keep secrets to communicate their unwillingness to become a part of *Duniya*. Every resident in the *Khwabgah* knows that their everyday life practices must never be revealed to the people living in *Duniya*. In the first chapter of the novel, when the old *Imaam* (officiating priest of a mosque) asks Anjum about the rituals and details of a *hijra*’s burial, Anjum replies:

You are the Imaam Sahib, not me. Where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the Sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? Do you not

think that the All-Seeing, Almighty One who put us on this earth has made proper arrangements to take us away? (Roy 2017, 5)

By using the bird metaphor here, Anjum demonstrates the imbecile preoccupation of people in *Duniya* with *hijra*. An effort to demystify *hijras* can be seen here. More importantly, by choosing not to disclose their burial rituals, Anjum keeps *hijra* lives as a secret from the people who do not belong to their world. The importance of keeping secrets is also demonstrated when Anjum leaves *Khwabgah*, as the narrator says, “Even though Anjum’s departure from the *Khwabgah* had been far from cordial, she knew that its dreams and its secrets were not hers alone to betray” (6). In fact, the narrator of this novel also keeps the secrets of *Khwabgah*. While the narrator allows the reader to peep through the door of *Khwabgah* and look into its dreams and secrets, as Anjum’s story unfolds, the narrator is careful not to leak all of its secrets. For instance, much later in the novel, when the old *Imaam* becomes one of Anjum’s trusted friends, he performs the burial rituals of one of the *hijras*. So, the old *Imaam* gets his answers but we as readers never get to know the full secrets of *hijra* burial. The old *Imaam*, through his genuine friendship with *hijra* characters becomes a secret sharer. It is as if the narrative is making a moral point that to know the secrets of *hijra* life, one must, like the old *Imaam*, attempt to understand them. There is also an unsaid trust which is maintained in the novel between the narrator and the *hijra* characters. Like Anjum and the rest of the *hijras*, the omniscient narrator is a secret keeper of *Khwabgah* and does not betray its dream even in narrating the lives of its residents. The use of secrecy, thus, comes as a powerful device to disrupt non-*hijra* people’s

preoccupation with *hijra* lives. Therefore, by representing *hijras* through secrets, the narrative presents *Khwabgah* as unknowable.

Through these motifs, *Khwabgah* is represented as the binary opposite of *Duniya*. “Manzoori. Consent” is the foundation of *Khwabgah*, a place which is called by its name because, as Kulsoom Bi says, people come there “with their dreams that could not be realized in the *Duniya*” (51). The dreams and secrets of *Khwabgah* are represented as empowering to its residents. Unlike the *Duniya* which does not welcome diversity, *Khwabgah* offers space to *hijras* from different backgrounds to exist in harmony. For example, Mary is a Christian *hijra*, Gudia and Bulbul are Hindus while others are Muslim. Some of them have undergone *nirvana*, while others refuse to undergo any surgery. Bombay Silk and Heera (both Muslims) did not undergo any surgical operation even though they wanted to. Unlike these two, Ustad Kulsoom Bi and Nimmo Gorakhpuri, both Muslims, underwent *nirvana*. They accepted a different interpretation of Islam, highlighting the diversity of beliefs in *Khwabgah*. The narrator further stresses that both Kusloom and Nimmo belonged to different generations but had a similar interpretation of Islam. Likewise, all residents of *Khwabgah* believed in their versions of *hijra* origin. For example, Kulsoom Bi believed *hijras* were “the chosen people, beloved of the Almighty” (7). Nimmo, on the contrary, believed that God created *hijras* as an “experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So he made us” (23). At the same time, Gudiya traced her existence from a story in Ramayana. In this Hindu mythological text, only *hijras* waited for Lord Ram to return from his 14 years-long exiles in the forest as he forgot to mention *hijras* while ordering all “men and women” to

return to their homes (51). Thus, *Khwabgah* allowed multiple forms of beliefs and practices to exist in harmony. In contrast to the *Duniya*, *Khwabgah* offers a potentially liberating space.

Significantly, the narrator demonstrates *Khwabgah* as the binary opposite of *Duniya* by using two different styles of narration for Anjum's life before and after she becomes a resident of *Khwabgah*. In the earlier quoted excerpt where Bombay Silk was portrayed for the first time, the narrator used elements of fantasy to describe her. Notably, that was the first time in Anjum's life she was offered a perspective about how she feels. Before this, Anjum's life story was narrated in terms of how others perceived her, while she was Aftab.

Readers are informed that Anjum's childhood was unhappy and traumatic for her parents, especially her mother who was "terrified of her own baby" (Roy 7). The narrative in this part of the novel is clearly detached and does not invest much in fleshing out the details of Anjum's life. On the one hand, this can be read as sidestepping some of the real struggles that *hijras* face in the real world. Anjum's feelings and her journey of surviving as a child in *Duniya* can be seen as silenced in a novel that otherwise indulges in non-significant details. For example, the narrator gives details about Anjum's parents; the area she was born, Hazrat Sarmad (the Dargah, shrine, to which Anjum's mother takes her) and details about the sexologist, Dr Nabi, whom her parents first consult about Anjum's gender. While the readers are left to assume how painful it must have been for young Anjum (then Aftab), born an intersex in a cis heteropatriarchal society, her traumas are never voiced. The narrator goes just as far as to remark that "Aftab refused to go to school any more"

(12). This sentence, without any significant narration about Aftab's school life, could suggest that the young Aftab had a choice of going to school, which he refused. Given the deeply patriarchal society in which he was born, it is worth considering whether the situation was the other way round – instead of Aftab refusing, was he forced to leave the school? The fact that there was only one *hijra* who was a high school pass-out in *Khwabgah* could suggest that the cruelty of Aftab having to leave his school could have served as retrospective plot element to voice the injustices that *hijras* suffer in real life. Similarly, Aftab's experience of leaving his parent's house at the age of eight and joining a new community is never voiced. In fact, Aftab's transition to Anjum is also very brief and sudden. It is as brief as Aftab taking "three whole minutes to make her mind" for the surgery (28). The entire episode of Anjum's surgery taking place, which does not even last a page, is full of details about the doctor who conducted the operation and about the physical changes done to Anjum's body. Anjum's feelings are completely unvoiced.

However, on the other hand, the detached narrative in this part of the novel which does not offer a perspective of Anjum in her past life could also be seen as a careful narrative device to mark a shift in the way *hijras* are perceived in the *Duniya* and *Khwabgah*, respectively. Like the narrator, the people in *Duniya* detach themselves from *hijra* subjects and do not want to understand their perspective. In contrast, *Khwabgah* offers a perspective and a sympathetic understanding to *hijra* lives. Likewise, *hijra* lives and the events that unfold in this part of the world are told by a curious and sympathetic narrator. For instance, from the very first time when Anjum (then Aftab) sees Bombay Silk, the narrative voice gives her a perspective. Aftab's immediate reaction was that he "wanted to

be her” (18). While this reaction may come across as rudimentary since Aftab was a child, only eight years old at this time, is almost as if he was given a moment of narrative wisdom about what he was going to be, and therefore suddenly recognises what he wants to be. The reader is told he wanted to be like her even more than he wanted to be the heroine from the romance story he loves. In fact, curious as he was to discover Bombay Silk, he quite naturally is driven to *Khwabgah*. Along with Aftab, we as readers also become curious to find out more about *Khwabgah*.

The change in narrative voice, from a detached narrator to a sympathetic narrator, therefore crafts space to represent how *hijra* lives are understood in the real world. Since this novel uses a metaphorical world and relies on elements of fantasy to represent *hijra* characters, sidestepping real life experiences of *hijras* is part of the creative adventure of this fiction. Hence, it does not come as a surprise in the world of the novel when one-night Aftab magically lands in *Khwabgah*, as in a fairy-tale plot, and never mentions his previous life. These episodes occur one after the other and set Anjum’s story as a fantasy where everything is possible. A curious narrator and elements of magic realism together represent *Khwabgah* as the symbolic other of *Duniya*. In *Duniya*, Anjum’s existence terrified her own parents and led her to leave school, but in *Khwabgah*, Anjum could live her life without the fear of being teased by any of the residents. It is a safe place for Anjum and acts as an exit door to *Duniya*.

The narrator also shows sympathy with the residents of *Khwabgah* by representing them as mothers. As the *hijra* mother in Bollywood films, discussed in chapter 2,

motherhood is one of the key tropes used to sympathise with *hijras*. Through motherhood, *hijras* are represented as nurturers fostering motherly tendencies, which draws attention to the unique position given to mothers in the subcontinent. In India, mothers are often made symbols of goddess and nation, which establishes mothers as powerful characters (Chakraborty 2009). In *The Ministry*, Roy uses motherhood as one of the literary tropes to disrupt the essentialist assumption based on biological parenting by sympathising with *hijra* mothers.

The description of the scene when Anjum sees Zainab (a girl child whom Anjum adopts) for the first time is one of the most emotionally detailed scenes of the novel. The narrative voice describes this moment as:

Zainab was Anjum's only love. Anjum had found her three years ago on one of those windy afternoons when the prayer caps of the faithful blew off their heads and the balloon sellers' balloons all slanted to one side. She was alone and bawling on the steps of the Jama Masjid, a painfully thin mouse of a thing, with big, frightened eyes... When Anjum loomed over her and offered her a finger to hold, she glanced up briefly, grasped it and continued to cry loudly without pause. The Mouse-in-a-hijab had no idea what the storm that casual gesture after rest set off inside the owner of the finger that she held on to ... The warring factions inside Anjum fell silent. Her body felt like a generous host instead of a Battlefield. Was it like dying, or being born? Anjum couldn't decide. In her imagination it had the fullness, the sense of entirety, of one of the two. (Roy 2017, 30-31)

Zainab's little and fragile body is compared to that of a mouse. However, more than Zainab's fragile body, the narrator focuses on the emotions that Anjum experiences on seeing Zainab. The fragility of Zainab's body is used as a metaphor for Anjum's own emotions. When the child, who is probably abandoned by her family and is at the mercy of nature, holds Anjum's fingers, she gives support and meaning to Anjum's life. Through this incident, Anjum's fragility, loneliness, and broken inner self are depicted. The coming of this child reveals Anjum's vulnerability in *Duniya*. Like Zainab, she is an abandoned child of the *Duniya* who is as vulnerable and fragile as a mouse. As much as Anjum gives meaning to Zainab by holding the child's hand, the child brings meaning in Anjum's life. Zainab's entry in the novel is a strong narrative trope to create sympathy with Anjum as a *hijra* mother.

Additionally, in representing *hijras* as mothers, this novel also recognises and celebrates the *guru-chela*/ mother-daughter relationship. As discussed in detail in chapter 1, motherhood is one of the primary kinship relations that bound *hijras* in South Asia. *Hijra* households are formed on non-bloodline kinship patterns and each *hijra* adopts new members in the community. In this novel, there are several instances when the *hijras* of *Khwabgah*, all of whom form kinship ties with each other, share moments of happiness or grieve together. For instance, in one scene, the *hijra* head, Ustad Kulsum Bi, takes her *chelis* time and again to the light and sound show which artistically portrays Delhi's history at the Red Fort, one of the historical monuments in Delhi. The omnipotent narrative voice tells us that Kulsum would wait for that one moment in the show when court *hijras* would make their presence felt "suddenly, amidst those soft, happy, lads-sounds would come the

clearly audible, deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch” (51). At this scene, Kulsum would cheer up and say “this is our ancestry, our history, our story. We were never commoners, you see, we were members of the staff of the Royal Palace” (31). This scene from the novel emphasizes not just the bond that *hijras* of *Khwabgah* share amongst each other in the contemporary setting of the novel but also establishes them as a community which has a lineage and ancestors. The pride and happiness which this part of the show brings to Kulsum is evidence of how she connects with her ancestors, which plays a crucial role in sustaining selfhood for many people. This lineage sanctions Kulsum’s and the existence of many *hijras* in India.

Through such scenes, Roy brings into focus the theme of motherhood as a reproductive right in this novel by representing *hijras* forming a lineage based on non-bloodline patterns. Tanya Saroj Bakhru states that the theme of reproductive justice “interrogates and complicate notions of ‘choice’ of motherhood” (2019, 7). In this novel, multiple choices of being a mother are recognised and celebrated. These include, *hijra* characters becoming mothers of other *hijras* (Kulsoom Bi and her *chelas*), *hijras* becoming mothers of non-*hijra* children (Anjum and Zainab) and non-*hijra* becoming mothers of non-*hijra* children (Tilo and Miss Jabeen). Therefore, *Khwabgah* also becomes a space which represents Roy’s own understanding of gender on a wide-ranging spectrum. The novel is a significant step forward in representing non-normative lives as it uses an anti-essentialist approach towards gender.

It is significant to note that as Roy represents *Khwabgah* as a romantic vacation through fantasies and secrets, she is careful not to depoliticise it. Instead, *Khwabgah* provides space to voice the changing structures and patterns in the lived experiences of *hijras* in an economically liberalised India. The novel acknowledges that as the “New India - a nuclear power and an emerging destination for international finance” shapes itself; gender non-normative experiences also reshape in modern India (38). A new sense of self, which emerged post globalisation for *hijras* in India is voiced through a new generation of *hijra* characters in the novel.

The narrator tells us that after a number of years of Anjum’s life in *Khwabgah*, it became “home to a new generation of residents” (29). Most of these new residents could speak English, wore both traditional (*Salwar-Kameez*) and Western clothes. They could also use terms like “cis-Man and FtoM and MtoF” and also referred to themselves “as a ‘transperson’” (38). The narrator tells us that Saeeda, one of the new residents:

... switched easily between traditional salwar kameez and Western clothes - jeans, skirts, halter-necks that showed off her long, beautifully muscled back. What she lacked in local flavor and old-world charm she more than made up for with a modern understanding, her knowledge of the law and her involvement with Gender Rights Groups (she had even spoken at two conferences). All this placed her in a different league from Anjum. Also, Saeeda had edged Anjum out of the number one spot in the media. The foreign newspapers had done the old exotics in favor of the

younger generation. The exotics didn't suit the image of the new India – a nuclear power and an emerging destination for international finance. (Roy 2017, 38)

Through the description of Saeeda, the narrator informs readers about the shift in the lives of *hijras* and the way they are represented in the media. *Hijras* recognizing themselves as trans is progressive as it frames *hijras* outside of the exotic symbol. This change opens several opportunities for *hijras* and is a step forward in integrating them into the politics of the real world. Through funding and international recognition, members of the *hijra* community like Saeeda have options to choose their profession. It provides them with social mobility and social integration to some extent. However, on the other hand, Anjum's jealousy of Saeeda in the novel is representative of how this change and social integration comes at the cost of further marginalizing one section of the community. Those like Anjum who are uneducated and do not have access to funding found themselves at the peripheries of the *hijra* community, which was once their only solace. Thus, *Khwabgah* starts to become fractured, like *Duniya*. Nimmo, one the old residents of *Khwabgah*, says:

Who's happy here. It's not possible. Arrey yaar, think about it, what are the things you normal people get unhappy about? I don't mean you, but grown-ups like you - what makes them unhappy? Price-rise, children's school-admissions, husband's beatings, wife's cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war – outside things that settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't. (Roy 2017, 23)

It is hard for Nimmo to believe that she or any *hijra* could ever be happy because they are fighting an internal war. For her, the world only makes sense through binaries and therefore, it is difficult to make sense of her existence and of those like her. Irrespective of creating *Khwabgah*, their internal conflict will never end. Through these binaries, insight is offered into how a *hijra* like Nimmo struggles to place herself in *Khwabgah*, which is the binary opposite of *Duniya*. This struggle shows that there are no essential binaries as residents in *Khwabgah* remain affected by the changes in *Duniya*. The manner in which Nimmo faces the challenges is different from ‘normal’ people, as she calls them, but they originate from the same root cause. Nimmo’s understanding of *Khwabgah* is how the narrator understands it too. The narrator created and represented *Khwabgah* through fantasies as a binary opposite of *Duniya* but as the narrative unfolds, it emerged as a failed resort for *hijras*, just like *Duniya*. Though ideal and fantastic as it may appear, *Khwabgah* becomes ordinary. It fails to support contradictions, as is evident when people like Nimmo and Anjum leave *Khwabgah*. Like these characters, the narrative plot too gets stuck in this world and in order to progress, it shifts to *Duniya*. Therefore, as this novel has focused on the unknowability and secrecy of *hijras*, this is not the preferred model or the ideal setting for the narrative.

