

Introduction

Pleasure, Power and Masculinities

In Bangladesh, as in many parts of South Asia, gangs of *hijras* adorned in saris and gaudy make-up are often seen swaggering down the busy streets, clapping and demanding alms at traffic lights or from the sellers in the bazaars. Like any typical Dhaka-dweller, I grew up viewing the hijras as not only starkly different from the normative mainstream, but also as neither men nor women. I have always been intrigued by the way people's attitude towards hijras tends to be a mixture of fear, pity and amusement. As popular public figures putatively devoid of functioning (male) genitals, and therefore occupying a liminal third space, hijras both arouse pity and incite laughter and mirth. At the same time, however, they are feared because they challenge mainstream society's notions of respectability and social protocols of appropriateness by engaging in activities ranging from sexually charged public cursing to exposing their putatively missing or defective genitals.

Upon close observation, one cannot help noticing the fact that hijras are perhaps the only group of people who are simultaneously asexual and hypersexual. Popular imagination across South Asia conflates genital ambiguity with asexuality or lack of sexual desire. Yet everyday interaction between hijras and ordinary people, especially men, is typically peppered with erotic banter, as hijras not only verbally shame the men with sexualized slurs, but also often directly fondle their genitals in a bid to coerce them into meeting their demands. The belligerence with which hijras typically communicate with the public (often accompanied by incessant hand clapping and body movements) is nothing short of being hyper-masculine in its aggressiveness and entitlement; at the same time, hijras emphasize their feminine comportment, which includes heavy make-up and nasalized speech, that enacts a caricature of femininity. Hijra practices thus raise the question of how to make sense of a social group that exemplifies values and practices that would seem to contradict each other.

This book focuses on these cultural paradoxes and contradictions in the production of the hijra subject position in Bangladesh and contends that hijra is an alternative space that one joins in order to be able to explore varied erotic, gender and sexual possibilities otherwise unavailable to normatively masculinized subjects both in Bangladesh and beyond. That an alternative hijra space had to be invented is emblematic of a broader politics of masculinity and the dominance of certain types of masculine hegemonies that operate to delegitimize a form of desire, culturally deemed to be incommensurate with certain styles of heterosexual masculinity. In this book, I foreground the cultural and scholarly politics of masculinity that frames the hijras as a third sex or third gender in the first place. I hope to demonstrate that while, on the one hand, hijras decentre and dismantle the phallus (the manifestation of masculine dominance both at the level of representation and practice) as the only and primary site of pleasure, power and masculinity, they also, on the other hand, paradoxically enforce and reinforce those ideals and politics of masculinity otherwise employed to socioculturally delegitimize them.

Pleasure and desire: rethinking the hijra subject position

Hijras are popularly described as ‘neither men nor women’ (Nanda 1999), or a third gender or third sex. More recently, hijras have come to the forefront of regional and international attention with several South Asian countries recognizing them as a legal category of a third or distinct gender (Hossain 2017). ‘Hijra’ is an Urdu word, widely used only after the Mughal invasion; its meaning stems from ninth-century Turko-Persian influence (Reddy 2005a). However, ‘hijra’ is also a Bengali word the lexical meaning of which incorporates ideas of impotency, being a eunuch, being someone born with genital ambiguity and asexuality. Its meaning, however, has shifted over time in response to various colonial and postcolonial notions of gender and sexuality. For example, the various ways the British constructed hijras during colonial rule reflected the British colonial establishment’s intention to set themselves apart as morally superior to the Mughals, a process that served to facilitate British colonial governance of India (Gannon 2009; Hinchy 2019). As noted earlier, hijras across South Asia publicly present themselves as people born with defective or missing genitals and above sexual desire. It is in terms of this hijra insistence on their being asexual and public understanding of such that hijras are socioculturally institutionalized in South Asia.

