

Mainstreaming Third-Gender Healers: The Changing Perceptions of South Asian Hijras

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Mainstreaming is the act of bringing public light to a population or issue, but it can have a deleterious impact on the individuals being discussed. Hijras comprise a third-gender group that has long had cultural and religious significance within South Asian societies. Described as being neither male nor female, hijras were once called upon for their religious powers to bless and curse. However, after the British rule and in the wake of more-recent media attention, the hijra identity has been scrutinized under a harsh Western gaze. It forces non-Western populations to be viewed in terms of binaries, such as either male or female, and it classifies them by inapplicable Western terms. For example, categorizing a hijra as transgendered obfuscates the cultural significance that the term hijra conveys within their societies. Furthermore, media representations of hijras cause consumers to view themselves as more natural, while hijras become objectified as occupying a false identity. This has caused them to be pigeonholed within the very societies that once legitimated their existence and respected them for their powers. With their cultural practices being seen as outmoded, and their differences from Western people being pointed out in the news and on television, hijras have faced significant discrimination and ridicule. After providing a discussion of relevant Western and non-Western concepts, I seek to describe hijras and the effects of mainstreaming on their lives. Finally, I offer a critique of current research on this population and provide solutions to improve their plight.

INTRODUCTION

Within Western discourse, sexual dimorphism is the idealized model that continues to drive inquiry on sex and gender (Herdt, 1994b, p. 11; Fausto-Sterling, 2000, pp. 19-20; Nanda, 1999, pp. 115, 129). In other words, it is believed that a strict division between male and female (sex) or man and woman (gender) best describes individuals today. However, these stark, dualistic categories are problematized by liminal groups. Gilbert Herdt (1994b) has indicated that members of these groups “have been marginalized, stigmatized, and persecuted” within Western societies (p. 11). Intersexuals, transgendered individuals, and transsexuals have been labeled with mental disorders and have been relegated to the periphery of society, only recently gaining leverage through activism (Stryker, 2009, pp. 8-9, 18-20).

In contrast, many non-Western societies have longstanding categories for individuals who “are neither male nor female” or “neither men nor women,” as legitimated through religion and cultural integration (Herdt, 1994c, p. 420; Nanda, 1999, pp. xxiii, 115; Nanda, 1994, p. 373; Reddy, 2005, p. 4). They are considered either third sex or third gender and include populations such as the hijras of South Asia, Native American berdaches, Sambian kwolu-aatmwol, and

Tahitian mähū, which are described in Herdt’s (1994) extensive anthology, *Third Sex, Third Gender*. Another aspect that these groups have in common is the ritual, healing role that they play within their societies (Vitebsky, 2001, p. 93). Gender takes on symbolic meaning, which reaffirms the need for the third category. It is because they are third gender that they are imbued with special powers and, thus, benefit society.

Unfortunately, with increased attention being paid to these groups, especially in the media, their members become a spectacle for the Western gaze, and the social perceptions of these healers are deleteriously affected (Reddy, 2005, pp. 2-3). Through an examination of South Asian hijras over the past two decades, the negative effects of mainstreaming on the perceptions of these third gender healers by their communities will be demonstrated, and definitions of relevant terminology will be provided. This study has major implications for the treatment of these individuals, as well as for the respect, upkeep, and relevance of their healing practices.

CONCEPTS AND THEORY

A brief discussion of key concepts is necessary in order to best understand hijras, their roles within their societies, and the effects of changing perceptions

on their status. The terms that will be defined include *sex*, *gender*, *third sex* and *third gender*, *mainstreaming*, and *healing*. Additionally, the brief section on Western versus non-Western categories of sex and gender will elucidate the effects of viewing hijras through a harsh, Western gaze.

Sex, Gender, Third Sex, and Third Gender

In Western conception, sex is believed to be biological, while gender is seen as a separate, culturally-described entity (Herdt, 1994a, p. 50; Stryker, 2008, pp. 7-9, 11). This separation is itself a Western phenomenon; whereas, in Indian society, sex and gender are collapsed into a single category (Nanda, 1994, p. 381). Based on definitions of sex and gender, third sex seems to refer to biological or morphological characteristics, while third gender is more sociocultural. Because the terms *sex* and *gender* may be used interchangeably in India, so can *third sex* and *third gender*. Their conflation actually seems necessary to understand hijras from an emic¹ perspective and will henceforth be used as synonymous.