3.4 *Duniya* – reinstating binaries

Anjum's journey to Gujarat allows the narrative to place Anjum in *Duniya* where she experiences her marginalised position as a Muslim *hijra*. Since *Khwabgah* was represented as a place where *hijras* from different religious beliefs and practices lived together in harmony, it became a comfortable zone for Anjum. She travels to Ajmer, Rajasthan to visit Hazrat Garib Nawaz's shrine to bring peace in her daughter Zainab's life. She makes this trip with Zakir Mian, a seventy-year-old man, who was her dead father's friend. On their return to Delhi, Zakir Mian had some business in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and Anjum decides to accompany him since she could not risk going alone for fear of abuse and harassment¹⁹. Fear and abuse are common characteristics used to describe *Duniya* in contrast to the safety and comfort which Anjum felt in *Khwabgah*.

Anjum's journey, intended to bring peace in her life proves to do the opposite. She is caught by a Hindu mob in Gujarat, during the Gujarat pogrom. She survives while Zakir Mian (a Muslim too, but not a *hijra*) is killed:

They left her alive. Un-killed. Un-hurt. Neither folded nor unfolded. She alone. So that they might be blessed with good fortune.

Butcher's luck.

That's all she was. And the longer she lived, the more good luck she brought them.

(Roy 2017, 63)

The words chosen in the above-quoted passage are highly sympathetic to Anjum's personal trauma. The words "un-killed" and "un-hurt" are masterfully used by Roy here to capture

the intensity of Anjum's trauma. Anjum's living condition can only be understood from the fact that she was not killed and hurt. Un-killed and un-hurt suggest that this is a punishment more than a relief that she survived the violence. It is a punishment that *Duniya* gave to Anjum for crossing the boundaries of gender binary roles. This incident instantaneously destroys the language that Anjum had learned during all these years in *Khwabgah*. The realisation that she is not killed, that she is allowed to live because of her gender, shatters her. As Dwivedi (2017) rightly suggests, this incident makes Anjum realise that the "‘Indo-Pak’ war of gender that plays upon her body and in her heart and that she has learnt to live and love with, is also ‘Butcher’s Luck’". Her existence in *Khwabgah* had been nothing more than a 'Butcher's luck'. The binaries that the narrator has sympathetically crafted in the depiction of *Khwabgah* are purposefully broken in this incident. *Khwabgah* suddenly becomes representative of a lack and an incomplete setting as Anjum realises that gender has been only one part of her existence.

Anjum's trip to Gujarat has two special purposes in this novel. First, this setting allows Roy to be vocal about her political views against Hindutva and the implications of a fascist regime on ordinary people. The Gujarat pogrom in 2002 is reported by many as state sponsored violence, including Roy. By contextualizing this scene against the voice of Narendra Modi, the current Indian Prime Minister of India who was then the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Roy offers a criticism of Hindutva ideology. Roy uses specific slogans commonly raised by violent mobs during such acts of violence to flesh out the politics of Hindutva and Indian nation-state – "Bharat Mata Ki Jai! Vande Mataram...Victory to Mother India! Salute the Mother!" (63). These are nationalist slogans that have persisted in

India since India's independence struggles against British colonisation. The use of these slogans by Hindu mobs as they kill Muslims is representative of the way religious minorities are seen as infiltrators and are othered in Hindutva nationalism. Roy uses her political commitments to sympathise with ordinary people, by depicting Anjum as a living victim of this pogrom which haunts her through the rest of her life. Secondly, the setting allows for the essential sacrifice that Anjum must undergo so that the plot can develop. This journey conflates Anjum's identity as a *hijra* and a Muslim in contemporary India, something that Anjum always experienced to co-exist peacefully in *Khwabgah*. This journey, therefore, is a sacrifice of Anjum's past understandings to new realisations which are complex. It acts as a break from the romantic vacation of *Khwabgah* where some of the lived experiences of *hijras* are romanticized.

After the mob leaves her 'un-killed', she witnesses horrific events. She sees women being raped while she lives a poverty-stricken life in a refugee camp inside a mosque in Gujarat, in the men's quarter as a man. All these experiences resulted in Anjum's change of perspective on her gender identity, which she had thought represented all the 'wars' inside her. She now sees herself in relation to other social categories. The conflict she witnesses between her religious and gender identity in *Duniya* disorients her understanding of herself. The world stopped making sense to her, and all she could understand was that she was a 'Butcher's luck. As a result, she could not continue to live with a language, the language available in the *Khwabgah*, as it confines her into a singular identity. This is why she could no longer talk to anyone when she returned to *Khwabgah*. She tries to learn new ways of living. For instance, she cuts off her hair, which is of extreme significance to residents of

Khwabgah. She changes Zainab's appearance to make her look like a boy and makes her learn *Gayatri Mantra* (a sacred chant of Hindus) as people in the refugee camp told her "it was good to know [Gayatri Mantra] so that in mob situations they could recite it and pass off as Hindu" (47). It was as a result of the experience of living as an 'un-killed', while dead internally, that she finally chooses to leave *Khwabgah* and go to the graveyard.

The episode of Gujarat also demonstrates that people who live in community-based settings are also affected by what is happening in *Duniya*. What Nimmo said earlier about the "Indo-Pak war is inside us" is proved wrong. Anjum's realisation that she no longer wants to live in the house of dreams, which remains with her for the rest of her life, is a strong criticism of *Khwabgah*. The fact that Anjum does not feel comfortable and welcomed in *Khwabgah* after returning from Gujarat stresses the limitations of *hijra* households. In this sense, the journey to Gujarat is an awakening for Anjum, which could never have been possible in *Khwabgah*. Travelling from a community-based setting to the outer world, the *Duniya*, is shown as more real, though cruel, but necessary, for Anjum's growth. *Khwabgah*, in relation of the incident in Gujarat, is portrayed as a safe place but also a place which is restrictive, unreal and which could not accommodate contradictions. It stands in binary opposition to the harsh-cruel yet real world of *Duniya* that Anjum experiences, hence, is only the other side of the same coin.

The critique of *Khwabgah* can potentially be read as reinstating binaries. Since the narrative indicates that *hijras* are allowed to form and live in communities only because the cis gender society considers them auspicious and that their community-based existence has

no agency outside of this narrative. Additionally, as the novel moves to the graveyard setting, the one which is preferred over other settings, and Anjum leaves behind the traditions and practices of *Khwabgah*, the novel unconsciously replicates the binary model of gender within the *hijra* community where there is no room for *hijra* customs and practices. The change in the metaphorical settings in the novel from *Khwabgah* to *Duniya* and finally to Graveyard represents a move away from *hijra* community-based existence. Newport rightly suggests that this “can be a threat to *hijras* by universalising a binary reading of gender which allows for trans identities, but has no room for third-ness or *hijras*’ particular traditions and identity associations outside of their gender identity” (2018, 242). Hence, it can be argued that while this novel is sympathetic towards *hijra* in the way that it does not depoliticise *hijra* existence, the novel reinstates some of the binary models. This novel, therefore, in this way, falls back into the “natural attitude”²⁰ towards gender (Hawkesworth 649). In her essay, “Confounding Gender” (1997), Mary Hawkesworth argues that even the most ambitious writing about gender “construct a tale of gender that is markedly unsettling...[and] replicate rather than undermine the natural attitude” (1997, 654). *The Ministry*, too, unintentionally revokes some reductive stereotypes in critiquing *Khwabgah*.

However, these stereotypes do not inform Roy’s representation of Anjum as a *hijra*. Since Anjum is a character who embodies “incendiary borders” that challenge strict categorisation into binaries (“Chicago Humanities Festival” 00:23:00- 00:24:00). She embodies the in-between space and lives between borders and boundaries, both literally and metaphorically. In one of her interviews, Roy says that Anjum does not accept binaries and

that is why she breaks free from *Khwabgah* and creates a space for herself among the dead where she can make her own meaning and form a language that is not restricted by any rules (Aitkenhead, 2017). Born as a ‘hermaphrodite’, Anjum is cast outside the binary understanding of gender. She is also spelled outside the conventional language, as the narrator tells early in the novel that in the Urdu language that her mother knew, everything has “a gender ... either masculine or feminine”, except Anjum (Roy 8). Her move away from *Khwabgah* suggests that it is Anjum’s personal quest to find and create a language in which she can make sense of herself. *Khwabgah* seemed to fulfil that quest initially, but it eventually fails as it does not go beyond being the binary opposite of the *Duniya*. The move to graveyard, therefore, is suggested as an inclusive space in this novel where people like Anjum, who are not accepted within the binaries and boundaries drawn by the mainstream, can exist since the graveyard does not have any defined codes and practices.

3.5 *The graveyard – creation of a third space*

The graveyard provides an ideal setting for the creation of a third space since all existing language and understanding ceased to exist for Anjum. This space falls outside all of the binaries drawn by the people living in *Duniya*, including *Khwabgah*. Literally, it is a place for the dead and an exit gate for those who are alive. Anjum, considering herself dead (‘un-killed’), on realising the reality of her existence, finds a place for herself there, as she waits for her death. Metaphorically, this place becomes symbolic of a third space where the

graveyard is represented as a common ground for various marginalised people to exist in together. Like Bhabha's concept of third space (as discussed in Chapter 1), the graveyard becomes a place which is inclusive, hybrid and supports co-existence.

Through the depiction of this symbolic third space, Roy alludes to a place which is outside of the hold of capitalism and Hindutva. As Anjum travels to a graveyard, the land of the dead, all the charms of city-life are denied. Instead of tall buildings, Anjum builds a room in the graveyard for herself and there she finds happiness as she builds friendships and solidarity with many people and groups. The graveyard challenges metro-normativity and offers a critique of the capitalist society. Anjum leaves the hustle of city life for a place where she can contemplate and reflect on the past events of her life. Here, she mourns her 'un-killed' self and the unresolvable losses, including the loss of her comfortable life in *Khwabgah*. After the events in Gujarat, Anjum realizes that her gender does not exist in a vacuum but is re-read by others. She decides to live with people who are also cast out (as social outsiders) and are subjugated due to their marginalised experiences. Her decisions reflect Roy's advocacy for the recentring of a collective minority voice. The space of graveyard is thus significant in highlighting Roy's political commitments and activism.

My analysis has shown that *Khwabgah* does not provide an inclusive space. Instead, it is another form of institutionalisation which restrict *hijras* within specific spaces and categories. As the novel moves away from *Khwabgah* to a more inclusive community, *Khwabgah* functions as a narrative trope in the novel's overall plot. Since the graveyard is the place where Anjum finally comes to peace with herself, it fulfils Anjum's quest. It is

also the place which the narrator privileges in this novel, as all the significant characters of the story come together in the graveyard, representing a collective voice grounded in various marginalised experiences.

In each of these settings, Anjum comes closer to new experiences of marginalities. Based on these experiences, she emerges with a “patched” body (Roy 2017, 29). However, her emergence and the fulfilment of her dreams are also contained within the intersections of marginalisation, as she moves to the graveyard. In the section that depicts the graveyard, Anjum develops friendships with people who do not belong to the *hijra* community. In depicting Anjum during this stage of the novel, the narrator becomes highly compassionate, and the novel becomes funny and playful. The desolated setting of the graveyard produces moments of joy and happiness which can be seen as part of Roy’s creative strategy to critique mainstream representation of *hijra* life. Significantly, the location of the graveyard provides social mobility to Anjum. This place grants her more freedom, access and respectability. By making acquaintances who have mixed backgrounds and identities, she becomes politically aware of issues other than gender. She even participates in protests at Jantar Mantar, exposing her to many of the political, social and religious problems in India society. Most importantly, she becomes economically stable after she starts to run her own business in the graveyard – the Jannat Guest House.

Roy masterfully uses the graveyard setting as a creative literary device to represent Anjum’s existence in the novel. Anjum’s character inhabits this space, representing a fluid identity which continuously makes and re-makes the self. In this space, Anjum becomes

into an activist who takes part in the strikes at Jantar Mantar along with living the life of a Muslim *hijra* who owns a business and is a friend to a Kashmiri activist, a Dalit man and other marginalised members of society.

It is no surprise that the environment of Jantar Mantar gave Roy the initial thought of writing this novel. Jantar Mantar represents a complex hybrid space where hundreds of protests take place but only very few gain mainstream media attention. Anjum's story in *The Ministry*, a novel which falls within high postcolonial literature with an international reach, is symbolic of such complexity. Several *hijras* in India have been embodying the life that is represented in this novel for centuries, yet it is only when an author like Roy chooses to write about their lives that *hijra* lives suddenly become important.

In this respect, Anjum remains a subject of Roy's creative imagination in the novel. Though, unlike all previous novels, *The Ministry* is commendable because it presents the story of a *hijra* in a way which does not demand conformity or consistency. It represents Anjum's liminality through the many choices that she makes, significantly through her choice to live in the graveyard. In this part of the story, the novel does not depend on building a strong voice. On the contrary, the narrator describes, Anjum's voice is like "two voices quarreling with each other" (Roy 32). Her speech is representative of her intersectional identity which struggles to conform to the binaries made by the *Duniya*, eventually leading her to live in the graveyard and challenge the various social categories, including, gender, caste, class, and religion. The graveyard thus creates a welcoming and

powerful third space, both literally and metaphorically, which provides representation of marginalised sections of society in a novel which has a global reach.

Conclusion

Thus, this chapter has argued that through Roy's experimental forms, the novel represents Anjum as a character living in actual locations, being affected by the socio-political changes of the time and place in which she was living. However, there are instances when this novel unintentionally uses reductive stereotypes in a way which undermines some of the innovative forms that it deploys to represent *hijras* in the first place. This novel is commendable for taking the steps to represent *hijras* as literary characters. In other words, I have argued, that this novel plays with conventions of realism and fiction writing to provide a space for the narration of experiences of caste, class, gender and sexuality in the contemporary India and attempts to expand parameters of queer life. Hence, the creative techniques used are successful in regard to the representation of *hijra* characters in this novel.

Chapter Four

Hijra Life Writings: Rewriting the self

Introduction

When the marginalised have no voice against massive power structures, they are forced to come out with their own media to be heard. Because at the end of the day, we belong here too. (Mudraboyina 2019)

The above lines are spoken by Rachana Mudraboyina, a well-known *hijra* activist, in an interview published in 2019 in an online journalist platform. In this interview, Mudraboyina draws attention to how *hijra* life writings emerged as part of *hijra* activism in India. *Hijra* activism developed alongside economic liberalisation in India in the 1990s. Researchers engaged with LGBTQ+ related themes in India, such as Akshay Khanna (2007), Paul Boyce (2007), Arundhati Dutta (2012) and Rovel Sequeira (2022), point out that major government and transnational fundings came from HIV-AIDS intervention during this period which resulted in connecting several *hijras* with NGO networks in big cities. *Hijras* were particularly associated with these funded NGOs because *hijras* were seen as a “culturally authentic and vulnerable Indian subgroup within the globalising category of MSM (men who have sex with men) used in transnational HIV-AIDS prevention discourse” (A. Dutta 2012, 826). As a result, *hijras* living in cities soon started to find support from NGO-related works and came to be at the centre of “discourses about gender/sexuality rights circulating via transnational NGO networks” (Sequeira 2022, 1),

thereby giving rise to *hijra* activism. It started as an awareness about HIV-AIDS at community level through transnational funded NGOs and emerged as an organised activism by the framing of a broader collective *hijra* voice. This raised concerns about *hijra* legal rights as Indian citizens (aided by a general interest in Indian *hijra* communities nationally and globally), and eventually led to the Supreme Court's landmark judgment in 2014.