Anthropological literature often depicts hijras as people who ritually remove or sacrifice their male genitals in return for spiritual power to bless newlyweds and the newborn (Nanda 1999; Reddy 2005a). It is through such ritual jettisoning of the penis and the scrotum, or emasculation, that hijras in South Asia acquire the status of a third gender or a third sex. One of the first anthropological debates on hijras appeared on the pages of *American Anthropologist* in the 1950s. Typical of the ‘culture and personality’ school of the time, this debate drew on deeply reductive theories of oedipal anxieties to explain the hijra practice of emasculation and transposed this on to the general Indian male personality structure (Agrawal 1997; Cohen 1995). In other words, the hijra practice of emasculation is read here as indicative of Indian males’ generalized inability to reconcile their oedipal anxieties. Nanda (1999), one of the first ethnographers of hijras in India, departs from this psychoanalytically grounded reading and embeds emasculation within various Hindu mythological narratives to contend that the very loss of the penis paradoxically transforms the hijras into a universal source of fertility. In a similar vein, latter ethnographers contend that the ritual of emasculation is not simply central to the production of the hijra subject position, but that it is through a ritual sacrifice of male genitals that one becomes an authentic hijra (Reddy 2005a).

In this conceptual and cultural framework, obtaining such a special status also entails an active renunciation of erotic desire: those who get rid of their penises are also said to lose their masculinity and become asexual. Loss of the penis is equated with the loss of desire. What is often left unexamined is the reason why hijras present themselves as asexual and above desire, and how the adoption of a third sex/third gender works to erase desire. This book contends that it is not only the desire for normatively oriented masculine men that motivates one to become a hijra, but, more significantly, it is the abject and forbidden nature of desire that is central to the social marginalization and cultural abjection of hijras.¹ It is this contradiction between the public (re)presentation of hijras as asexual and above desire and the internal recognition of their being erotically inclined that lies at the heart of their lived lives and cosmologies.

¹ See Besnier (2004) for a similar argument in the context of Tongan gender-variant subjects’ entanglement with mainstream Tongan men.

Foregrounding desire in the constitution of hijra subjectivity is not to reduce the hijras to gender and sexual difference alone. Throughout this book, I highlight a panoply of factors including class, kinship and religion in terms of which gender and sexual difference are configured and conceived. Rather, my point here is that the gender and sexual difference that hijras embody cannot be fully comprehended without an adequate examination of the desire that brought the hijra universe into being. In other words, while understanding how gender and sexual differences are refracted through other forms of social difference allows us to decipher the multiply inflected and complex configuration of gender and sexuality (Reddy 2005a); too often desire tends to be subordinated to other cultural refractions of difference. My concern here is to indicate how desire often gets subsumed under other factors of social difference rather than being central in the crafting of hijra subjectivities, even though desire is precisely what is at stake. The common theorization of hijra as an identity that derives its cultural legitimacy through the wider societal understandings of hijras as both above and beyond desire illustrates this representational effacement. Contemporary scholarship tends to focus on the public (re)presentation of hijras as asexual and above desire and the wider societal understanding and engagement with it in terms of the culturally valorized ideals of renunciation and asceticism (for example, Nanda 1999; Reddy 2005a). While situating hijras within wider cultural ideals of renunciation and detachment offers useful insights for contextualizing and historicizing hijras, failure to adequately engage with desire and its abjection not only inhibits us from comprehending hijra subjectivities, but also works to further the social marginalization of hijras.

My point here is that it is penile politics that produces the current forms of representation of hijras as not only a third sex, but also as a subject position above and beyond desire. It is precisely because of this phallocratic interpretive framework that hijras are placed outside the procreative heteronormativity as well as the economy of phallic pleasure. While this critical focus on the penis foregrounds the politics of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, analytical approaches are often locked in a binary framework cast in terms of the appearance and disappearance of the penis, with the effect that those who get rid of their penis are denied not only masculinity, but also the power of pleasure. The very abjection of hijras is not only the result of societal understanding about hijras being people born with defective or missing genitals, but also of the popular understanding about hijras being outside the economy of desire and pleasure.