Third sex/third gender is a category for individuals who do not fit neatly into dualistic, Western notions of sex as male/female and gender as man/woman, and it primarily applies to non-Western populations. Herdt (1994a) further notes that third gender is typically separate from Western conceptualizations of sexual orientation/sexuality (p. 47), which Stryker (2008) defines as the objects and actions (or lack thereof²) involved in pursuing erotic desire (p. 16). However, sexuality is central to identity formation (Nanda, 1994, p. 281; Reddy, 2005, pp. 32-3), and failure to consider sexuality as interconnected with third gender is a flaw of Herdt's (1994) work. Asexuality is central to the legitimacy of hijras within their traditional role and spiritual relevance to society (Reddy, 2005, p. 56), but the emergence of hijras in sex work defies that role and stigmatizes them within society. Thus, taking an intersectional³ or hybrid⁴ approach to identity formation can give a more accurate image of third gender groups, such as the hijras. These views involve the conceptualization of individuals with multiple intersecting or intertwined components instead of the study of each aspect separately—as if it were dissected out of the body and context. In other words, these approaches beseech not just researchers but also the public to view the interactions of gender, sexuality, and culture (among others) as relevant to one another and key to the formation of

the person.

Western versus Non-Western Conceptual Categories

Judith Halberstam (1998) believes that “‘thirdness’ merely balances the binary system and . . . tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of ‘other’ ” (p. 28). While such individuals may be otherized in the West, the category of third gender remains salient in cultures that have a social and historical role for its members. At the same time, third sex categories “are not present at all times and places, which has implications for the creation and maintenance” of the fragile categories (Herdt, 1994a, p. 22). This is especially true in the presence of foreign ideological influences. The Western gaze has changed social perceptions of hijras by the very South Asian communities that once had a religious, symbolic, and ritual place for them. Once seen as inextricable from life and culture, the application of Western terminology and categories has severely constrained the identities of these groups within their respective societies. Thus, it is highly reductive and harmful to frame third gender groups in this ultimately inapplicable light.

Additionally, third gender is very separate from “‘gender dysphoria,’ ” and reducing it to a mental disorder is to oversimplify the category because “gender-reversed roles are not the sole basis for recruitment into a third gender role” (Herdt, 1994a, pp. 47-8). Roughly translated to “eunuch” or “hermaphrodite,” which highlights their sexual impotence, *hijra* is a unique subcultural term that is derived from Urdu and takes into consideration the range of variability and experiences that these individuals and their bodies encompass (Nanda, 1999, p. 13; Stryker, 2008, pp. 22-23). While some hijras are naturally intersexed, having characteristics of both male and female (Stryker, 2008, p. 8), majority are not (Reddy, 2005, p. 235n3).

Although third sex/third gender is similar to Stryker's (2008) definition of *transgender* in its inclusion of a variety of “gender-variant practices and identities” (p. 19), it is different in its symbolic, ritual value to the culture as a whole. Piers Vitebsky⁵ (2001) links transvestism to shamanism and ritual healing (p. 93), but it is important not to conflate third sex and third gender with Western notions of transvestite and transgender for two major reasons. First, the Western terms fail to capture the diversity and roles of these individuals within their cultural contexts (Herdt, 1994c, p. 440; Nanda, 1999, p. xii). Second, there is no category of

third-gender in the West (Herdt, 1994a, p. 71). Western categorical terminology should not be used to describe non-Western populations at the risk of curtailing culturally relativistic understanding by conceptually linking disparate ideologies. Thus, only *hijra* can truly describe this third gender group of healers, and others such as *transvestite* or *hermaphrodite* are illogical, albeit widespread, reductions of their bodies and lives.