Hijra activism in its current state is formed into a well-established collective voice which continues to fight for legal rights and social acceptance in India. *Hijra* life writing emerged as a significant part of *hijra* activism in the 2000s, with the first book-length narrative, *Unarvum Uruvamum* (Our Lives, Our Words), published in 2004 in Tamil, written by *hijra* activist A. Revathi. It narrates the life of several *hijras* whom Revathi met during her work at the NGO. This book inspired several *hijra* writers to write their autobiographies, including Revathi herself who published her autobiography, *The Truth About Me – A Hijra Life Story*, in 2010. Revathi recounts, in an interview published in *The Hindu*, a leading Indian newspaper:

Recently my *hijra* friends encountered a woman on the streets who hugged them and begged them for my phone number and having got it called me to tell me how much the book meant to her and how it helped her rid herself off her prejudices and fear of *hijras*. This is what is important for me; to touch people's hearts through my art (2021).

Revathi describes how writing her life narrative has been an important part of her role as an *hijra* activist. It is important to study *hijra* activism as it has been a means to educate non-

hijra people about *hijra* experiences with a hope to reduce social prejudices and biases against the *hijra* community. In this regard, first-person accounts were part of their activism. Several forms of *hijra* life writings have emerged into the public domain, from published book-length *hijra* autobiographies to non-traditional life writing modes, such as online articles, blogs, interviews, *YouTube* channels, websites and thousands of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts/pages run by individual *hijras* or *hijra* organisations. At the core of all these life narratives is the intention to represent *hijras* positively against the negative stereotypes which circulate in the dominant cultural modes of *hijra* representation, as Mudraboyina argues that:

The stories carried out on transgender people were either under-reported or wrongly reported, and the community was always negatively portrayed. You would have stories put together from unrelated videos, with news about us spreading diseases or being violent for no reason ... Most of them never consult us before publishing a story about us ... We recognised that the media lacked a basic understanding of our community, thus propagating transphobia, discrimination and negativity. (2019)

While this underlying thought is what defines all *hijra* life writings, in this chapter I categorise *hijra* life writings into autobiographies and non-traditional modes of life writings and argue that the two support/represent different kinds of *hijra* activism. I argue that autobiographies appear as autoethnographies on *hijra* activism. They focus on collectivised experiences of *hijra* identity, dominated by narratives of NGO-based *hijra* activists. While autobiographical writings bring out personal experiences, through a single lens, of *hijra*

lives, non-traditional *hijra* life writings, I argue, represent intersectional *hijra* concerns and have given voice to an emerging activism, which is a critique of the established NGO-based *hijra* activism. These writings include everyday *hijra* experiences based on intersections of gender, sexuality, caste, colour, religion and nationalism. These writings extend solidarities to other marginalised communities to form a broader collective voice to survive Hindutva.

Amongst *hijra* autobiographies, I have chosen the ones which are available in English. These were either translated into English or were originally published in English. These are:

1. *I am Vidya: A transgender's Journey* (2007) written in English by Living Smile Vidya;
2. *The Truth About Me* (2010) written in Tamil by A. Revathi and translated into English by feminist historian V Geetha;
3. *me Hijra, me Laxmi* (2015) written in Marathi by Vaishali Rode, in the first-person narrative voice. Rode is the wife of a close friend of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. This work is a result of several hours of conversation with Tripathi. It was translated into English by writer-academics R. Raj Rao and P.G. Joshi; and
4. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) which depicts the 'story' of the author, Manobi Bandopadhyay. It is co-authored by Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey.

Non-traditional *hijra* life writings are thousands in number, and it is not practically possible to have a list of them all. My choice of selection was based on a range of mix of *hijra* life writings available in English which intersect on issues of caste, colour, religion

and nationalism. The selection of these case studies shows a wide range of forms in which *hijra* life writings are present. Furthermore, their publication details show an emerging solidarity between various marginalised communities, such as *hijras*, Dalits, acid attack victims, trans-men and Muslims. The details about *hijra* writers in these writings dismantle the way in which mainstream representations portray members of *hijra* community. The thirteen sources that I have selected as my case studies are:

1. A conversation between Mudraboyina and “NewsTracker”, an online journalist platform (started in 2018) run by a community of young journalists to report about rape cases in India. This conversation was later edited for clarity by Media Action Rape, a research and capacity building project led by Bournemouth University, UK, and UNESCO and New Delhi, and was published at *Feminism in India | Intersectional Feminism – Desi style!*, an award-winning intersectional feminist platform that amplifies voices of women and the marginalized, with the title “Rachana Mudraboyina On TransVision And Trans Representation In Media” (2019);
2. An Interview with Mudraboyina and Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli, a *hijra* activist, singer and motivational speaker, published in 2017 by Kunal Shankar in the ‘Social Issues’ section in *Frontline*, a national magazine in India. The interview is titled “*Hijra* has become a political identity”;
3. A transcript of an interview between a Dalit *hijra* feminist writer and theatre artist, Living Smile Vidya, with her transgender brothers Kaveri Karthik and Gee Ameena Suleiman. The interviewers attached a note with this transcript which details how

this interview took place. The note clearly shows an emerging solidarity between several gender and sexually marginalised identities. It follows as:

This conversation took place on a late night after 11 pm in the basti [locality] where Kaveri and Gee live, following a day-long discussion between the transgender men and intergenders and lesbian community of Bangalore with a group of visiting Dalit activists and intellectuals from Tamil Nadu. After the other ladies in the basti left the common space on the footpath and went to sleep, the following conversation unfolded. (*Sanhati* 2013)

The transcript of this interview was published in 2013 at *Sanhati*, an online journal which started in 2006 in order to resist the neoliberal forces in West Bengal and to support the voice of dissent. Over the years *Sanhati* has flourished as a journal which gives voice to several forms of marginalisation and activism. It was also published later in *Round Table India*, an online resource of different sorts of material which relate to Dalit experiences. In both the publications, the title of this transcript is “(Trans)gender and caste lived experience – Transphobia as a form of Brahmanism: An Interview of Living Smile Vidya”;

4. An article entitled “Where are the archives of our Dalit Trans foremothers and forefathers?”, written by Grace Banu, published in 2018 during the Dalit History Month in *The Print*, an Indian online newspaper. Banu is a Dalit *hijra* activist, a cultural performer and a technologist. Banu is also the founder and director of Trans

Rights Now Collective, an organisation which works for trans visibility among Dalits, Bahujans and Adivasis;

5. Grace Banu's interview with *Dalit Camera* (2016), a *YouTube* Channel and website which started in 2011 and documents voices of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and other minorities, particularly in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal;
6. An online blog post, published in 2020, by Kalki Subramaniam, entitled "I'm on a mission to empower India's transgender community, one painted palm at a time". It appeared under the 'Arts' section in *CNN Style*, an international news portal which features the world of fashion, beauty, design, architecture, arts and luxury.
Subramaniam is a trans rights activist and artist, who runs a website to showcase her art and activism. She is also the founder of the Sahodari foundation, which has been voicing the experiences of several *hijra* and non-binary communities since 2007;
7. A radio broadcast by America's National Public Radio (NPR) entitled, "A Journey Of Pain And Beauty: On Becoming Transgender In India" which was aired and published online on their website under the 'Culture' section in 2014. The broadcast was a report done by Julia McCarthy, NPR journalist, on the Indian Supreme Court's 2014 verdict, in conversation with Abhina Aher, a *hijra* activist working in the Humsafar Trust, one of the most active LGBTQ+ organisations in India;
8. An article, entitled "What Does India's Transgender Community Want?", based on communications with two Dalit *hijra* activists, Shamiba and Shreya, published by Tapasya, a journalist, in *The Diplomat*, an international online news magazine, under the 'South Asian' section in 2020. Shamiba works with the *Vanchit Bahujan*

- Aghadi* (Deprived Majority Front), a political party in Maharashtra, and Shreya works with the Humsafar Trust;
9. A documentary, titled “‘We Are Indians Too’: Assam’s Trans People Are Left Out of NRC”, created by two journalists, Anjana Dutta and Tridip K Mandal, published in 2018 in *The Quint*, an online news platform that voices the minority and the left politics. This documentary is a compilation of clips of *hijras* from Assam designed to raise awareness about the cruelty with which this law has been affecting the *hijra* community;
 10. *Hijra* narratives in an online forum, titled, “NRC and CAB to eradicate transgenders and *Hijra* system in India?”, which was created in 2019 for *hijras* to discuss their views on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). This forum was part of the main website run by a group of *hijras*, called *Transgender India*, the first website to provide online forums to support trans people, which came online in 2016;
 11. An online article published in 2020 by Aqib Khan, a journalist in *The Hindu*, a leading Indian newspaper, which emerges from an interview with Megha, a *hijra* sex worker in Kolkata. The article is entitled “CAA triggers fears among sex workers, transgenders”;
 12. A joint statement issued by “*Indian Trans, Intersex and Gender Non-conforming (T/IS/GNC) individuals and groups in response to the Kinnar Akhada's call for Ram temple at the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya*”, published in 2018 in Round Table India. The statement was previously circulated through various social channels and

“a total of 183 T/IS/GNC individuals, 20 LGBTQIA+ groups, 8 ally organisations, and 146 individual allies have endorsed this statement at the time of its release” (*“Collectives”* 2018); and

13. A YouTube series “Alif Sonia” (2017) hosted by an acid attack hijra survivor Soniya Sheikh on the channel *TransVision*, started by Mudraboyina, in order to voice everyday issues of underprivileged *hijras*.

(Refer to appendix 3 for a list on the selected case studies for this chapter)

By choosing the above listed seventeen case studies, including autobiographies, I aim to answer the following questions in this chapter – why *hijra* life writings shifted from the traditional autobiographical style to less academic and more intimate forms such as online articles, interviews, blogs and *YouTube* channels as a medium to narrate life stories? How has the *hijra* figure (the ‘I’ subject) emerged in these narratives? Does it (the *hijra* figure in the narratives) challenge dominant discourses of gender diversity in politically and culturally transformative ways? And finally, how successful are these writings in creating alternate spaces to narrate intersectional positionings?

To answer these questions, I have divided this chapter into two sections. The first section will contextualise autobiography as an essential genre within life writing, which emerged as a subaltern genre in India. This section places *hijra* autobiographies as a literary practice and I will discuss that, as works of literature, similarities could be drawn between *hijra* autobiographies and the literary tradition of Western trans life writings. I situate trans life writing as a significant root of connection because all *hijra* autobiographies and

activists have used the expansive category of trans to describe their experiences. Furthermore, there are some recognisable similarities in the dominant tropes and metaphors used in the literary conventions of Western White trans life writings and *hijra* autobiographies. However, my discussion does not suggest that *hijra* autobiographies draw from trans life writings. In fact, there are many significant divergencies and differences between the two. Rather, I suggest that drawing parallels between the two helps in looking at some of the common issues like authenticity which help in situating *hijra* life writings in global trans discussions. I argue that *hijra* autobiographies emerged as one of the initial forms of life writings to voice *hijra* concerns, but they remain restricted as *hijra* autoethnographies of NGO-based activism, limiting the scope of intersectional *hijra* representations.

The second section will identify from the thirteen case studies stated above, that non-traditional life writing modes help *hijra* writers to represent their narratives in more complex ways since these mediums are more accessible in terms of their production and circulation. These mediums also allow exploration of themes of caste, sexuality, religion, colour, patriarchy and nationalism in narrating *hijra* life stories. These enable intersectional thinking about how systems of inequality function in present-day India. My understanding of intersectionality draws from how Gloria Andaluz defines herself as:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria, the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. “Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race.

“Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. (2009, 228)

Andaluz’s understanding of self challenges concepts of borders and categories. She has understood intersectional as a transgressive and a blended lens. I apply this understanding to look at how *hijra*’s represent themselves within their life ‘stories’ at the ‘crossroads’ of gender, sexuality, caste, class, colour, region and religion. I identify that in non-traditional life writing modes, *hijra* writers bridge solidarities and connections emerging from these intersectional identities. Whereas, in the autobiographical mode of writing, *hijra* experiences are categorised. Additionally, the autobiographical mode is more accessible to privileged Brahmin *hijras* as this mode is inherently limited in its scope in representing intersectional *hijra* experiences (as is discussed in the next section). These narratives focus on singular *hijra* subjectivities to authenticate *hijra* experiences. As a result, most *hijras* started to find other ways to ‘tell’ their life ‘stories’. These other ways offer new and alternate conceptualisations of *hijra* identity. These modes can be seen as liberating as they have the scope for challenging the repressive understanding of *hijra* community and gender in general. My understanding of repressive gender identities, particularly *hijras*, is influenced by Sarah Ray Rondot’s reading of Marilyn Frye’s metaphor of a birdcage

(2016). Rondot says, Frye's metaphor shows how trans identities are constrained by specific biases and institutionalised systems through "a cage with interlocking bars":

If we look at the cage up close, one or two bars may become apparent and we might ask: "Why doesn't the bird simply fly around those bars?" If we imagine a birdcage as a metaphor for the oppression that trans people experience, it might be appealing to argue that if only media representations would change, or if only medical professionals would expand their understanding, or if only politicians would champion trans people, then perhaps trans people would be liberated. However, looking only at the micro aspects of the birdcage fails to account for how the bars reinforce one another on an institutional level. (Rondot 2016, 529)

Hence, an understanding of repressive gender identities will show that it is based on interlinked institutional powers. In the case of *hijra* communities, institutions of Hindutva, caste, class, religion, colour and nation (discussed in chapter 1) together frame/shape *hijra* experiences and their writings. Hijra life writings, therefore, must not be seen as liberatory in themselves as these narratives do not overthrow these repressive institutional or individual powers or "reinvent or restructure Frye's birdcage", as Rondot would put it (547). Rather, they offer alternate voices. These voices "contribute to a multivocal conversation about gender, expand cultural knowledge, and offer new and different ways to narrate and understand" non-normative lives (547). These then further instigate gender discussions in the 'media', 'medical professionals' and among 'politicians' and thus, may

result in real-life changes in conceiving *hijra* and other non-normative lives. *Hijra* life writings, thus, must be seen as an important practice to understand *hijras*.

I suggest that the two genres, traditional and non-tradition life writings, allow different issues to emerge. The latter emerged as a critique of *hijra* autobiographies and the NGO-based activism since these do not incorporate many aspects of intersectional *hijra* experiences. In the second section, I establish some ideological similarities between non-traditional *hijra* writings and Black trans life writings, as both emerged as counter-genres to specific umbrella genres in their respective circulations. I also highlight that there is an important coalitional space of intersectional alliances/ solidarities between transnational trans life writings and *hijra* life writings. This section also discusses the activism related to Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and how members of the *hijra* community supported the anti-CAA protests. All these writings re-enforce the discussion that there is a historical community in South Asia which is being delegitimised and pushed to the edges of the national imagination by contemporary nationalisms.

41. *Reading hijra autobiographies as a literary genre and part of hijra activism*

Life writing as a genre has long drawn attention for complicating the gap present between real life and literature in writing. Often understood as based on real life events, there is a continuing debate about whether life writing should be seen as fiction or non-fiction. David

McCooley suggests that “in life-writing studies, we see limits constantly coming into conceptual play: the limits between literary and factual writing; between narrative as a literary device and narrative as lived experience; and between autobiography and fiction” (2017, 277). In my understanding, to study life writing within these limits is to get caught in the debate of what is ‘true’ and what is not, which often leads to a reductive reading of the ‘story’ that is being narrated. Several schools of thought, like postmodernism, Quebec feminist fiction theory and deconstruction have also challenged the emphasis on authenticity in life writings (Kadar 1992). Marlene Kadar rightly argues that life writing should not be seen as a genre where the focus is on the story being ‘true’ or not, good or bad. Instead, it must be seen as an in-progress literary critical practice where the reader “takes great pleasure in inventing a persona for himself or herself as he or she reads” (1992, 11). In this way, it allows the readers to interpret and critically engage with the text and not limit the text based on its ‘truth’ value.

Within this framework, life-writing is “best viewed as a continuum that spreads unevenly and in combined forms from the so-called least fictive narration to the most fictive” (Kadar 1992, 10). For instance, the conventional ways of life writing, like autobiographies, letters and diaries, are closer to being more non-fictive as compared to the more creative life writings, like autobiographical fiction, lyric poems and narratives in various digital forms. In autobiographies, letters and diaries, there is a conventional expectation of a prominent presence of the writerly self. While in the more fictionalised forms of life writing, the self is distanced, making the subject less abstract. As a result, the

distance between the reader and the narrator/author shifts in these different forms of life writings.

