This is not About the Body: Deprioritizing a Corporeal Study of the Hijra

By: Alex Padfield
Department: Religious Studies
Advisor: Dr. Sarah Mirza

Overview:

- Introduction

- Chapters 1-7

- Conclusion

Introduction

- Hijra communities are located in what is presently Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India
- Divert attention from transgender, third gender, gender variant conceptualizations
  - Sufficient, previous academic attention has been given in this regard
  - It's not that we aren't seeing ways of playing with gender, it's that these are Western terms reveal biology and cannot adequately explain Hijrahood
- Establish that a malleable or mutable gender is not instantly associated with the Western creation of the term "queer."
  - Moving away from a Western approach towards "queer" which focuses on the illusion of progress and hypervisibility of identity.
- Instead, investigating privacy, community hierarchy, and language
- Ethics of research as a form of consumption

Chapter 1: Hijra Background

"Moyna's (54) Guru passed on leaving her the plainness of a window along with responsibilities and restrictions of the real world. It's been forty years since Moyna went home, but between the puffs of her smoking pipe she dreams for a death in her motherland" -Bangladesh. Kolkata, 2014. Shahria Sharmin.

"Knowing that Shumi (22) L & Priya (26) R have no chance to return to their family, they have adjusted themselves to live under a guru" Shahria Sharmin.

"Poppy (47)L and Kesri (45)R may be dead to their families, whom they left ages ago, but they are strongly living through each other for decades. They have found a friendship which can come close to replacing unfulfilled unconditional love" Shahria Sharmin

Chapter 2: Terminology

Hijra:

- Arabic root hjr, meaning "leaving one's tribe" (Gupta, 71).
- "Hijra is an Urdu word, though its etymology is traceable to Persian, either from the root word *hiz,* meaning 'effeminate', or *hich*, for a person who is *hichgah*, nowhere" (Reddy, 237).

Khwajasara:

- "*Khwaja,* "real master" (*khwajaseras*): those who "decorated" the real master in royal Muslim households" (Reddy, 237).

Eunuch:

- Colonial term
- Reveals surveilled bodily information

Chapter 3: Hijra Structure

- Guru-cela hierarchy
- Closed communities
- Hijragiri- "occupations of the Hijra" (Hossain, 495).

Chapter 4: Methodology

- Community formation is a religious practice
- Placing Hijra social order in proximity to:
  - Religious ascetic orders which follow master-disciple structure
    - Hindu Sadhus
    - Islamic Sufis
- Syncretic Religion

Youth and Dervish, second quarter 17th century

Chapter 5: Mughal Courts

- Part of the academic tradition to cite Mughal court origins or connections to Hijra
- History as a critique of the contemporary
- The ability to enter political life as khwajasaras introduces how gender transience is not rooted in identity formation, but rather its socio-political advantages.
  - Ability to occupy feminine and masculine gendered spaces
- Commentary on status and privacy

Khawas Khan, the Eunuch of Bahadur Shah, late 17th century

Chapter 6: British Colonialism

- Criminalization of the Hijra
- Hijra closed communities form prior to criminalization
- Hijra community structures threatened colonial rule, though "sexual deviance" was cited for reason of criminalization
- Conflation of terms and application of eunuch

Chapter 7: Privacy

- Privacy Theory
- Hijra Farsi
  - Secret language which only Hijras can understand
  - Hijras can understand others, outsiders cannot understand Hijra language
- Privacy is communicative and interactive

Conclusion

- Suturing the term transgender to Hijra is homonationalist
- What is compelling about the Hijra is not their bodies- it is their language, hierarchical structures, and way of enacting privacy which deserves more scholarly attention

Sources

- Hossain, Adnan. "Beyond emasculation: Being Muslim and becoming hijra in South Asia." *Asian Studies Review* 36.4 (2012): 495-513.
- Reddy, Gayatri. *With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*. Yoda Press, 2006.
- Gupta, Ankush. "Translating Hijra identity: Performance culture as politics." *Theatre Research International* 44.1 (2019): 71-75.
- Sharmin, Shahria. Call Me Heena.