Mainstreaming

Although it may seem that bringing public light on marginalized individuals and their plight can aid in dispelling ill sentiment towards them, this “mainstreaming” has, in fact, been demonstrated to be deleterious to their situation. When non-Western categories, such as third gender become mainstreamed, they fall under the scrutiny of a dualistic and reductive Western gaze (Reddy, 2005, p. 3). This concept is based on Urvashi Vaid’s (1995) documentation of the mainstreaming of the gay movement within the United States (pp. 106-7). While it improved their lives, it did not dissuade stigma and violence against these peoples (Vaid, 1995, p. 3). In fact, though not explicitly stated in *Virtual Equality*, the mainstreaming of the gay and lesbian movement may even have promoted judgment by bringing them into the public eye; greater awareness paves the way for greater scrutiny. This problem is visible with hijras in India, as well. Hijras have been mainstreamed through National Geographic Channel shows, such as *Taboo* (“Third Sex,” 2009; “Sexuality,” 2002) and through news outlets that have documented civil rights action, thus commanding global attention for their cause (Burke, 2013; Ethirajan, 2011; “Indian Eunuchs,” 2009; “Laws to Protect,” 2012).

Healing

Healers are individuals who serve specific ritual functions within society. They are healers in their own right, not due to a cultivated doctor-patient relationship, but rather through the spiritual comfort that they can bring to families. Here, the term *healer* will not be used in the biomedical context of the word; rather, the culturally relevant model will be utilized. Hijras have the ability to bless and curse (Cohen, 1995, p. 276; Herdt, 1994a, p. 70; Nanda, 1994, p. 386; Nanda, 1999, pp. 8, 12, 48-51; Reddy, 2005, p. 3), and their traditional role within society has both religious and historical bases (Reddy, 2005, p. 89). Thus, for hijras, their status as ritual performers is centered on of their ability to heal.

HIJRAS

Hijras are third gender ritual performers with special powers to bless or curse. To be defined as *hijra* means not just that one is neither male nor female or neither man nor woman,⁶ but it simultaneously entails physical characteristics, gender identity, sexuality, and psychological affiliation with the group (Nanda, 1994, p. 381; Nanda, 1999, pp. xxiii-xxiv). Already evident here is the difficulty in describing hijras through Western, dualistic terminology. The key aspect to understanding hijras is their classification as sexually impotent, whether extant or by castration, because they gain their status as neither man nor woman through this inability to procreate (Nanda, 1999, p. 14). Because they are third gender, hijras can take on both male and female gender roles and occupations (Nanda, 1999, p. 17). They are like women in their performance of female-associated characteristics, such as hip-swaying and linguistics, generally caricaturing women’s actions and expressions (Nanda, 1999, pp. 17-8). They are like men in taking on male-associated jobs in, for example, construction (Nanda, 1999, p. 17). However, hijras should not be viewed as solely a factor of their sex, gender, or sexuality (Reddy, 2005, p. 4). There are many qualifications and considerations for the hijra identity, so there is no single, set-in-stone definition for the group.

Traditional Roles as Healers

Hijras in India are inextricably linked to their religious and spiritual role as healers within communities, and they are called *badhai hijras* (Reddy, 2005, p. 56). As performers at weddings, they bless wives to bear sons in an effort to deter the very infertility that characterizes hijra status and causes such fear (Nanda, 1994, pp. 386-7, 392; Nanda, 1999, pp. 44-6). This ensures a future for the traditional hijra practitioners who also bless newborn infants—especially sons—warding off evil spirits and ensuring their fertility (Nanda, 1994, p. 386; Nanda, 1999, pp. 2-3). They also claim that any intersexed child must join the hijras, which goes uncontested (Nanda, 1994, p. 386).

Conversely, hijras curse families who do not pay for the blessing services and who refuse their performance at weddings or births. They recount stories of cursed families that experienced the death of a child or infertility, stating that they only curse when faced with severe disrespect (Nanda, 1999, p. 8). The payment for

their work tends to be fixed but depends on the social class of the host family (Nanda, 1999, p. 49). Items given include money, sweets, and clothing. While some negotiating may take place, “people most often try to send the hijras away satisfied because of the fear or shame of their abuse if they are angered” (Nanda, 1999, p. 49). Families fear the wrath of an unhappy hijra’s powers.