Nevertheless, life writings attempt to produce an illusion of coherence by establishing specific patterns within the narrative. Central to this process is the formation of self, which is presented to the reader as a truthful representation constructed through memory. Mark Freeman (2010) observes that memory often must do more than just recounting the past. It makes sense of it as an interpretive act, with which also comes an enlarged and often exaggerated understanding of the self, which remains at the centre of this genre.

Within this broad genre, the autobiography is used as a tool that is completely engaged with the construction of self. It started as a confessional mode of writing and emerged as an individual life narrative mode, and later was adopted for recording collective experiences of the socially marginalised communities and groups (Gilmore 1994, 2; R. Singh 2015, 77-84). The genre of autobiography is commonly adopted by people or communities that have been marginalized worldwide because it offers them a voice. Apart from providing the space to voice concerns, it also allows the subject, the writer, of these autobiographies to find some sort of liberation from the psychological bondages as they become part of a collective activism. Since these writings are part of a bigger scheme of events, the style and literary devices used help to create the subject and their experiences 'real' and 'true', which support the overall narrative effect of individual liberation and

collective activism. In other words, while the solo voice is at the centre of these writings, the solo narration represents the entire community.

In India, autobiography emerged as a “revolutionary new literary voice” which was dominated by educated elite upper-class male writers (Brueck 2019, 26). Over time, it has proved a highly effective form of writing in which various socially marginalised persons and communities can declare their subjective agency (Shankar and Gupta 2017, 2). Especially in Dalit literature, autobiography has marked the arrival of an “explosive voice”, which has hit a political and social “awakening” (Brueck 2019, 26). Autobiography has also been used by other social minorities and marginalised groups such as *hijras*. Their writings can also be read as politically and socially driven towards a community-based awakening and as a medium for bringing silenced life struggles and experiences to the centre.

For a community like *hijra*, which is mostly misrepresented or portrayed on the peripheries, this medium is used to narrate lived experiences of *hijras*. These narratives have emerged as part of *hijra* activism which fights back against stereotypes prevalent about *hijras* in the dominant cis heteropatriarchal society. In the preface of the Marathi edition of *me Laxmi, me Hijra* (2015), Rode asserts that indeed it was the sudden activism and political stir around *hijras* in India that gave her the idea of writing an auto/biography of a prominent *hijra*.

Hijra autobiographies are some of the earliest accounts present in the public domain that highlight *hijra* struggles. As a literary practice and form of activism, they voice

collective experiences of *hijras* based on gender discrimination. These narratives describe similar experiences of struggles and a uniform storyline. This includes – born as a boy who from an early age knew that they do not identify with their birth gender; traumatising childhood; ran from their houses at an early age to join *hijra* community; found comfort in *hijra* community because they did not face discriminations within the community; focused solely on gender-based discriminations; worked as sex workers and performed *badhai* until they joined NGO networks; became successful *hijra* activists; and continual lament over their past lives.

There are notable parallels which can be drawn between the tropes and styles used in *hijra* autobiographies and in the tropes identified by scholars and academics in Western White trans life writings to narrate their experiences of struggles. For instance, Evan Vipond (2019) identifies that most trans writings that emerged in the latter half of 20th century had the same narrative of being born in a ‘wrong’ body, a dysphoric and traumatising childhood, gender conforming surgery which eventually led to a stable identity. In both genres, a homogenous narrative is created so that readers can identify and sympathise not just with individual struggles of the writer but the collective struggles of their community. Several devices and styles are therefore used repetitively in these writings to create a ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ story about their respective communities (Vipond 2019). Prosser understands these tropes as narrative maps, which almost all trans writers use to make themselves “culturally intelligible” (1998, 124). I use the phrase “culturally intelligible” from Prosser in the context of *hijra* writers because they are also invested in a

similar project of making their lives intelligible to the dominant cis heteronormative society.

Trans life writing emerged as a genre in the global North after the publication of Christine Jorgenson's (the first transwoman in the US to undergo gender conforming surgery) autobiographical text *Christine Jorgenson* (1967) – also the first widely publicized account of first-person trans narrative. In this narrative and the ones that followed, the focus has been on the 'realness' of the subject's body, feelings, experiences and gender behaviour (Vipond 2019, 22). Vipond reads the preoccupation of trans life writers with "realness and authenticity" in relation to the transphobic cis gender understanding of trans persons as "deceptive and untrustworthy" who are "thought to be lying about who they 'really' are" (23). Western trans life writers challenge the suspicious behaviour that many cis gender people carry against them (24).

The belief that trans persons are deceptive and fake their gender behaviour is also widely advocated by trans exclusionary radical feminist thinkers, like Sheila Jeffreys (1990; 1997) and Janice Raymond (1979)²². Jeffreys asserts that the whole idea of trans is "socially constructed" and is "a human rights violation" which "is also dangerous politically to women's chances of freedom as it maintains the idea of gender dichotomy which forms the very foundation of male supremacy" (1997, 70). Both these thinkers suggest that trans persons should not be treated as 'real' men/women. Vipond explains that such stereotypical understanding "is reinforced through the institutional and cultural erasure of trans persons, which denies their existence" (23). As a result, trans persons are often

‘wrongly’ seen as ‘fake’ (23). It is no surprise that the focus on authenticity is a significant part of trans life writings. It is used as a repetitive yet crucial identity trope by trans writers to make trans lives intelligible and recognisable for the dominant cis gender society. There are several other tropes and themes that appear in trans life writings which highlight the urgency of being wanted to be recognized as a ‘real’ body.

Vipond studies popular trans autobiographies originating from the West dating from 1967 to 2017 and highlights common key tropes. These include – being born in the wrong body; establishing “some form of gender continuity before and after transitioning”; a “knowing” trope where one identifies “whether one is really a boy or a girl from a young age”; and “becoming” a gender (23-28). These tropes are repeated in almost all trans life writings as they have become the standard intelligible ways of understanding trans lives. Jay Prosser (1998) and Juliet Jacques (2017) also recognise similar tropes in their reading of various trans life writings. In addition to the ones already mentioned, Jacques identifies the trope of normalising transition (358).

Aren Z. Aizura in their book *Mobile Subjects* (2018) place emphasis on travel/journey as the most significant trope that trans persons have used in their autobiographies. Before Aizura (2018), several trans studies scholars, including Prosser (1998), have highlighted that travel is a significant experience for trans person in their quest for a home. However, Aizura is critical of Prosser and other trans studies scholars for universalising “‘home’ in a gendered or geographical sense” (60). Instead, they advocate for an understanding of trans experiences as embedded in social, historical and

geographical specificities. They argue that travel is used as a metaphor to create a common narrative of marginalised experiences which the readers can sympathise with.

Aizura's work is vital as they not only identify significant tropes used in trans autobiographies but also criticise White trans writers who "have deployed racial difference in varying ways to translate [trans] marginality for a mainstream readership" (2018, 60). Western White trans life writers make the transition of gender affirmation seem a very linear and uniform experience, and the only desired route for trans persons. This often reflects a binary understanding of gender. Aizura's work is central to my analysis of *hijra* autobiographies for two reasons. First, *hijra* writers also use travel/journey as one of their central tropes in narrating their experiences of becoming *hijra*, thereby requiring a critical assessment of the same. Second, Aizura's critical frame allows me to understand how "travel and migration have opened up capacities for particular subjects but closed down possibilities for others" (3). In *hijra* autobiographies, when writers use travel as a significant trope to make their gender identity culturally intelligible, many possible *hijra* experiences are excluded, which cannot tap into these gendered travel narratives.

In the chosen *hijra* autobiographies (see appendix 3), journey and authenticity remain the two most essential aspects. In *I am Vidya: A transgender's Journey* (2007), the first available *hijra* life writing, Vidya exclusively uses the metaphor of journey/travel to make her life intelligible to her readers. Leaving her natal parent's house and travelling for *nirvana* are represented as a "mortgage" of her "pride", "anger" and "honour" that she endures to become a *hijra* (2007, Loc 53, Kindle). In *The Truth About Me*, Revathi tells

that one of the lessons that she learnt at a very young age was that “only if I went to Mumbai and Delhi and stayed for years with those who wear saris and had undergone operations, could I hope to become [a woman]” (2010, 19). She flees from her natal parent’s house in early teenage years and travels to Delhi and Mumbai in the hope of undergoing *nirvana*. In *me Hijra, me Laxmi* (2015), Tripathi makes three significant journeys in her life. The first journey is to Mumbai when she is in standard 4th (around 9 years old) to meet Ashok Row Kavi, the famous trans rights activist in India. From this journey, she affirms her identity. The second journey is when she joins the *hijra* household and leaves her natal parent’s house. The third journey is to Toronto for a conference, her first foreign trip. She says this trip made “some of the things that I did earlier seem Lilliputian to me” (90). This trip transformed her perspective on *hijra* community as she became a popular face of *hijra* activism in India. Similarly, in *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi* (2017), Bandhopadhyay makes significant travel to different cities. Her autobiographical narration differs from other *hijra* autobiographies as she undergoes a gender conforming surgery and identifies as a trans woman. However, she initiates as a member of the *hijra* community at one point in her life and her narration continues to focus on authenticity.

In all these narratives, travel from village to city or natal parent’s house to *hijra* households or travel to undergo surgery is used as a common narrative to represent *hijras* as marginalised subjects based on their gender. This is similar to how Western White trans writers used travel as a metaphor in their narratives to highlight their “minority subject position” through transness (Aizura 2018, 62). Far from travel being a dominant metaphor for luxury and middle-class pursuit, it is utilised in these genres as a metaphor for

authenticity, hardship, struggle and marginalisation. For instance, in her autobiography, Revathi (2010) narrates that from an early age she knew she could only attain her ‘real’ identity if she travels to Delhi or Mumbai. When she makes this journey, she says, she felt, “I was like a worm, out in the sun, squirming and ready to die” (32). The imagery of insect, hot weather and death represent her experience of travel through a marginalised position. There are similar images used in other *hijra* autobiographies when they narrate their journeys from their natal homes to big cities in order to join *hijra* community. The images of suffering in these journeys are used to highlight gender-based discriminations that *hijra* face. These narratives have built up a way for *hijras* to become culturally intelligible as a gender-based community and gain sympathy from readers by normalising marginality and struggling against *hijra* experiences.

In all the texts, *hijras* give up their natal family, friends and their desire to live a modest life to undertake their journey to become a *hijra*. Within these narrations, the *hijra* subject is represented as a lone person. Sacrifice becomes an essential trope in which *hijras* are made legible as marginal subjects. For instance, Revathi (2010) ran away from her home just before her sister’s wedding. Before running, she stole her mother’s gold earrings. She sacrificed her desire to attend her sister’s wedding and hates herself for stealing her mother’s earrings. Similarly, in *I am Vidya* (2007), Vidya travels to a big city, leaving her studies, parents and career in order to become a *hijra*. These narratives relate the urge to become a *hijra* with sacrifices associated with self-loathing and marginal positions.

Hijra subjects mourn these losses, including the loss of their previous selves, throughout their narratives. The journeys that they undertake in pursuit of freedom are lamented by the grown-up *hijra* subjects. Even in the narrative of a *hijra* like Tripathi who is one of the most successful *hijras* in India (as she represents Indian *hijras* on various international platforms and is also accepted by her natal family) her autobiography *me Laxmi, me Hijra* (2015) ends with these lines:

I do not regret my decision to become a *hijra*.

But then, it's not as if I don't miss my old self either. I covered my face with a mask till the mask became my skin. And yet there are times when I want to rip off that mask and feel the tenderness of my skin, as it naturally is. (170)

These moments frame *hijra* lives through melancholy. The metaphor used here is that of masking and disguising. It is also a metaphor present in Revathi's *The Truth About Me* (2010) to describe her life after she became a *hijra*. This metaphor brings attention to how *hijra* autobiographies, like trans life writings, are mainly concerned with framing *hijras* as 'real' and authentic. Interestingly, disguise and masking here are also used in sketching *hijra* subjects as minority subject position, or as outcastes (a common metaphor used in *hijra* autobiographies to represent their struggles), who lament their losses and their old self. The outcaste or the minority subject position is representative of collective struggles and experiences of inequalities, based on practicing non-normative gender roles in a cis heteropatriarchal society. It is this lament of living a life of an outcaste, as opposed to a 'modest' life, which are used in these narratives to become culturally intelligible to non-

hijra readers. In these narratives, gender is constructed as the sole social category through which to imagine a 'modest' life for *hijras*. It is this desire to which all *hijra* subjects in these autobiographies continuously return. In doing so, these autobiographies homogenise *hijra* lived experiences through the social category of gender which is normalised via experiences of sacrifice and marginalisation.

These representations, I argue, are exclusionary and overwhelming. Similar to Aizura's critique of White trans life autobiographies which say, "shore up whiteness and racial hierarchies" (2018, 70), *hijra* autobiographies uphold gender difference in their quest to make *hijras* culturally legible. This results in upholding individual social hierarchies of caste, religion, colour and nationalism. I suggest this is possible because of two reasons – autobiography as part of *hijra* activism and autobiography as a literary form of creative writing practice.

As part of *hijra* activism, differences are smoothed out in the process of creating a 'collective voice' which becomes the dominant (and/or resistant) way of *hijra* life writing and representation in autobiography. *Hijra* lived experiences are represented exclusively within a 'collective voice' through a marginal subject position as an outcaste, based on the social category of gender (as discussed in previous paragraphs). It is no surprise that all *hijra* autobiographies narrate the stories of *hijras* who were able to secure some sort of employment and education due to NGO-based activism, since autobiography as a literary genre is accessible only to privileged *hijras*. As the *hijra* subjects want to emerge as

someone with whom the readers can sympathise, a continuous power struggle operates in the autobiographical form.

As a creative writing practice, the writer uses various stylistic tactics that enable the autobiographies to appear ‘truer’ and more ‘accurate’. Since the narration takes place in the first-person narrative voice, the narrator, the subject and the writer are intertwined. Additionally, there are certain techniques such as the use of italics, parenthesis and words in bold which are used by the narrator in these autobiographies to create a more robust sense of direct communication between the *hijra* writer/subject and the reader. These stylistic techniques are peppered throughout the *hijra* autobiographies as they try to make their version of *hijra* subjectivities ‘true’ and culturally intelligible. For instance, the narrator in Tripathi’s autobiography addresses the readers directly in an entire chapter about the history of *hijras* and their community practices. The narrative voice says:

We hijras virtually have a parallel social structure. There are seven gharaanas. These are: Bhendibazaarwala, Bulakwala, Lalwala, Lucknowwala, Poonawala, Dilli-wala, and Hadir Ibrahimwala. Each gharaana has a chief, known as nayak. Below the nayak is the guru. A hijra is obliged to observe the laws framed by our nayaks and gurus ... (Tripathi 2015, 174)

In the mannerisms of above narration, it is indicated that the expected reader is non-hijra, and therefore there is a didactic tone to the narration. In such narrations, the reader is made to feel that the author (whose life is being narrated) is appealing directly to them. The main purpose behind such narrations is to outline to readers an understanding of the *hijra*

community in a way that can be accepted as culturally intelligible. As Tripathi continues describing *hijra* customs, she places *hijra* practices within Hindu tradition. Her use of ‘we’ throughout such narration indicates that she is not just telling her ‘story’ but is telling a collective ‘story’ of all *hijras*. The creation of this ‘collective voice’ is contradictory in *hijra* autobiographies. On the other hand, within this form of writing as activism, which is part of forming a ‘collective voice’, only one positionality is focused. So, the ‘collective voice’ of *hijras* is in fact singular as there is an inherent contradiction in this form of life writing. *Hijra* subjects, in these autobiographies, imagine themselves as outcast based on the category of gender only because these *hijra* subjects do not belong to the othered castes. In trans life writings, it is the racial identity that is made culturally intelligible by uniting all Western White trans writers with their supposed cis gender White readers (Aizura 2018, 62). In the case of *hijra* autobiographies, Brahmanical Hinduism is made the connecting link that binds *hijra* writers to their readers on the basis of caste and religion. Therefore, when *hijra* subjects of these autobiographies use the metaphor of outcaste and marginality to make *hijras* culturally intelligible, it signifies exclusions based on parameters other than gender.