Anal thinking and the hijra as an alternative erotic space

Extant ethnographic literature reveals a problematic tendency to attribute defect, deficit and inadequacy in terms of gender and desire in the representation of hijras. Put differently, it is as if one becomes a hijra by default, that is, it is on account of having defective male genitals or failure to be sufficiently normatively masculine that one enters the hijra community. Against this narrative of deficit and inadequacy, most powerfully encapsulated in the now famous expression ‘neither men nor women’, this book demonstrates that the very act of an individual’s identifying as a hijra also entails a conscious disapproval and disavowal of normative masculinities. That is, one joins the hijra community not because of one’s failure to excel in masculine performance, but rather in order to be able to explore varied gender, erotic and ritual possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to the normatively masculinized subjects in Bangladesh.

According to the hijras, only those who renounce the privileges of heterosexual masculinity are entitled to varied forms of bodily pleasure. Desire is framed in terms of hetero-gendered idiom: those who penetrate are by definition men, as opposed to hijras who are always essentially receptive and therefore feminine, or ‘female-like’. While such a penetrated/penetrator framework is often reversed in practice, this configuration of desire is not simply mimetic of heterosexuality. Rather, the reason why hijras lionize and strictly police this paradigm is because, according to my hijra interlocutors, being penetrated is a lot more pleasurable than penetrating. In other words, it is within this hetero-gendered framework that hijras maximize their erotic delights. Furthermore, hijras believe that only those who are part of the community as hijras are entitled to such pleasures. This does not, however, require hijras to be permanently detached from heterosexual affiliations. Rather, there are both hijras who are heterosexually married as well as those who are feminine-identified on a permanent basis; however, once one becomes a hijra, one is required to ‘publicly’ identify receptivity as the only legitimate form of sexuality. Because the anus in the mainstream view is not only culturally devalued, but also unspeakable, hijra space functions as an alternative site for actualizing and performing varied forms of erotic and bodily gratification.

Scholars often question the validity of cultural models that bifurcate people in male-to-male sexual intercourse into rigidly penetrative and receptive roles or categories. Such models often fail to acknowledge the complexities and fluidities of sexual behaviours and identities. The unwritten assumption is not

just that pleasure is centred in the penis, but also that penile pleasures are superior to other forms of pleasures, a point that feminists have long made. Grosz (1994) underscores the way non-phallic body parts can be re-signified by same-sex attracted people as zones of pleasure. Reclamation and restoration of the erotically devalued body parts by non-heterosexuals, she contends, work to advance the possibility of a new order of pleasure. She further holds that it is through imagining the male body to be simultaneously engaged in insertivity and receptivity that a new order of pleasure can be established. While her suggestion is insightful and intriguing, I feel that she underestimates the pleasures of receptivity and its power. This is not to deflect our attention from the relations of power inequalities within which penetration and reception are structured. Nor am I indicating that erotic acts are non-political. Rather, what I emphasize here is that acts of penetration are neither more powerful nor automatically more pleasurable than those of receptivity.

The centrality of the penis is also evident in critical scholarship in the way non-penile body parts and most notably the anus are eroticized and reclaimed. For example, in her paper on the conceptualization of gender and sexuality in nineteenth-century Iran, Najmabadi (2008) contends that a system of hierarchical gradation of body parts was central to people's understanding not only of gender and sexuality, but also pleasure, wherein the anus (both of male and female) was considered superior to the vagina as an object of penetration. While such historical insights trouble the modernist narratives of gender and sexuality, here again the hierarchization of the body parts is often conceptualized through the standpoint of the penetrator, or the phallus. Furthermore, accounts of anal receptivity often uncritically equate receptivity with a loss of manhood. In a similar vein, albeit in a different context, Kulick (1998) contends that the Brazilian transgendered sex workers whom he studied derived their gender from their partners, by whom they were penetrated, while they derived erotic pleasure from their clients, whom they penetrated. The dominant underlying assumption informing this interesting body of scholarship is that pleasure inheres in and flows from the penis, much like the way the very lack of a penis among hijras works to consolidate hijras as asexual and above desire. Against this overarching penis-centred approach, this book foregrounds and asserts anal power and agency through hijra narratives of the anus as not only an object of desire, but also an active desirous subject.