Association with Hinduism

Hinduism legitimates space for hijras by lending religious basis to their special powers (Nanda, 1994, pp. 386-393; Nanda, 1999, pp. 12, 23-4, 30-1; Reddy, 2005, p. 100). Furthermore, the association of hijras with the major religion of India promotes social inclusion, since religion and culture are heavily intertwined within South Asia. This furthers their legitimacy. It is the third-gender nature of hijras that offers them—or at least used to—status and respect within society (Reddy, 2005, pp. 104, 108-10). Thus, viewing hijras in the context of religion becomes central to understanding their position in society.

Goddess Bahuchara Mata.

The Hindu Mother Goddess, Bahuchara Mata is the major deity that the hijras are associated with and worship, and they bless brides and newborns in her name (Nanda, 1999, pp. ix, 24-5; Reddy, 2005, pp. 57, 97-8). Hijras also serve as servants to her temples throughout India (Nanda, 1999, p. 25). The story of Bahuchara Mata gives hijras their association with sexual abstinence and asexuality. As the Mata was travelling, she was attacked by bandits whom she feared would ravish her. In order to preserve her virtue, she cut off her breast and offered it to them in its place. Although this self-mutilation killed her, she was deified for her purity. It is the hijras’ sexual abstinence that gives them their powers to bless and curse.

Goddess Bahuchara Mata also is associated with the hijra emasculation ritual, *nirvan*. She was wedded to a prince who kept running away at night and never consummated their marriage. Getting angry at his constant disappearance, the Mata followed him demanding an explanation. After discovering that he was neither male nor female, she got angry and cut off his genitals, proclaiming thenceforth that all men like the prince must undergo *nirvan*. For this reason, every time the emasculation ceremony occurs, she is called to oversee it and confer powers to the individual being operated upon (Nanda, 1999, pp. 25-6). *Nirvan* is a term

derived from Sanskrit that, in Hindu⁷ circles, has been associated with concepts of rebirth and attaining supreme peace. Undergoing *nirvan* may, thus, be seen as a rebirth—the birth of a hijra. For hijras, confirmation of legitimacy comes from castration without replacement by female organs, which establishes loyalty to the identity. Male genitalia are seen as useless or unnecessary to hijras, and their excision proves one’s asexuality (Nanda, 1994, pp. 381, 393; Nanda, 1999, p. 11; Reddy, 2005, pp. 91, 224). Since it is her third-sex nature that gives her special powers, if a hijra without the excision is caught performing, then she will likely be run out of the venue without pay; she is seen as a fraud (Cohen, 1995, p. 296; Reddy, 2005, pp. 56, 98).

Lord Shiva.

Lord Shiva is seen as a sexually ambivalent figure, having both male and female characteristics (Nanda, 1999, p. 20). One of his most powerful incarnations is *Ardhanarisvara*, who is half-man/half-woman and “united with his Shakti,” or female creative power (Nanda, 1999, p. 20). Lord Shiva was asked to create the universe in one version of the Hindu creation myth; however, he spent so much time in preparation that Lord Brahma was given the female powers to create it. After seeing the universe already full, Lord Shiva broke off his phallus and cast it to the world seeing no more need for it, since creative powers are female. In this action, Lord Shiva blessed the world with fertility though he had been emasculated. Hijras, likewise, may confer fertility to others though are, themselves, infertile (Nanda, 1999, p. 30). These examples demonstrate that hijras have much respect throughout India; they are intertwined with Hinduism⁸ and Indian culture.

Cultural Acceptance and Legitimacy

It may seem as if hijras were never accepted within South Asian societies given the fear of their curses and of their status as infertile beings. However, they were once highly respected for their religiously-conferred powers to ward off evil. They were even called into homes to give fertility blessings, rather than turned away; they were trusted, rather than suspected to be extortionists. Their role to deter impotence, in addition to their association with Bahuchara Mata and Lord Shiva, makes hijras integral to the religious milieu of South Asia. This is especially true since religion is so central to the cultures of communities that legitimize hijras.