Additionally, *hijra* autobiographies uphold caste hierarchies because of the literary form of autobiographical writing. Autobiographies create an overwhelming subjectivity of the subject-narrator in the narratives as well as in the writer’s life. This places the subject’s voice powerfully at the centre in the narrative. Notably, *hijra* autobiographies particularly play a potentially powerful and liberatory role in the life of an *hijra* writer because the dominant patriarchal society had long ago cut off most opportunities for persons belonging

to *hijra* community to acquire education and raise their voices. The fact that the subject of the autobiography can write their ‘story’ is an act of resistance. Therefore, for most *hijras*, to be able to write and express themselves in a full-book length work provides a sense of achievement and fulfilment. Hence, these writings are also artworks for *hijra* writers. Kalki Subramaniam, a well-known trans rights activist in India, who uses art forms and poetry to express herself, says on her website:

The deepest wounds cannot heal until they are expressed. Practising art helps us heal emotional injuries, by providing a safe opportunity for self-expression and shaping one's identity. (2020)

Subramaniam’s claim shows that expressing one’s identity is also a personal experience and is not just used to form a ‘collective voice’. Through their writings, *hijras* also aim to emerge victorious, challenging the heteronormative structures of the mainstream cis gender society. Hence, *hijra* autobiography is a powerful tool through which the subject ‘I’ speaks about their life and which the dominant cis heteropatriarchal society wants to suppress. Writing their stories makes them in-charge of how they want to represent their lives. However, since this literary practice is part of a collective activism, subjective experiences of writers become at the centre of these writings-activism. The ‘collective voice’ of these autobiographies has its own limits and constraints, which lead to further marginalisation (as I discuss below).

In *hijra* autobiographies, the subject’s positionality is dominated by Brahmanical voices. A possible reason for this could be that publication houses in India are strictly

regulated in several ways, making it difficult for Dalit *hijras* to get their narratives published. S. Anand (2020), the founder of Navayana, the first anti-caste publishing house which started in 2003, says, “large publishing houses and corporate media (such as academia) tend to be unconscionably Dalit-free”. He recounts how in the early 2000s, he could not get hold of Ambedkar’s seminal works on caste as they were no longer published. Thus, he started this independent publishing house as he was too tired “of the deeply insensitive *savarna* media” (Anand 2020). Since then, a few other independent publishing houses began working, though most of them struggle to continue financially (Pal 2013).

Notably, this issue of publication is also reflected in the available *hijra* autobiographies. Out of the four book-length publications, there is only one Dalit *hijra* autobiography (*I Am Vidya*, 2007) and the other three represent stories of *savarna* hijras. The autobiographies of *savarna* hijras received attention from bigger publication houses, as compared to the one written by the Dalit hijra. *I am Vidya* was published by Rupa publications while the others, written by *savarna hijras*, were published as follows: *me Hijra, me Laxmi* (2015) published by an international press, Oxford University Press; *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) published by Penguin India; and *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) also published by Penguin India. Except for Rupa Publications, the rest are amongst the top ten publishing houses in India, as listed on various websites²³. However, it is important to note that Rupa publication is not a small publication house either, but it is also worth noting that though Vidya recognizes herself as born into a Dalit family, she does not talk about even a single incident of caste-based discrimination in her autobiography. In contrast, she has been extremely vocal about caste-based injustices in her

interviews and other forms of non-traditional life narratives. In fact, she is the first *hijra* to voice caste-based discrimination in the *hijra* community, as Banu acknowledges (*Dalit Camera* 2016). Vidya says in one of her interviews:

I realized that since all women get oppressed under patriarchy, and trans women and Dalit women through the combined might of patriarchy with casteism and transphobia, I might as well have a loud mouth and be assertive than take everything silently – to be a strong but silent woman was not enough. I decided that I do not want to be modest and soft spoken to please others or to fit the ideal of a “good woman”. (*Sanhati* 2013)

However, her voice as a Dalit has been suppressed somewhere within the structures of publishing houses in India. It can be well suggested that the absence of her anti-caste activism in her autobiography may imply about the publishing agencies involved in the process. Therefore, though autobiographies have been significant in bringing a ‘collective voice’, it is the collective that I challenge through my analysis of *hijra* autobiographies.

Tripathi’s *me Hijra, me Laxmi* (2015) here is particularly significant evidence for analysis when looking at the issue of an overwhelming depiction and self-construction in order to make hijras culturally intelligible by creating an homogenised hijra narrative. Interestingly, both Rode and Rao (involved in writing and translating Tripathi’s autobiography), were awestruck by Tripathi. In the afterword of the book, Rao says about Laxmi that “once she becomes a hijra ... [she] lives life on her own terms. She becomes an activist, works for the eradication of AIDS among her people, and attends national and

international conferences. She can put her own ‘story’ on hold to insert an aside about her pet dog!” (188). Likewise, Rode expresses her gratitude towards Laxmi, in the preface of the Marathi edition, and says, “as Laxmi’s life unfolded before me, I was surprised. Her life overwhelmed me” (188). Hence, it is not surprising that Tripathi’s image comes out as a larger-than-life figure in her autobiography. In this autobiography, the ‘I’ figure has unabatedly a self-pleasing nature at the expense of silencing essential aspects related to hijra community. Kavi, one of Tripathi’s close friend writes in his review of the book:

What gets tiresome is Laxmi's huge “I.” The book is full of “I”s without telling us what that “I” does for the society around her or what it observes as symptoms, which threaten people like her. For example, there is an amazing description of a visit to her mother's sister in Bangkok and of meeting her cousins for the first time. They accept her like a long lost bosom brother (She's changed into male attire) and only towards the end does she say that her cousin hugs her to say good-bye and whispers "sister" into her ear. It's a huge high five for acceptance in Indian families. Compared to that, there is nothing about the sheer horror of Thai *hijras* or kathoys with HIV/STI rates as high as 30%. And there's nothing about how there are no support systems for HIV positive kathoys and about their high death rates. It is like a visit to cuckoo land and that aspect saddened me. (Kavi 2015)

Clearly, there is an issue of authenticity and reliability in the mode of narration here. As a narrator of her life, Tripathi has the power to carefully select the events that appear in her ‘story’ and shape them within the frame that she wants. Tripathi had always represented the

hijra community as a homogenous group, “where caste, religion nothing, comes across ... That’s the beauty of being a *hijra*” (Bhasin 2016). Several Dalit *hijras* have been highly critical of this definition (discussed in the next section). Mogli, a Dalit *hijra* activist, claim that *hijras* like Tripathi present *hijra* community as caste-less because she is a Brahmin and has not experienced caste-based marginalisation (Shankar 2017).

Throughout her autobiography, Tripathi upholds her Brahmanical lineage and asserts, rather unapologetically, several times in the book that she was born into a Brahmin family and therefore has a thorough understanding of the *Vedas* and other spiritual books. Though she denies hierarchical presence of any social category, including caste and religion, amongst members of *hijra* community, she repeatedly insists on her Brahmanical roots. Such insistence normalises experiences of Brahmanical *hijras* as ‘true’ and ‘accurate’ at the expense of othering experiences of Dalit *hijras* or non-Hindu *hijras*. In her autobiography, Tripathi says:

I hated the idea of a ghetto or a gated community. Yet, this is exactly what the *hijras* seemed to want ... Why segregate yourself from mainstream society to such an extent?

But my approach did not wash with the *hijras*. (2015, 67)

Being born into a Brahmin family and becoming a well-recognised public figure, Tripathi is highly privileged, both socially and economically. When she says she cannot understand why *hijras* do not integrate within the ‘mainstream’ society, she is unconsciously relying on wild assumptions that all *hijras* have similar experiences. She overlooks the fact that a

major population of *hijras* faced life threats as soon as they identified as *hijra*, even from their immediate familial circles. For them, segregating from the ‘mainstream’ has been the only possible way for survival. This way of survival for many has come at the cost of having to remain uneducated, unemployed and often without any support system, even within the *hijra* community. There is a denial of these experiences which are mainly formed through multiple levels of marginalisation where gender is just one of them.

However, I do not intend to discredit Tripathi’s or other *hijra* writer’s autobiographies. Instead, I am suggesting that these narratives, due to being part of *hijra* activism, and because of the literary genre of autobiography, remain occupied with constructing a homogenous *hijra* experience (to bridge the gap between *hijra* and the supposedly non-*hijra* readers) and offer a liberating experience for *hijra* writers. In this process, experiences of Brahmin *hijras*, based on gender discrimination, are normalised. Thus, these autobiographies fail to provide an intersectional understanding of *hijra* experiences.

4.2 *Non-traditional modes of hijra life writings*

Mudraboyina, a Dalit *hijra*, along with several other Dalit *hijras* like Vidya, Mogli and Bano, have been at the forefront in highlighting intersectional *hijra* experiences, especially those of caste, colour and gender. Their activism “comes from a deeper understanding and

conviction that transgender people do not come with their gender identity alone and have other marginalized identities of caste, religion, region etc” (Majumder 2019). For instance, Mudraboyina in her activism, which is evident from her *YouTube* channel TransVision and her Facebook profile²⁴, is highly vocal in extending solidarity with various marginalised communities, like female sex workers, farmers, Dalits, Muslims, acid attack survivors and Adivasis. Since autobiographical mode has become a yet another “massive power structure”, as Mudraboyina (2019) calls it, where marginalised *hijras* have no voice, *hijras* started to claim their spaces and voices through different mediums of self-representations. These mediums mainly include self-publishing modes as they provide more space for narrating intersectional experiences. These include online forums, blogs, interviews and *YouTube* channels, amongst others. In this section, I discuss the multiple layers of discrimination that non-traditional *hijra* life narratives explore, and how these alternate modes are used in creating *hijra* alliances with other marginalised groups, to form an expansive collectivised *hijra* activism.

These non-traditional ways of *hijra* life writings are part of an activism that has emerged as a critique of NGO-based *hijra* activism, since *hijra* autobiographies, which emerged from NGO-based activism, proved exclusionary where only a particular section of privileged *hijras* were represented. The emergence of these new kinds of writings are similar to how Black trans life writings emerged as a critique of Western White trans life writings. The experiences of Black trans life writers and *hijra* life writers are not based on similar issues but, since *hijra* autobiographies share some parallels with trans life writings, I argue that Black trans life writer’s critique of Western White trans life writing can be

useful to study some of the motifs and themes highlighted by non-NGO based *hijra* narratives.

In both Black trans life writings and non-traditional *hijra* life writings, there are a few similarities found within discussions of colourism in relation to beauty. Several of these narratives show the struggle and pain of acquiring a fairer complexion to be better recognized as feminine. The paralleling of skin colour with feminine beauty among trans persons of colour can be seen emerging from the narratives of White trans life writers. Vipond outlines that in the writings of Western White trans life writers, “blonde beauty” and “white feminine glamour” comes as the most natural and universal image of feminine appearances (2019, 25). The notion of beauty among trans writers encourages a certain type of “stereotypical behaviour” regarding women, which radical feminists have also criticised (Jacques 2017, 360). Nevertheless, thinkers like Emi Koyama (2013) and Richard Juang (2013) have talked about how even the most progressive Western trans women spaces are generally welcoming to only those trans women of colour who have a considerably pale complexion and how there is an added lens of racism that trans women face. Janet Mock, a trans life writer of colour, writes in her autobiography, *Surpassing Certainty* (2017):

When beautiful was used to describe me, it was often qualified through filters of gender and race. If they knew I was trans, they would often say, *Oh my God! You look like a real girl.* If they didn't know I was trans, it would often be racialized: *You are pretty for a black girl.* (qtd. in Vipond 2019, 25)

Like Mock (2017), several other trans persons of colour bring attention to this double threat and discrimination that they undergo. In the narratives of several trans persons from Anneliese A. Singh and Vel S. McKleroy's study on traumatic experiences of trans people of colour, one trans person says:

Society put me in a place where I am a minority and doesn't think I have the talent or potential because of who I am [racially/ethnically]. When I was a child, didn't think my ethnicity was anything to be proud of—I was looked down on because I was Black. And then being transgender made it even worse. (2011, 38)

Such accounts by trans persons of colour exemplify how skin colour is a part of cis normativity and that only those trans persons who match these norms are welcomed. These biases also promote a rigid understanding of genders. Hence, "while white trans subjects are normalized through their proximity to whiteness, trans persons of colour, who are always already marked as divided, are Othered" (Singh and McKleroy 2011, 25). In this way, these practices silence trans persons of colour from the dominant trans spaces and narratives.

Mock laments this systematic erasure and lack of visibility of Black trans women in the mainstream. She writes on her website:

When I walk into queer and gender studies spaces on campuses across the country, I've witnessed people theorize about these women's lives. But we often know nothing about their lived experiences, about how these women survived and loved and gave and fought this racist, classist, misogynistic and femme-phobic world.

We need to begin giving these women the space and resources during their survival, during their active lives, to tell their stories, to share their insights, to speak up for themselves. Reading their names once a year is not enough. (2013)

She further goes on to praise the recent trans women of colour who have come out in order to narrate their stories in public. It was in 1986 when the first Black trans writer Sharon Davis published a memoir, entitled *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood: A transsexual Speaks Out*. Since then, several trans writers have recognised the need and urgency to narrate their life stories and to make their complex experiences heard. In a broader context concerning trans people around the world, Viviane K. Namaste suggests in her book *Invisible Lives* (2000) that the experiences of trans people are erased in an institutionalized setting and to reclaim them, their everyday concerns must be given voice.

Hijras in India, though, do not form a racial minority in the same way Mock (2013) is talking about a racial minority. However, there is an underlying colourism that persists among all spheres of Indian society, which affects *hijra* experiences in the subcontinent. N. Mishra writes in her article “India and Colorism: The Finer Nuances” that India has:

... the practice of exclusion and discrimination based on the skin tone of a person... it is a deep-rooted problematic practice embraced by both the oppressor and the victim. This single practice has become so widespread in India, more so in the past four decades, that it has taken shape along the same lines as “colorism” of the Western world. However, the manifestation of the color discrimination in India differs as it hides behind various other variables. (2015)

Fair skin is almost always equated with being beautiful in India. The obsession with fair skin is “a brazen cocktail of colorism, patriarchy, and residual colonialism” (Dixit 2019). However, the history of colour-based discrimination predates colonialism in the subcontinent, in the contemporary India the “antipathy towards dark skin is overt, even blatant, today and is underpinned by very powerful epidermally marked signification” (Paul 2016, 135). As a result, all the “desirable faces” in Indian film industry or television are “exclusively lightskinned” (2016, 135). In fact, light skin is one of the most highly considered attributes of femininity amongst many Indians (Paul 2016, 136; Kullrich 2022, 5). Equally, there is a deep social prejudice against dark skin, which often results in blatant discrimination in marriage prospects, employments and other opportunities (Paul 2016, 135-141). Colourism in India is deeply patriarchal. Several *hijra* life writings draw attention to the added risk of having dark complexion and the mistreatments and challenges it attracts in everyday experiences of *hijra*. Since many *hijras* do not undergo intensive hormonal treatment, their facial hair remains thick. These make them more vulnerable to various kinds of discriminations, including less social acceptability as compared to fair skin *hijras* and less representations and positions in NGOs.

Interestingly, in all the four *hijra* autobiographies (see appendix 3), the respective narrators have more than once stated that the *hijra* subject was beautiful, implying sharp features and fair complexion. The narrator unconsciously equates the success of *hijra* subjects with their being beautiful to normalise their progression. For instance, in the autobiography, *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi* (2017), Bandhopadhyay remarks how her beautiful facial features and fair skin, which she got from her father, and the hormone

treatment, made her “glamorous”, often leading to her passing as a woman (2017, 10, 88). She remarks, “People said I looked glamorous” (88). It is no surprise that Bandhopadhyay could easily rent private accommodation in a small town where she taught at a college. Her complexion and caste made her survival easier as compared to experiences of many other *hijras*.