The failure of imagination and scholarship to recognize and adequately and critically envision non-penile possibilities of pleasure is the direct corollary of

how we as social scientists view erotic pleasures and relate to self, others and the ethnographic field. That is, ethnographers' understanding of pleasure and power is configured within particular socio-historically specific economies of desire, in terms of which both our understandings of the other as well as the knowledge we produce are framed.² Given that the epistemic template scholars of hijras specifically and gender and sexual diversity more generally adopt is penis-centred, analysis inevitably forces questions of body, pleasure, power, erotic practice, and agency back to the penis. In much contemporary writing on male-to-male sexual subjectivities or hijras as well as further afield, the penis often emerges as the uncontested cultural totem at the centre of erotic pleasure.

Given the cultural valorization of the penis in South Asia as well as in the Western world (Stephens 2007), it is not surprising that so much attention has been paid to a group of people who are alleged to obtain power and status on account of sacrificing male genitals. In other words, this conceptual and representational privileging of emasculation is the direct corollary of and paradoxically contributes to the hegemony of not only the penis, but also the phallus (Roth 2004; Stephens 2007). While I acknowledge the complexities of this relationship, I use the term 'phallus' to indicate the cultural manifestation of masculine hegemony. As my ethnography indicates, the hijra subject position is produced at the interstice between the magical appearance and disappearance of the penis and the way one's ability to claim authentic hijra status depends on one's ability to master this special art. Furthermore, emasculation represents an uneven distribution of the phallic power wherein the accommodation, if not acceptance, of hijras in the Indian social structure comes at the cost of emasculation (Agrawal 1997; Cohen 1995). My point is that as a social institution hijras have been conceptualized within a penis-centred frame of reference, even though the very absence of a penis is precisely what has been posited to be the truth about them.

The limits of a third sex/third gender framework and masculinities as an alternative approach

The most dominant lens in the study of hijras has been a third gender or a third sex framework (Nanda 1999). Several critical anthropologists have

² See Kulick (2006) on masochist ethnographic interest in the powerless and the libidinal structure within which ethnographic interest in the powerless is produced.

responded to this problematic and exotifying ‘third sex’ gaze on to the hijras and foregrounded the multiply configured and context-specific construction of hijra subjectivities (for example, Agrawal 1997; Cohen 1995; Reddy 2005a). The third sex/gender framework fails to account for the complex interaction among gender, sexuality and the social, economic and political context in which hijras are implicated. Critical scholarship has drawn our attention to the misleading conception about the emancipatory potential of multiple genders and the simplistic idea that more genders denotes greater freedom or acceptance. Instead of being an emblem of acceptance, the consignment of some people to the status of a third gender can be read as a form of gender failure on the part of those who fail to be either sufficiently masculine or feminine (Agrawal 1997). The hierarchical order of genders further complicates and hides the socio-political power relations that facilitate the formation of a third gender while naturalizing the existing two-gender system. The third gender as a model is driven more by a desire to challenge the two-sex/gender system than by the lived lives of the people who constitute this ‘third’ (Hossain 2017). Furthermore, the idea that societies that accommodate third gender categories are more tolerant than the rest works to obfuscate the everyday struggle of hijras, who must constantly fight against the mainstream to demand a position within those societies (Hall 1997).

Against this background, I adopt masculinities as an alternative analytical cipher to complicate the hijra subject. Although social scientists, including anthropologists, have conventionally overlooked masculinity and favoured a third gender lens, as indicated earlier (Osella, Osella and Chopra 2004, 2), I argue that masculinities are central to the marginalization of hijras in contemporary Bangladesh (Hossain 2012). Adopting masculinities as an optic adds considerably to our understanding not only of the hijra subject in South Asia, but also of the production, reproduction and transformation of masculinities. ‘Masculinities’ as an approach also allows us to account for the extant cultural accommodation of thirdness and its recent official institutionalization in several South Asian countries. A focus on the way the politics of pleasure and power constitute masculinity brings to the fore the problematic preponderance of the penis and the phallus in the conceptualization of hijras. As I have already previously indicated, it is precisely because of this phallocratic interpretive logic that hijras are placed not only outside the procreative heteronormativity, but also beyond the (phallic) realm of pleasure.