To a Western audience, the excision of male

genitalia may be seen as an unnatural act, making hijras and third gender seem like a fabricated identity. In South Asia, however, *nirvan* marks the birth of a hijra—the creation of a new being. The excision surgery further links hijras to their religious place within society and legitimizes their ritual performances. It offers the proof that they are infertile and are truly capable of conferring fertility blessings. One undergoes *nirvan* to fully embody the hijra identity, vaguely comparable to transsexuals undergoing a sex change surgery to embody their identity. Sex change surgery in Western society is a natural desire for many transsexuals, though opponents may see it as mutilative and unnatural. The concept of what is natural is very different in South Asia from in the West. In order to better understand hijras, Western scholars and consumers need to see them within their non-Western religious, historical, and cultural context in order to better understand them. It is viewing hijras as fakes, unnatural, and abnormal that does the most disservice to this group. Neither aliens with magical powers nor members of a false identity, hijras are humans whose traditional role is becoming outmoded, whose cultural relevance is dwindling in the face of the Western gaze, and whose lives are being broadcasted for the world to see and scrutinize.

POST-MAINSTREAMING AND STIGMA

While hijras are central to the functioning of traditional Indian society, they are becoming increasingly marginalized as their healing role is being denied. Without their traditional role, more hijras are relegated to the domain of prostitution; these are the *kandra hijras* (Nanda, 1999, p. 393; Reddy, 2005, pp. 12, 56). Engagement with sex work directly contradicts the asexuality that is supposed to characterize a true hijra in her association with Bahuchara Mata (Reddy, 2005, p. 56). Because it is highly stigmatized, even within hijras' perception, engaging in prostitution undoubtedly decreases their value as perceived by Indian society (Reddy, 2005, p. 80). In fact, due to the decreased market for hijra ritual performers, they are more likely to be involved with prostitution than traditional work (Reddy, 2005, pp. 12, 56).

Nanda (1999) notes that hijras have been stigmatized to some extent ever since the British rule of India, despite their auspicious presence at weddings and births (pp. 49-51). Hijras have since been blamed as dirty, shameless extortionists for their actions and their bodies (Nanda, 1999, p. 51). The mainstreaming

of their third gender status through TV shows and their oddness relative to the Western gaze has cast them in a public, negative light. This opinion seems to be seeping into Indian society. While they were once an invisible group—called upon when needed but otherwise left alone—now their disrespect is more open and profound (Reddy, 2005, p. 3). Hijras are taking action to better their social status both symbolically and legally (“Indian Eunuchs,” 2009; “Laws to Protect,” 2012). Unfortunately, this mainstreaming puts them in the scrutiny of the Western gaze, garnering them increased scorn that manifests as public disrespect, which must be combated in day-to-day life. Thus, the cycle of scorn and retribution is perpetuated, reinforcing the already widespread notion that hijras are problems and further pigeonholing them within South Asian society.

Respect through Lifting One's Skirt

When disrespect becomes too severe or intolerable, hijras commit an act that is considered highly unfeminine and shaming—they lift their sari to reveal their mutilated genitals (Cohen, 1995, pp. 296-7; Nanda, 1999, p. 18; Reddy, 2005, pp. 139-40). Supposedly, being exposed to the sight of castrated genitals imposes impotence on the viewer, so it is a paradoxically potent action (Cohen, 1995, p. 296; Reddy, 2005, p. 139). It is an implicit curse⁹ (Reddy, 2005, pp. 139-40).

Within traditional hijra communities, there is a sense of honor, or *izzat*. The action of revealing one's lack of genitals is a symbolic recapturing of that honor and respect by reinforcing their traditional powers (Reddy, 2005, p. 139). However, hijras have become constructed as individuals without shame (Nanda, 1999, p. 18; Reddy, 2005, p. 139), and the British, at one point, tried to outlaw the practice but with little success (Nanda, 1999, p. 50). Hijras are seen as extortionists, in some cases, who exploit the locals' fear to gain undue alms (Nanda, 1999, p. 50). They are considered hard to get rid of after a performance, asking for more and more alms (Nanda, 1999, p. 18; Reddy, 2005, p. 140). Given these perceptions, the threat of a hijra committing fraud is high. Unless a family sees the lack of genitals, they cannot confirm that *bahdai* hijras are who they claim to be and not just men dressed in women's clothing; at the same time, being exposed to the mutilated parts also confers infertility on those who view it, so offending a hijra is dangerous. Finally, not all hijras are legitimated through emasculation. The threat of fraud—of a non-hijra pretending to take on

the sacred identity—surely decreases their status within society, especially when their traditional role is already starting to be seen as outmoded. Age-old traditions become viewed as backwards when the West-defined third-world seeks to emulate the Western-/first-world. With Westernization, once central aspects of society are eschewed for the perceived promise of progress. Thus, hijras become defined as expendable.