Hijras who cannot afford to take medical help have to get their facial hair removed by “traditional ‘pluckers’ from the *hijra* community” (McCarthy 2014) and apply a lot of light shade makeup to hide their real skin colour to look “beautiful” and “feminine” (Bearak 2016). In a radio broadcast, Aher, a *hijra* who underwent sex affirmation operation at a later stage in her life, remembers her initial days in the community and says that she applied a lot of makeup because she “just wanted to become a beautiful butterfly” (McCarthy 2014). Since many *hijras* earn as performing dancers and through sex work, to have fair skin becomes important for them.

Within this context, narratives of acid attack *hijra* survivors are significantly important. India ranks first in acid attack cases registered per year in the world. Vidhik Kumar prepared a quantitative report titled “Acid Attacks in India” in 2021 in which he showed that above 80% of acid attack cases are against women and the target is specifically their face (2021, 2). The face is targeted because the abusers want to destroy the woman’s most valued attribute to make it “a public mark of shame, making it hard for her to get married or gain employment” (2021, 2). While Kumar’s report does not include any mention of *hijras* or trans women, *hijra* life writings and other sources²⁵ indicate that *hijras*

are common acid attack victims. While the awareness of *hijra* acid attack victims is shockingly limited, acid attack is one of the grave threats that many *hijras* in India fear.

Sheikh is amongst the very few *hijras* who spoke about her experience of being a *hijra* acid attack survivor. She is a Muslim *hijra* dancer who does an online series titled, “Alif Soniya” in Dakhni (an Urdu Dialect). In the second episode of the series, Sheikh recounts her memories of acid attack. She narrates that she was a dancer and was the sole breadwinner of her family. After one of her performances, a man who found Sheikh very beautiful approached her and tried to befriend her. They exchanged numbers and started talking. However, over the next few days the man became possessive of her and asked her to stop performing as a dancer. Sheikh was disappointed and was advised by her *guru* and friends to stop talking to him. However, the man contacted her several times and pleaded with her to meet with him once. After refusing many times, she finally agreed. The man took her to a farmhouse where he and few of his friends molested Sheikh and, on their way back, threw acid on her face. Sheikh recounts how this experience left her completely shattered and broken. She faced discrimination because of her gender identity as an acid attack survivor. She recalls that while she was still recovering at a hospital, the police asked her details of the incident, and focused on how the men molested her. When she asked the police what they wanted to hear, the police told her that if she was molested then she will also be punished. Sheikh was taken aback at this inhumanity. She knew she was discriminated against on the bases of her gender and as an acid attack survivor. She looked for government resources but found none that could aid her. Sheikh’s narrative highlights how being an acid attack survivor leaves a *hijra* vulnerable and marginalised many times

over. There is immense lack of sympathy for *hijras* who are victims of acid attack, because a *hijra's* sexual life continues to be seen as a criminal act by society, even though it is recognised legally. They face additional marginalisation based on gender and sexuality apart from the physical, psychological, social and economic effects that acid attack survivors suffer.

Sheikh runs a series on the *YouTube* channel TransVision and many of her episodes are in collaboration with *Dalit Camera* as her series attempts to build a solidarity between *hijras*, Dalits, Muslims and acid attack survivors. Each of these categories define a standard of acceptability in Indian societies. Though these are not intrinsically related to each other, many *hijras* experience the intersections of these marginalities in different combinations. The name of the channel – TransVision – is suggestive of these intersections as trans is used as an expansive category here which includes experiences of caste, religion, region and colour along with gender and sexuality-based experiences. The founder of the channel, Mudraboyina, understands TransVision as a mode to dispel stereotypes about *hijras* by narrating stories that intersect with several identities (Godhawat 2018).

In India, caste has an overarching presence in all systems and experiences, amplifying the effects of discrimination and injustices. Caste hierarchy works in parallel with gender-based hierarchy and is co-constitutive of race, colour, religion and sexuality (as discussed in my discussion of Hindutva in chapter 1). Uma Chakravarti rightly shares:

A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to

humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and... [share] close interconnections. (2015)

The sanctity of the caste system relies on the purity of women, which means to have control over women's bodies. As a result, men from a lower caste often use patriarchal structure to mobilise within their limited social position. In this way, patriarchy and caste together uphold the Brahmanical social order (Chakravarti 2015; Kothari et.al 2020, 13). This duo has resulted in further marginalisation. Several Dalit activists, over the last few decades, have brought attention to these intersectional experiences. But these have remained restricted mainly to Dalit women's experiences. Non-normative gender experiences are still not included in the mainstream of Dalit literature.

The report, "The discrimination based on caste with the intersections of sex, gender identity and Disability" by Kothari et. al (2020) suggests that with the growing Dalit activism, intersectional experiences are starting to find footing in many disciplines. Even though *hijras* remain hugely affected by the multifaced connection between intersectional systems, no major study has been undertaken that discusses gender and caste together in framing *hijra* experiences. There are just a few scholarly articles and some individual *hijra* life narratives that talk about how *hijra* experiences of caste and gender shape their identity of a 'good' Indian citizen within the contemporary populist hyper-nationalist Brahmanical Hindutva imaginary.

Banu, who identifies as a Dalit *hijra*, and is also the founder and director of Trans Rights Now Collective (an organisation which works for trans visibility among Dalits, Bahujans and Adivasis), writes in an article:

As one of the first computer science transgender graduates, I could not get a job for a year because of my Dalit and trans identity. It was only Project Mukti, a Dalit Bahujan technology startup that hired me full time and that is because it is led by Dalit Bahujan femmes ... Additionally, the hypocritical brahmanical social structure looks at sex work and begging as taboo, even when their exclusionary mindsets that force us into these professions. In Babasaheb's words, 'History shows that where ethics and economics come in conflict, victory is always with economics.' ... Under brahmanical Hindu society, we are exploited under their system of morality, purity and pollution which creates an environment where we are ostracised from society. That is why Dalit trans folks and the trans community in general require affirmative actions and laws that cater specifically to our issues. Only this will allow us to strike a historical bargain with dominant castes and genders in the fight for our self-determination. (2018)

This article was published in an online Indian newspaper, *The Print*, during the Dalit history month in 2018. While a Dalit *hijra* life 'story' appearing during the Dalit history month seems a step forward towards building solidarity across different marginalised groups, it is important to note that *The Print* is recognised as one of the few liberal news mediums in India and is criticised for being anti-BJP and anti-nationalist. *The Print*, along

with few other news mediums, is often represented by the dominant right-wing supporters as spreading anti-nationalist causes. Nevertheless, the appearance of Banu's narrative in *The Print* is a progressive step, considering that most Dalit movements do not extend their solidarity towards the *hijra* community (Semmalar "Unpacking Solidarites" 2014, 290; "trans Movements Must Be Anti-Caste" 2017).

Dalit *hijra* writers like Banu and Vidya have been at the forefront of highlighting how there is an urgent need to build solidarity between communities and groups that face marginalisation from the dominant cis heteropatriarchal Hindutva society. Vidya discusses the way in which the feminist movements in India are largely represented by the *savarna* (upper-caste Brahmin) women, most of them being trans exclusive (*Sanhati* 2013). In an interview with her transgender brothers, Karthik and Suleiman, Vidya says:

I know that most so called feminists think that I am a man in woman's clothing.

They would treat me as if I am not quite a woman ... Some of these feminists will wear FabIndia clothes and their gold and think women must be modest ... As a trans woman, though the fact that I cannot have biological children, is used against me to make me feel less like a "real" woman ... They also are very patronizing about caste and can talk progressively but will have a Dalit woman making tea and serving them at their meetings instead of also including her and learning from her experiences. (*Sanhati* 2013)

Vidya understands transphobia as an inherent part of Brahmanism, where Dalits and trans are seen as the other. Within this oppressive system, she laments, people from these groups

are left to do the “dirty tasks” like manual scavenging, sex work and begging (Sanhati 2013). There are no options left for them to come out of these subjugating and humiliating spaces. As a result, even basic dignity and respect are not given to people belonging to these sections. Class, here, becomes an equally subjugating category as that of caste, since the strict patriarchal Brahmanical order does not allow for class mobility within the lower castes. In the above quotation, Vidya draws attention to how most feminist movements are dominated by upper-class *savarna* women, who discuss social inequalities within closed rooms without having any problems with a Dalit woman serving them tea. It is this ignorance that has led to a barrier between feminist movements and Dalit movements, and further between cis feminists and trans people. Activist Gee Semmalar, a trans man, also laments the lack of solidarity between feminists, Dalit women and trans communities. He reasons that it is because of this “elitism and exclusions within the feminist movement which is dominated by *savarna* women and their agenda” that Dalit women have to organise their activism separately starting afresh, challenging the gender and caste intersections (2014, 290).

It is noteworthy, that similar to feminist movements, the Dalit movement too is exclusionary of trans communities. Dalit *hijras* face discrimination from within the Dalit community because of their gender identity. Activist Banu questions the invisibility of Dalit *hijras* amongst Dalit activism and movements. She insists that Dalit movements must fight cis Brahmanical patriarchy by being attentive to discrimination based on gender and sexuality (Kothari 2021). In an interview with *Dalit Camera*, Banu recalls experiences from her school days:

In school, at that non-conforming age, at the plus 2 stage when the school got to know my transgender status, the school discriminated me against my Dalit position plus my transgender state. So both together isolated me a great deal. I was not allowed to enter the school at normal hours. The school started at 9 AM but I was to reach there only at 10 AM. The school finished at 4.30 PM I had to leave at 4 PM itself. I was not allowed in the classroom. I was made to sit in a separate room where the HM kept discarded slippers and there was a tree under which alone I could sit and study. Many such restrictions and rules were laid and still I continued to study. The other students began saying mean things and most of all they were all forbidden from talking to me. At that age I could not take that stress and I left the school and discontinued my plus 2 studies after which I left home too ...

DC: How many Dalit students were there?

GB: There was a substantial number of Dalit students too.

DC: So all Dalit students suffered this kind of discrimination?

GB: No, not all were discriminated in this manner. Once my gender identity was out in the open, my Dalit identity came to focus. So both together. (2016)

In this excerpt from the interview, Banu draws attention to how she had to face double discrimination for her Dalit identity as well as her gender identity. While there were many other Dalit students in her school, she alone was made to sit under the tree and was not allowed to talk to anyone at school. This shows how her non-normative gender identity was

a taboo bigger than her caste. This speaks volumes about the ‘sophisticated’ workspaces that are occupied by Dalits in comparison to *hijras* in India. I am not suggesting that Dalits do not face discrimination. Rather I am suggesting that they are slightly better situated than *hijras*. A part of the reason for this is access to reservations, on the basis of caste, in education and employment, which create spaces for Dalits. Though reservations have not entirely helped in solving caste-based discrimination and atrocities prevalent in India, since those coming from the margins of lower caste hardly benefit from these systems. *Hijras* on the other hand, who are treated as ‘untouchables’, like Dalits, because of their gender practices in contemporary India, lack such representations and opportunities.

In fact, *hijras* face marginalisation from within the Dalit community for their non-normative gender expressions. Vidya argues that “transgender discrimination is more severe than Dalit experience” (*Sanhati* 2013). She says, there have been many instances where she has faced discrimination from her Dalit community because of her identity as a *hijra*. For instance, she says, *hijras* are only allowed to live in Dalit localities which are mostly away from the central places in cities. However, in these localities, *hijras* are made to pay higher rents than other residents. She expresses her grief over such experiences:

It hurts a bit when Dalits discriminate, even though they discriminate less than *savarnas* - as it feels like my own people shouldn't discriminate against me at all due to our shared understanding of oppression as Dalit. It is paradoxical for me to face added social disadvantage as a transgender. I feel like oppressed groups should try to understand each other's pain and work together. (*Sanhati* 2013)

A Dalit *hijra*, hence, faces threefold discrimination. First, on the bases of her caste and gender from the mainstream cis Brahmanical patriarchal society, and then from within their Dalit community on the basis of their gender identity. Additionally, they suffer from further discrimination at the hands of Brahmin *hijras* within *hijra* communities, which often comes as the most painful realisation for Dalit *hijras* when they join these communities.

That there is no casteism amongst transgenders is like putting a whole pumpkin on rice and expecting to gobble it down. Internally caste feelings exist in all. (*Dalit Camera* 2016)

Almost all *hijras* join the *hijra* community to find a sense of belonging that the dominant cis gender society had failed to offer them. They leave their biological family, their assigned gender roles, birth name and almost everything given by their natal family to form new kinship ties within *hijra* community that are based on shared experiences of discrimination. For a long time, the *hijra* community was represented by *hijra* representatives like Tripathi as “one community where caste, religion nothing comes across” (Bhasin 2016). However, since the last decade, voices from the lowest section of *hijra* communities have started to emerge which challenge these claims. Mogli, a Dalit *hijra*, explains in an interview that the *savarna hijras* exercise their power within the community to dominate other *hijras* and occupy the dominant voice (Shankar 2017). Therefore, they are always at the frontline when the media interacts with the community which results in ‘false’ representations of *hijras* as a casteless community. Being critical of Tripathi, although without taking her name, Mogli says, she knows “a renowned

transgender activist who said, ‘I am born into a Brahmin family. I cherish Hindu culture’. Cherishing Hindu culture is okay but being proud of her Brahmanical roots could be interpreted as a sense of superiority” (Shankar 2017). This sense of superiority not only disturbs the unity of *hijra* community but also leads to an additional layer of discrimination for Dalit *hijras*.

Shamiba, another Dalit *hijra* activist, tells in an interview published in *The Diplomat* that a Dalit *hijra* is often refused to be initiated by *savarna* gurus (Tapasya 2020). She also tells how different practices within the *hijra* community uphold the caste system. For instance, in the ritual of *hijras* being “possessed by the goddess”, if the *hijra* is a *savarna*, there is a “huge celebration” and everyone must bow down (Tapasya 2020). Whereas, if the *hijra* possessed is a Dalit then there is no celebration, and no one bows down. Apart from these ritualistic practices, there are several discriminations that Dalit *hijras* face in their day-to-day lives. Sharmili, a *hijra* belonging to the Valmiki (Dalit) community, shares her experience of not being allowed to go for *badhai* and give ritual blessings even though she was a talented dancer and singer. She says only *savarna hijras* are allowed to go for ritual blessings as they belong to upper-castes and are, therefore, considered worthy of giving blessings (Goel 2018). In contrast, Dalit *hijras* are assigned tasks that are ‘lower’ in status, like sex work and alms collection. Also, they rarely reach senior positions within *hijra* households (*Dalit Camera* 2016).

Given all these caste-based discriminations, it is no coincidence that many Dalit *hijras* drop off their surnames when they join the community, while the *savarna hijras*

continue to keep theirs (Goel 2018). Dalit *hijras*, Vidya says, try everything to hide their caste once they walk out of their biological families (*Sanhati* 2013). For instance, they hide their true accent or the region that they belong to, and stop eating beef – all of which may reveal their caste. She further says, as a Dalit, it is easy for her to identify who are Dalits and who are *savarnas*, as the *savarna hijras* proudly assert their caste, while the Dalits, on the other hand, try not to talk about caste at all. She also discusses how even among the Dalits, there are internal caste-based hierarchies. She recalls how her parents never allowed her to learn her mother tongue, Telugu, to save her from further marginalisation by the local Dalit community which was superior to them (*Sanhati* 2013). Caste is, therefore, very much a part of *hijra* experiences in contemporary India. To say otherwise, as Banu says, proves that the ones who represent the community simply do not understand what it means to be discriminated against within these suppressive systems (*Dalit Camera* 2016).

A similar pattern of injustice is at work in NGOs, that have emerged as the only alternative space for most *hijras* outside of the community support. While NGOs played a significant role in uplifting *hijras* since early this century, these helped only particular sections of *hijra* community, marginalizing the rest even further (as argued earlier in this chapter). Outside the many NGOs that work for transgender rights throughout the country, there are hardly any which have Dalit *hijras* as their representatives. In fact, Dalit *hijras* are allocated “lower-level jobs, like distributing condoms” (*Dalit Camera* 2016).