CRITIQUE

Nanda (1999) attempts to identify four broad categories into which hijras fit: impotent or emasculated men, castrated individuals, hermaphrodites, and females who do not menstruate (pp. 6, 14, 21). However, these categories are highly reductive and continue to force hijras to be seen in terms of Western gender binaries. As explained earlier, hijras are not transvestites or hermaphrodites, and they are neither men nor women. Consequently, the use of these categories even as a very rough guide to conceptualize this population should be avoided whenever possible.

Reddy (2005) makes an important critique of earlier works that fail to see how sexuality is interconnected with the perceptions of hijras by oneself and by the surrounding society (pp. 32-3). Entire books are written on the hijra identity, each with its own shortcomings. First, ethnographic studies tend to focus on a particular population, so generalizing must be done carefully. Nanda (1999) focuses on a couple groups in North India (p. xviii), while Reddy (2005) studies a few populations in South India¹⁰ (p. 1). Second, the authors' interest in the hijras arose from a Western curiosity. Reddy (2005) admits that even though she was born and raised in India, she never really paid attention to hijras until spending time in the United States (p. 4). Nanda (1999) had an existing interest in sexual variations, which pushed her to study hijras (p. xvii). Through their studies, they cast aside the idea of a monolithic hijra identity. There are asexual, castrated hijras who bless and curse by the powers vested in them by Bahuchara Mata. There are also kandra hijras who survive through sex work. Hijras are not gay men, some without penises. Rather, they comprise a group of their own—the third sex—and although there is no concept of this in the West, they become essential to the discourse of queer studies by presenting not just scholars but also the world with an example of how thirdness can be part of a status quo. Western media simply needs to frame these groups in a positive light.

In the news, hijras continue to be categorized as transgenders, eunuchs, and transvestites, and a simple Internet news search reveals how unfortunately true this is. Two prominent British news websites, the *BBC* and *The Guardian* are among those that use the false terms (Burke, 2013; Ethirajan, 2011). In fact, Burke (2013) writes for *The Guardian* that *hijra* is “. . . a catch-all term for transexuals, hermaphrodites and transvestites but usually indicating someone born male identifying as a woman.” *Hijra* is hardly a “catch-all term” (Burke, 2013). As explained previously, this categorization significantly curtails the cultural importance of hijras as well as provides a highly reductive, binary impression of them for Western readers under the label of transgender rights. Unfortunately, this mainstreaming calls out the differences between them and the reader, which provokes scrutiny and increases stigma. Even *The Times of India*, an English-only newspaper based in India, makes the mistake of calling hijras as “transgenders” (“Laws to Protect,” 2012). This provides evidence of the negative effect of the Western gaze pervading Indian society. Given that the self-proclaimed target audience is younger readers, and it is considered one of the newspapers with the largest readership worldwide, a single article can wreak havoc on the social status of hijras. Younger readers become accustomed to using incorrect terminology and, thus, stigmatize hijras, while their parents may still understand the difference. This creates a new generation of possible intolerance and unacceptance of a group who, for so long, peacefully coexisted. Therefore, one of the first steps that must be taken to increase hijra rights is to use correct cultural terminology within the news.

Television shows, such as National Geographic's *Taboo*, use loaded terms to retain viewers but often misconstrue the lives of those they describe by focusing on out-of-context facts that make heads turn. *Taboo* discusses hijras in the episodes, “The Third Sex” and “Sexuality.” Westerners come to see them in terms of the abnormal; even the show's title, *Taboo*, indicates a deviation from our perceptions of the world. Thus, media presence of third-sex individuals causes Westerners to view themselves as better, correct, normal, and even natural, while third-sex healers become seen as wrong, abnormal, unnatural, and freaks. Though Schuklenk et al. (2006) discusses “deducing from the way things are to the way they ought to be” in terms of gay and lesbian individuals facing increased discrimination, there is clearly a wider application for this argument (pp. 47-

8). Committing this naturalistic fallacy causes social perceptions of third-gender groups by their surrounding culture to change in a negative way. The word *natural* is highly contestable depending on use and should be employed with the utmost caution.

In *Neither Man nor Woman*, Nanda (1999) criticizes how transgender and transsexuality in the West reinforces a dichotomy that is “ascribed and permanent” (p. 138); however, she does not address that the notion of hijras does the same. While hijras may not have been otherized for a long time in the sense that Halberstam (1998) described, they still received their status by being neither man nor woman, and this reinforces the dichotomy, as well.

CONCLUSION

Gayatri Reddy (2005) states, “viewing hijras solely within the framework of sex/gender difference . . . might be a disservice to the complexity of their lives and their embeddedness within the social fabric of India” (p. 4). To adequately define what makes a hijra in a one-sentence definition is to constrict the meaning of the hijra experience. Hijras are people who challenge Western perceptions of normativity, though their own society has traditionally legitimated space for them. However, with changing times brought on by technology and globalization, societies that were once far removed and people who were once invisible are now becoming spectacles for a hegemonic Western gaze. This gaze trickles back to their own society, pigeonholing hijras and erasing the perceived need for their traditional roles.

Mainstreaming does not need to have a deleterious impact on the lives of third gender healers. In fact, with reframed representations of these individuals, they can be seen as they traditionally have—inextricable from the culture that surrounds them. Rather than comparing hijras with transgendered individuals and transsexuals, it becomes critical to use culture-specific terminology and explain the significance of third sex groups to their society and in terms of their culture. These steps may improve the status and lives of hijras throughout South Asia, instead of otherizing them. Ultimately, though, the current mainstreaming of these third sex healers constrains their roles within society and poses a dismal future for their traditional ritual role.

FOOTNOTES

1. Emic is an anthropological term referring to an insider’s perspective on a population or culture. In contrast, etic is the outsider’s perspective, or Western gaze, of that population. Through careful fieldwork, an emic perspective may be acquired to produce an accurate ethnographic report on the population being studied.

2. The lack of action or desire is important to the traditionally asexual nature of hijras (Reddy, 2005, p. 56). This will be discussed later in the paper.

3. For additional information on intersectionality, please read Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1243-4299.

4. For additional reading on hybridity, please see Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands, la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books. She writes of hybridity with a focus on race, but the applications of hybridity to gender and sexuality are made very clear.

5. This improper use of Western terms to describe non-Western populations is, unfortunately, committed often in academia and the media. In their introduction to section ten of *Sexualities in Anthropology: A Reader*, Andrew P. Lyons and Harriet D. Lyons (2011) also describe hijras as transvestites because they are castrated (p. 268). They also mistake hijras as simply “entertain[ers] at Hindu weddings,” which fails to capture the importance of their ritual role as religious performers with special powers (A. P. Lyons & H. D. Lyons, 2011, p. 268).

6. Recall that being neither man nor woman and being neither male nor female are synonymous concepts in non-Western cultures.

7. Also occurs in Buddhist and Jain societies.

8. Both Nanda (1999) and Reddy (2005) provide more examples, expounding on the subtleties of hijras’ relationship with Hinduism. Specifically, see chapters two and three of Nanda’s (1999) *Neither Man nor Woman* and Reddy’s (2005) chapter four.

9. Respect works both ways. The honor of the family for whom the badhai hijras perform is also dependent on the happy departure of the group (Reddy, 2005, p. 140). Hijras respect those who respect them, and they dishonor those who abuse them (Reddy, 2005, p. 139).

10. Nanda's (1999) work takes place primarily in Batispore, though some fieldwork takes place in Bombay, Delhi, and Chandigarh (p. xviii). Reddy (2005) focuses on Hyderabad and Secunderabad (p. 8).

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