NGOs can be deeply flawed, and may end up doing greater injustice than good. Mudraboyina criticizes the flawed nature of NGOs, saying that it:

... decimates people's movements because most NGOs are funded and the politics of funding requires them to stay silent on any discrimination or dual standards followed by their funding agencies. This includes the state, private corporations and so on. (Shankar 2017)

Due to the fractured and biased nature of NGOs, there are several levels of hierarchies that leave the lowest of *hijras* unrecognised. The funding that is released in the name of an entire community, often goes into the pockets of board members, or helps only the privileged *savarna hijras*. These politics of selective recognition in NGOs resonate closely with the politics of recognition in caste-based reservations. There have been strong demands for reservations based on third gender category by *hijras* after the Supreme Court's judgment (Saria 2019). However, there is a parallel voice from Dalit *hijras* (through open forums, interviews and social networking sites) that have been making a call for *hijra* reservations to be based on both gender and caste, since in a common reservation for *hijras*, only the *savarna hijras* would benefit because of their visibility and recognition. The fight of *hijras* for reservation is a struggle to be identified as national subjects, to have equal opportunities and representations in India. However, the demand for reservation based on intersections of caste and gender is harshly met by *savarna hijras* since caste-based reservation will help in class mobility within castes (which is against their values and benefits).

Social mobility amongst Dalits and people from minority religion has always come as a threat to upholders of Brahmanical Hindutva ideologies. Therefore, caste-based

violence and practices are silenced and erased in the dominant *savarna* narratives. This threat is informed not just by economic upliftment of people from othered castes and religions, but is seen as an attack on the purity of Indian culture and tradition that is imagined in the Hindutva ideology (P. Chatterjee 1993). As discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, the debates around a pure Indian culture are directly related to discourses of nationalism and defining good citizens of India. In these discourses, good citizens and *savarna* Hindus are deeply connected.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is the most recent example of how nationalism is a powerful tool in legitimizing certain subjects within the fold of Indian citizenship, while pushing others out of it. The Act was passed in 2019 by the BJP government. The Act incited a lot of protests from several communities in the country, as it refuses to consider certain communities residing in India as Indian citizens without specific documents, targeting non-Hindu residents. Considering that a huge part of population of India does not have any legal documents with them (including birth certificates and residence proof, amongst others) because a large number of this population are homeless, uneducated, migrants from different cities or neighbouring countries and for several other reasons; this act remains deeply problematic. The act, though largely considered as anti-Muslim, is also anti-Dalits, anti-Adivasis, anti-*hijras* and anti all other non-normative communities in India (Ambedkar 2019; *The Hindu* 2020).

In Assam, where the national register of citizens (NRC) has already been prepared to enact CAA, more than 20,000 *hijras* applied for NRC and most of them were left out in

the final list released by the government (Mandal and Dutta 2018). In a short documentary created by *The Quint*, an online news platform that voices the minority and the left politics, compiled clips of *hijras* from Assam to raise awareness about the cruelty with which this law is affecting the *hijra* community. Swati Bidhan Barua, the founder of All Assam transgender Association, says in this documentary:

While applying for the NRC, there were three gender options: male, female and others. The transgenders applied in the ‘others’ community. But the documents like birth certificates that the community submitted mentioned them as either ‘male’ or ‘female’. This created a mismatch. (qtd. in Mandal and Dutta 2018)

This mismatch led to a complete erasure of the community from NRC in Assam. Following this, many *hijras* feared for their fate in the country and took part in the anti-CAA protests, as they feared community decimation. Hashtags of *hijras* against CAA trended on Twitter as prominent *hijra* voices raised their concern over this act. Activist Banu calls the act “poisonous” in her tweet and asked *hijras* to join hands in this campaign (@thirunangai 2019). There is also an online forum run by *hijras*, called *Transgender India*, where *hijras* have criticized the bill and the government harshly (“NRC and CAB” 2019). Most of the *hijras* have shared their personal narratives revealing how it is not possible for them to present their proof of address documents. One of the *hijra* users anonymously shared that many *hijras* adopt a Muslim name when they join the community and do not have access to their documents as they ran away from their houses at a very young age. Another *hijra*, named DivyaLele says:

Now due to NRC if I will be asked for legendary documents before 1951, I don't have any, my parents were poor, born at home, never went to school, they don't even know their birth date, they registered with govt for the 1st time in 1980's. So according to NRC, I will be an infiltrator, but since I am Hindu I will get my citizenship back. But our neighbour in exact same situation won't, because she is Muslim. (DivyaLele 2019)

Like her, many other *hijras* narrated their stories and the nightmare that this act has brought into their lives. Megha, a sex worker, who has not been in touch with her biological family ever since she left her house at the age of fourteen, reports that the trauma of facing them again, just to get her documents to prove her citizenship has deeply affected her (Khan 2020). She says:

I am even forgetting to take medicines; it is like this fear of proving citizenship does not let me focus on anything, including my work... I was already thrown out of one home, now they want to throw me out of this country too... They [her biological family] may just not let me enter the house, thinking I came back for the property; forget producing my birth papers. (Khan 2020)

Honour killing is yet another fear that most *hijras* face if they wish to meet with their biological families (Narsee et al. 2020). Hence, *hijra* life narratives reveal that through these new legal amendments, similar to the colonial rule of decimating *hijra* population (as discussed in chapter 1), the contemporary right-wing politics is invested in re-creating a sense of hyper-nationalism that only benefits a certain caste, religion and gender.

Significantly, while the government is moving towards erasing *hijras* and other minorities from the material history of India to deprive them of Indian citizenship, some *hijras*, within this imagination of a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (‘Hindu nation’), are trying to find their space in the mythological and religious texts of Hinduism to prove their claim over Indian citizenship. Brahmin Hindu *hijras* are often seen quoting from the *Vedas* and other religious texts to legitimize their roots in Hinduism, which has started to be recognized as an important symbol to prove nationalism in contemporary India. Tripathi’s major works, including her autobiography, Facebook page²⁶ and interviews, replicate this model of Hinduism and nationalism.

Hence, the narrative of nationalism, while it unifies a large group of people, works on identifying certain groups and communities as the other (Kaviraj 2010). Most *savarna* Hindu *hijras* have started to openly support BJP and identify themselves as proud Indian Hindu *hijras* (S. Bhattacharya 2019, 4-5). *Hijras* like Tripathi have been actively making spaces to legitimize *savarna hijras* as Indian citizens by situating them within the Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism). For instance, when Tripathi was appointed as the *Acharya Mahamandleshwar* (the highest level of Hindu monk) of the *Kinnar Akhara* (a Hindu religious community) in 2018, she said in several of her interviews that it is the Sanatan Dharma that has given *hijra* community its lost place. Later in 2019, she along with her *hijra* followers took the “royal holy dip ... a ritual traditionally reserved for Hindu priests, who are mostly male and Brahmin, or upper-caste” (Goel 2019). This was captured by all the leading local and national newspapers across the country, and pictures and videos of the same were shared by *Kinnar Akhara* via their social networking handles. It is significant to

note here that the members of *Kinnar Akhara*, who got mainstream attention, are all Brahmin *hijra* BJP supporters.

Before this ritualistic ‘bath’, Tripathi and her followers have expressed their support for the BJP government openly. In an interview with a leading Indian Newspaper, Tripathi has openly proclaimed her support for the BJP’s decision of building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya²⁷ – “*Jo Ram ka hai, woh hamara hai* (he who belongs to Ram, is ours too)” (*The Indian Express* 2018). Such statements disturb communal harmony within the community, as well as place *hijras* within the majoritarian populist religious politics of the country.

These accounts and claims of *savarna hijras* have been harshly criticized by many *hijras*. A group of 183 people, supported by 20 queer groups and 8 other organizations released a statement condemning *Kinnar Akhara*’s support for Ram Temple in 2018. It said:

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, an upper-caste Brahmin trans woman, has been appealing to Hindutva ideology and justifying the existence of the caste system in India ever since she began aspiring for a political position within the current ruling party. Her position negates the politics of communal harmony that is espoused by Hijras and Kinnars, who have historically maintained a syncretic faith of belonging to both Hinduism and Islam. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s position idealises a mythical past of the Sanatan Dharam and supports the right-wing politics of communal hatred in the guise of ‘we were always accepted’.

It should be noted that while Tripathi's position ostensibly seeks harmony between the realms of faith and gender/sexuality, in actuality, it is aligned with Hindutva and derives explicit inspiration from Nazi ideology. Such a stance is likely to deepen existing hierarchies of trans persons in dangerous ways, especially alienating minority-religious and atheist, gender expressions and identities. ("Collectives" 2018)

The statement criticized the caste-based and the religion-based discrimination that *Kinnar Akhara* advocates through its support for BJP-led Hindutva ideology, by placing *hijras* within the folds of Sanatan Dharma, to reclaim *hijras* as Indian citizens. It is the narrative of "we were always accepted" which is problematic because the "we" in these narratives is exclusive of many *hijra* subjectivities ("Collectives" 2018). It is against this 'we' that othered *hijras* have started to voice their concerns through different modes of life writings discussed in this section. These new forms of writings have changed the way *hijras* were framed as a casteless community by *savarna hijras*.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that though *hijra* autobiographies as a genre emerged as part of *hijra* activism, intending to make *hijra* subjects culturally intelligible; this mode of narration is limited to understanding *hijra* subjects through a single lens of gender identity.

Through my analysis of *hijra* autobiographies, I have shown that *hijras* are made culturally intelligible by using marginality and outcast as their subject position in the travel metaphor. Within this view, *hijra* experiences are equated with the experiences of an outcast on the basis of gender-based discrimination. Since autobiography as a mode of narration is accessible to only privileged *savarna hijras*, for several reasons, including regulated publication houses and the privilege of having a ‘story’ a ‘tell’ (as discussed in this chapter), the metaphor of an outcast (used to make *hijras* intelligible to the dominant cis gender Hindutva society) completely othered the experiences of Dalit *hijras* because the metaphor is used to create an exclusionary ‘collective voice’ which only recognises gender-based discrimination.

However, as *hijra* activism led to the Supreme Court’s decision to decriminalise *hijras* in 2014, *hijras* from many sections of the society started raising their concerns in non-traditional forms of life writing. As I have discussed, these writings helped Dalit *hijras* in expressing their voices which were dominated by the narratives of *savarna hijras*. In contrast to autobiographies, these modes offered the space to voice intersectional experiences. These also became a significant way for *hijras* to come up with non-NGO-based unregistered organisations which do not have links with central power politics. These organisations run *YouTube* channels, online blogs and handle social networking handles. For instance, Mudraboyina is part of one such organization named Telangana *Hijra* Intersex Transgender Samiti (THITS). She also runs a *YouTube* channel TransVision to voice everyday issues of underprivileged *hijras*. Other than this several Facebook groups

and other non-registered organisations feature *hijra* life narratives as part of everyday activism, such as Trans Rights Now Collective and The *Hijra* Project.

These local expressions of activism have helped to flourish several new projects and in making links with some of the already established platforms to voice these intersections. Project Mukti, Anveshi, *Feminism in India | Intersectional Feminism – Desi style!*, *Round Table India* and *Sampoorna* are some of the most prominent organisations and websites which have given space to or are a result of Dalit *hijra* activism, wherein *hijras* can narrate their life stories.

Such gender-sensitization work from inside the community has helped encourage the addressing of the internal discriminations that exist in the *hijra* community (Tapasya 2020). These non-traditional modes of life writings are therefore a significant part of *hijra* activism that aims to bring home the understanding that “all people [are] under attack whether the enemies are Brahmanism and caste, gender oppression, patriarchy, NGOs, the State, capitalism, multinational companies, Western neo imperialism etc” (*Sanhati* 2013).

I have also argued in this chapter that *hijra* writings offer experiences of certain types of sexual subjectivities which are not the dominant ones, and hence, challenge a fixed understanding of non-normative gender identities. While Western White trans writers like Jorgenson (1967) maintained the Western virtues of respectability, decency, domesticity and heterosexuality (Vipond 2019, 34), most *hijra* life writers refuse these middle-class virtues. They openly express that they work as sex-workers. Likewise, unlike White trans writers, *hijra* life writers assert that they do not identify with the established binary models.

Their writings focus on their struggles to occupy intelligible spaces being a traditional third gender community in India. Therefore, *hijra* life writings provide alternate ways of being visible in an atmosphere which is deeply conservative and heteropatriarchal. These writings are also important narratives to take into consideration when discussing trans life writings transnationally where trans writers are writing about their lives in an atmosphere where there is so much medicalised understanding of trans-ness. Though *hijra* autobiographies remain preoccupied with subjective concerns of *savarna hijras* and fail to address the broad range of discriminations that many *hijras* face in their everyday experiences, non-traditional life writing modes offer spaces that recognise intersectional experiences and provide other visibilities. However, it is important to note that the authors of these life writings also emerge from particular positionalities and are not liberating in and of themselves. Instead, their expansive model of building solidarities amongst many groups and communities must be appreciated. Life writing opens up and potentially forecloses ways of seeing and being. Narrations of self-hood often rest on gendered and caste specific investments in having a 'self' or a 'story' to tell. Yet other stories emerge as social scripts which are re-produced, activated and rejected, and notably from *hijras*, diverse productions.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have investigated how subjectivity, agency, religion, and queer forms of kinship circulate across different cultural texts. I have collected and unpicked the patterns and politics of representation for hijra people inter/transnationally. I have approached this with contextually responsive sensitivities by foregrounding the need to understand difference within local contexts without becoming subsumed by typically western notions of gender diversity that are used to read and understand non-western contexts and experiences. In this regard, my work is part of a wider decolonial project that seeks to undermine the myth of universality by taking seriously the local. Hijra identities, cultures, experiences, practices, and storying are, therefore, important starting points for disrupting multiple gendered orders. As a whole, my thesis contributes to this disruption and reimagining of a more equitable future, thus making a contribution to hijra activism through scholarship. This work has also been undertaken with deep consideration of the socio-cultural, historical, and political context of India.

A focal concern has been on the intersections of gender, sexuality, caste, colour and religion against the backdrop of populist Hindutva ideologies. Hindutva has fostered a renewed sense of nationalism, post 1990s, which celebrates Brahmanical concerns and focuses on progression of selective citizens, those that it considers as 'good' citizens. In such a state, uneducated *hijras* who come from othered castes and religions find themselves

outside the boundaries of ‘good’ citizens. Yet, the post-90s has been a period where “the digital milieu has become the primary battlefield for social activism and representation of alternative genders and sexualities in post Millennium India” (Gairola 2018, 59). During this period, *hijras* have become hyper visible in Indian media, culture and legal policies. Hindutva and *hijra* representations and activism have seen a parallel rise in India. In this thesis, I have problematised these increased visibilities as simple signs of progression or social inclusion. I have suggested that while there are kinds of inclusions happening, they are happening under very particular conditions.

As a scholar activist, I resist being complacent to this increase. Instead, I have made a case to disrupt the dynamic between different medias. Some media are more influential in shaping public imagination and what we know about specific people and communities. Yet, there are alternative mediums providing sources of information through storytelling, activism and scholarship in digital media. These get circulated less widely but they represent a more complex politics of representation. There is a systematic level of oppression that I have highlighted in my thesis. It’s not just the representation of hijras in particular case studies that needs interrogating/I have interrogated, but the production, circulation, publication houses and industries tied to Hindutva ideology which is further connected to the politics of representation. Seeing through these systemic issues and questioning what we as an audience are consuming is the case that this thesis is making.

The thesis is invested in mapping the representations of (and, in the last analytical chapter, *by*) hijra people: from the popular culture texts of Bollywood film to

postcolonial English literature, to life writings by hijra activists. On one hand, the range of case studies and their mediums signify how discursive patterns emerge across multiple systems. That is, certain relations of power are reproduced and maintained by way of multiple representations. The case studies are also intertextual, in that the meanings generated from one case study is dependent on the meanings available in a broad range of other case studies that we as audience are familiar with. Looking across the genres of film and literature, it became possible to see how value systems have shifted, and how certain value systems (such as cis-hetero-patriarchalism and Hindutva nationalism) are woven into the popular cultural representations of our time.

On the other hand, my selection of case studies also makes visible points and means of resistance through discursive designs of the chosen case studies. By including Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and, perhaps more importantly, the various modes of life writing by hijra activists and community members, the readers are exposed to the ways in which these case studies also enable difference to be repositioned. This is, as I have shown, not uncomplicated. Even when some representations, such as those (auto)biographies which are designed to disrupt gender and Hindutva ideologies, may also continue to maintain other problematic power relations such as caste, colour, and normative femininities (i.e., through 'passing').

Thus, the selected creative representations of *hijras* offer insightful opportunities to understand the multiple ways in which *hijras* remain affected by the social categories of gender, sexuality, caste, colour, religion and nationalism. This thesis shows that these

representations open forms of counter-narratives and space to explore questions of colonial heteronormativity for multiple identifications. In doing so, this thesis makes a significant intervention in the study of queer identities and representation in India.

I have drawn on the works of critics and scholars who focus on gender and sexuality, postcolonial studies, and South Asian queer cultural representation more broadly in this thesis. This has helped underpin my understanding of intersectionality and how queer theory travels transnationally in *hijra* representations in respective cultural modes. As Menon highlights, in India, queer politics moves beyond sexuality and is complicated by “class, caste and community identity” (Menon 99). This thesis encapsulates an understanding of queerness within these intersections to make meanings of *hijra* behaviours and practices. This theoretical framework has also benefited my argument in locating how the nineties has been a significant period from which a new movement has emerged in India to conceptualise gender and sexuality, making *hijras* more visible. This movement has helped *hijras* to acquire a sense of collective voice and identity, not just in their life writings but also in the ways they are represented in other cultural modes. They acquired new meanings and were recognised differently.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this thesis has analysed *hijra* representations until 2020, and since then, a lot of *hijra* representations have emerged and continue to emerge. From Bollywood, *Gangubai* (2022) and *Ardh* (2022) are the most recent examples which have represented *hijras*. In life writings, hundreds of new voices and narratives emerge every day on online platforms. My thesis has demonstrated that there is a pattern of

recognition which can be found in these mediums after the nineties. In Bollywood, *hijra* have been represented within particular categories fulfilling specific kinds of roles and disrupting the heteronormativity of the films. In anglophone literature, while most novels used *hijra* characters as metaphors to explore its central theme, reproducing reductive stereotypes in the process, *The Ministry* has used metaphorical settings to represent *hijras* with a hope to understand what it is to be pushed to the margins. In life writings, *hijra* autobiographies have a pattern of representing *hijra* ‘stories’ through an exclusionary lens of gender, whereas the non-traditional life writing modes show that there is a conscious attempt to build solidarities with other marginalised groups by representing intersectional *hijra* ‘stories’. As future representations continue to emerge in these mediums, the patterns that I have located will help in understanding why and how these representations portray *hijras* in specific ways. There are chances that these patterns shift, modify or change as new representations may portray *hijras* in novel ways. The future directions in all these mediums seem hopeful as *hijras* continue to be a point of interest in these mediums. *Hijra* life writings particularly seem hopeful as Dalit hijras like Mudraboyina have indicated interest in publishing an autobiography. Additionally, there are new solidarities which are emerging in NGO-based activism like the Aarohan NGO in Delhi which started by uplifting underprivileged children and is now making plans to start teaching uneducated *hijras*. The patterns identified in my research will continue to be of use as these new representations will either mark a shift from 2020 onwards or will strengthen the existing patterns. My findings can thus be of help to scholars and activists working on *hijra* lives in drawing a roadmap of how the post 90s *hijra* representations are helpful/ harmful in

circulating *hijra* images. Disseminating these findings in the form of a booklet or a website could be possible ways of taking this research forward and contributing to *hijra* activism.

NOTES

1. In Indian religious and mythological texts like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, *hijras* are mainly represented as *Ardhanarishvara*, which is one of the many forms of the Hindu God, Shiva. As *Ardhanarishvara*, Shiva is depicted as half-male and half-female. Read Kidwai and Vanita's book *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* for a better understanding of how *hijras* are represented in Hindu mythologies.
2. Link to the Vicks India 2017 advertisement where the *hijra* activist Gauri Sawant was portrayed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zeeVEKaDLM>
3. In 2018, an *Akhara* (a Hindu religious order) was established by the *hijra* community, led by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, called Kinnar Akhara. The community showcased itself in January 2019 at the Kumbh Mela festival by taking the holy dip. The holy dip is a ritual reserved for male Brahmin Hindus. Tripathi and other members of the *Akhara* appeared with big tilaks, a mark worn by Hindus on their forehead to indicate high caste. It was the first time *hijras* took this holy dip.
4. The Varna system categorised people based on their occupations which was understood as idealized human callings, where Brahmins were the priestly people, Kshatriyas were the rulers, administrators and warriors, Vaishyas were artisans, tradesmen and farmers and Shudras encompassed the labour class. The fifth class was that of the 'untouchables', who were segregated and persecuted by those belonging to a high caste.
5. *Dharma* is a key concept in Hinduism which signifies the fulfilment of individual duty by observing the law.

6. After India gained independence from the British Raj in 1947, a new national vision was inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru's (India's first prime Minister and the then president of Congress party) concept of secularism and nationalism, which was based on his commitment for "scientific temper" and "the rational organisation of society" (Malik and Vajpeyi 1989, 311). Nehru's vision denied the relevance of "religion in national political identity", which was met by resistance from those who opposed a narrow and limited vision which provided little space for the consideration of India's recent history of partition based on religion (311).
7. Link to the advert seatbelt crew advertisement which showed *hijras* dressed in air hostess costumes to remind reckless drivers of traffic rules:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muCU6_Y_Kyo
8. Following the NALSA judgement, the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill was introduced and passed in the Rajya Sabha in 2014. The bill underwent several changes by the government after consultation with the trans community and was replaced with a new version, the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill in 2015. However, while the bill was still pending in Rajya Sabha, the BJP government (which was elected in 2014) made certain changes and presented it as the new Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill in 2016. This bill received a lot of criticism from the transgender community as some of the articles were found regressive. The bill was again presented with some amendments in 2018, which too received protests from the transgender community, however, it was passed and made into an act in 2019.

9. All three groups (Karni Sena, Bajrang Dal and RSS) have protested against several Bollywood films. For instance, at the release of *Padmaavat*, these groups had burnt posters and vehicles, blocked highways and sparked fierce protests demanding a ban on the film. They claimed that the film has a dream sequence portraying the Hindu Rajput queen Padmaavati romancing with the Muslim ruler Alauddin Khilji. Previously, these groups had also protested against Bollywood films that casted Pakistani Muslim actors.
10. Shelley Park defines Monomaternalism as “the ideological assumption that a child can only have one real mother... [it] stems from a combination of beliefs about the socially normative and the biologically imperative” (Park 3).
11. Famous dialogues like *agar maa ka doodh piya hai to saamne aa* (you are brave if you were breastfed by your mother) and *maa ke doodh ka karz* (the debt of mother’s milk) are repeated in many superhits films like *Lawaaris* (1981), *Deewar* (1975) and *Gadar* (2001).
12. Doordarshan is India’s largest public broadcaster funded and owned by the government of India. Until the 1990s, it was the primary channel on television that was available to the masses.
13. All India Radio was officially, and commonly, known as Akashvani since 1957. It is the national public radio broadcaster of India and is also the largest radio network in the world.
14. For a queer reading of “*Didi tera devar deewana*” from the film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?*, see Gopinath’s analysis of the song in the chapter “Bollywood/Hollywood” in *Impossible Desires*, 2005.

15. Chopra's (2001) essay, "Retrieving the father: Gender studies, "father love" and the discourse of mothering" and Gala's blogposts (2014; 2016) explore in detail how disguise and cross-dressing scenes often represent women as soft targets or as distractions, but also as possible critiques of masculinity.
16. Films like *Veergati* (1995), *Naseeb* (1997) and *Pardesi Babu* (1998) are some examples of such films.
17. Films like *Darmiyaan* (1997) and *Tamanna* (1997) are examples of films where the central *hijra* character is born intersex.
18. Padhma Vibhusan and Paddma Bhushan are the second and third highest civilian awards, respectively, in India.
19. Fear of travelling alone is a fear that many *hijras* discuss in their life writings. For instance, in *The Truth About Me*, A. Revathi narrates how she had feared travelling alone in trains and buses for most of her life because a *hijra* is extremely vulnerable to abuse and threats in public places (2010, 69).
20. The "natural attitude", a term introduced by Harold Garfinkel, which Hawkesworth understands as:

a series of "unquestionable" axioms about gender, including the beliefs that there are two and only two genders; gender is invariant; genitals are the essential signs of gender; the male/female dichotomy is natural; being masculine or feminine is natural and not a matter of choice; all individuals can (and must) be classified as masculine or feminine. (Hawkesworth "Confounding Gender" 649)

21. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 is an act passed in the Indian parliament which overtly used religion as a criterion for citizenship. The act grants citizenship to religious minorities from the Muslim-majority countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. This act incited protests from Muslims and many other minority communities across India because the act is implemented by creating a National Register of Citizens (NRC) of all Indian citizens. The purpose of this register is to identify illegal immigrants to deport them or keep them in detention centres. The NRC has already been implemented in Assam; and several minority communities have found themselves outside of the final list.
22. Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond belong to the second wave of the feminist movement. They are part of the radical trans exclusionary feminists. Also see for further information - Sheila Jeffreys “Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution” (1990) and Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* (1979).
23. Link to websites that list India’s top publishing houses: <https://www.frontlist.in/top-10-best-publishing-houses-in-india/> ; <https://rafalreyzer.com/30-best-book-publishers-in-india-list-submissions/> ; <https://edugorilla.com/best-10-publishers-in-india/>
24. Mudraboyina actively posts about solidarities and alliances between Dalit and *hijras* on her Facebook account. Link to her Facebook profile – <https://www.facebook.com/rachanamudraboyina>
25. News published on pinknews.co.uk (2017) and in the *Times of India* (2017) show that members of the *hijra* community are common acid attack survivors.

26. Tripathi's followers uphold Hindutva ideology. Their posts on their Facebook page,

"Kinnar Akhara", is an example of this. Link to the page:

<https://www.facebook.com/kinnarakhara/>

27. The dispute over Ram Temple in Ayodhya engaged religious sentiments since 1992

when the mosque (Babri masjid) was demolished by a Hindu mob. The place where the mosque was built is regarded as the birthplace of Lord Ram by many Hindus. Since the BJP came in power in India in 2014, Hindu sentiment for building the temple over the destroyed mosque became intense, which led to the Supreme Court's verdict in 2020 in favour of the rebuilding of the temple.

Appendix 1

The following non-English words appeared repeatedly in this thesis. Here is a list with their translations:

Zenaana – feminine

Guru – Head or teacher

Chela – Junior or disciple

Deras – communes of *hijras*

Nirvana – an initiation ceremony performed by making a sacrifice to Bahuchara Mata

Kothis – a group of men who occasionally dress as women

Panthis – The passive sexual partner among same-sex partners

Chakka – A slang used for *hijras* in the North Indian region

Acharya Mahamandleshwar – the highest level of Hindu monk

Akhara – a Hindu religious community

Kinnar – another term used for *hijras*, mainly in north India

Badhai – The traditional role of alms collection by *hijras*

Mewat – A region located at the border of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in India

Swayamvarasakhis, dogana and zanakhi – terms for intimate female friendships

Masala – mix

Gharaanas – *Hijra* households

Raga – Classical Indian musical modes

Gujarat ka Lalla – The son of Gujarat

Salwar-Kameez – A loose trouser worn by females in the Indian subcontinent

Kameez – An upper garment like a long shirt without a collar. Worn usually over a *salwar*

Savarna – Those who belong from the high-caste (Brahmins)

Khwabgah – House of dreams

Duniya – World

Jannat – Paradise

Imaam – An Islamic religious leadership position. The one who leads prayer in mosques

Diyas – Oil lamps

Jamaat – A group

Chimta – an instrument used in Hindu religious celebrations

Pooja – A Hindu worship act

Jogi – A monk

Maulvi – A learned man in Islamic teachings

Tilak – a mark worn on forehead by Hindus

Jogi – a monk

Appendix 2

The following are the English translations of all the Hindi film titles and song sequences mentioned in Chapter 3

List of all the films:

Love Aaj Kal – Love in these days

Badrinath ki Dulhaniya – The bride of Badrinath

De De Pyaar De – Give me love

Dil Bechara – Poor Heart

Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na – You know or you don't

Sita Gita – These are the names of the two lady protagonists in the film

Mardaani – Masculine lady

Gulaab Gang – Pink gang

Kya Kool Hain Hum – How Cool we are

Pyaar kya to Darna kiya – Why to fear when we are in love

Padmaavat – This is the name of a historical queen on which the film is based

Tamanna – Desire

Darmiyaan – In-between

Sadak – Road

Sangharsh – Struggle

Laxmii – Name of the *hijra* protagonist in the film

Kunwara Baap – Unmarried father

Nadiya Ke Paar – beyond the river

Hum Aapke Hain Kaun – Who am I to you?

Pyaar Koi Khel Nahi – Love is no game

Agneepath – The path of fire

Raja Hindustani – Name of the hero protagonist in the film

Shabnam Mousi – Name of the *hijr* protagonist in the film

Maine Pyaar Kya – I have been in love

Shola aur Shabnam – Fire and Snow

Khalnayak – Villain

Nayak – The hero

Daayra – Limits

Wajood – Existence

Mohra – Pawn

Golmaal Returns – Golmaal means a deceptive situation

List of all the songs:

Choli ke Peeche Kya? – What is behind the blouse?

Didi Tera Devar Deewana – Sister, your brother-in-law is a lover

Sarkayi leo khatiya jaada lage – Get your bed closer, its cold

Chatt pe soya tha behnoee, mai tanne samjh ke so gayi – The brother-in-law was sleeping on the terrace, I slept next to him thinking it is you

Saj rahi gali meri maa – the lane is decorated, my mother

Tayyab Ali pyaar ka dushman – Tayyab Ali is the enemy of love

Jogi Ji Dheere Dheere – Monk, slowly slowly

Dhiktana – A random word

Munni Badnam Hui – Munni has become dishonourable

Fevicol se – With a glue stick

Chikni Chameli – Hot Chameli

Chaand sa lalama – The child is like the moon

Saare mohalle mai halle hogaya – There is an outburst in the entire locality

Bambholle – Reference to Bholenath (Hindu God, Shiva)

Appendix 3

A list of key sources used in Chapter Four specifying the names of *hijra* writers whose ‘stories’ these sources represent:

Four *hijra* autobiographies used in this chapter:

1. *I am Vidya: A transgender’s Journey* (2007) – Living Smile Vidya;
2. *The Truth About Me* (2010) – A. Revathi
3. *me Hijra, me Laxmi* (2015) – Laxmi Narayan Tripathi.
4. *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) – Manobi Bandopadhya

Thirteen case-studies of non-traditional *hijra* life writers

1. “Rachana Mudraboyina On TransVision And Trans Representation In Media” (2019) – Rachana Mudraboyina
2. “*Hijra* has become a political identity” (2017) – Mudraboyina and Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli
3. “(Trans)gender and caste lived experience – Transphobia as a form of Brahmanism: An Interview of Living Smile Vidya” (2013) – Living Smile Vidya
4. “Where are the archives of our Dalit Trans foremothers and forefathers?” (2018) – Grace Banu
5. Banu’s interview with *Dalit Camera* (2016)
6. “I’m on a mission to empower India’s transgender community, one painted palm at a time” (2020) - Kalki Subramaniam

7. “A Journey Of Pain And Beauty: On Becoming Transgender In India” (2014) – Abhina Aher
8. “What Does India’s Transgender Community Want?” (2020) –Shamiba and Shreya
9. “‘We Are Indians Too’: Assam’s Trans People Are Left Out of NRC” (2018) – a few Assamese *hijra*
10. “NRC and CAB to eradicate transgenders and *Hijra* system in India?” (2019) – several *hijras* from mixed backgrounds
11. “CAA triggers fears among sex workers, transgenders” (2020) – Megha
12. “*Indian Trans, Intersex and Gender Nonconforming (T/IS/GNC) individuals & groups in response to the Kinnar Akhada's call for Ram temple at the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya*” (2018) – *T/IS/GNC individuals, 20 LGBTQIA+ groups, 8 ally organisations, and 146 individual allies*
13. “Alif Sonia” (2017) – Sonia Sheikh

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