One of the widespread, albeit problematic, translations of the term ‘hijra’ into English, widely deployed during British colonialism and contemporaneously

in South Asia, is ‘eunuch’, a word that marks the hijras as made out of male bodies. Although in the popular press, as well as in scholarly representations, a plethora of divergent terms, such as androgyne, transsexual, transvestite, hermaphrodite, intersex, homosexual or transgender, is often simultaneously used to describe hijras, critical ethnographies of hijras often describe them as ‘phenotypic male[s]’ who sacrifice their male genitals in return for special power (Reddy 2005a). Furthermore, despite the centrality of emasculation in the production of the hijra body, ethnographies on Indian and Pakistani hijras also make the claim that there may also be a minority of hijras who are born intersex. However, in the context of Bangladesh, as I argue in this book, it is only male-born people who can qualify to become a hijra. In other words, hijras are typically those assigned a male gender at birth who later may identify as either non-male or female. That various ideas including genital ambiguity and various intersex conditions are popularly ascribed to the hijra by the mainstream populace at least partially stems from the fact that hijras too present themselves as people born with missing or ambiguous genitals. That hijras present themselves as such, or as neither men nor women and/or as above and beyond desire, works to account for the long-running cultural accommodation of this group within South Asia, including Bangladesh.

Furthermore, in everyday contexts, the word ‘hijra’ is also often used by the mainstream non-hijra populace to mark, police and describe digression from the normative protocols of masculinity. The very utterance of the word ‘hijra’ in the context of daily life also provokes laughter and jest alongside a deep sense of commiseration for a group of people believed to have been born with defective or missing genitals. Here, there is a popular association between genital ambiguity and asexuality. Not only are people with genital ambiguity relegated to the status of a liminal third gender/sex in popular imagination in contemporary Bangladesh, they are also deemed to be asexual and above desire on account of those associations. Against this backdrop, masculinities as an alternative approach brings into view the structural inequalities in the social configuration of gender and sexuality that produce the hijra subject in the first place. The continued lack of attention to masculinities also has repercussions for policy change and intervention in the context of achieving gender equality and sexual rights for a range of gender-variant subjects, including hijras, transsexuals and the intersex and transgender, who are often problematically conflated in contemporary popular cultural imagination (Hossain 2020).

In adopting masculinities as an optic, it may be useful to think through the usefulness of this concept. Throughout this book, I use masculinities rather

than masculinity to indicate that there is no single model of masculinity. However, in pluralizing masculinity, it is important to recognize that these models or types of masculinities are not static. Rather, divergent models of masculinities are enacted in a complex interplay with a variety of factors—namely class, ethnicity, gender, power, desire, religion, kinship and transnationalism—and are subject to change.

There also remains a strong tendency to collapse men and masculinity into a causally linked proposition. Recent queer and ethnographic interventions have, however, strongly challenged such analytical conflation, urging us to conceptually de-link masculinities from maleness. A slew of ethnographies on female masculinities, in diverse settings, have clearly driven home the point that masculinities are qualities and styles that females can take on, thereby guarding us against the reification of masculinity as maleness (Blackwood 1998; Davies 2007; Halberstam 1998; Lai 2007; Sinnott 2007; Wieringa 1999). Thus, in speaking to masculinities, the book does not essentialize the hijras as men. Nor does it reify masculinities or femininities as intrinsic properties of biological maleness and femaleness respectively.

An important and widely used concept in this context is hegemonic masculinity, which can be defined as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell 2005). Hegemonic masculinity brings into view the relations among masculinities: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginal. Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is rather the masculinity type that occupies the most hegemonic position and is always contestable (Connell 2005). Attending to the multiplicity of differentiations through which masculinities are inflected foregrounds how such hegemonies paradoxically engender various counter-hegemonic trends. Nevertheless, very few men actually live up to the normative ideals of hegemonic masculinity, while an overwhelming majority become complicit in sustaining its dominance (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 2002; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).

From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity as described here, hijra can be seen as a countercultural formation that emerged not only in rejection of and as a response to compulsory hegemonic masculinity, but also as an alternative subcultural community offering the possibility of varied forms of erotic pleasures and practices otherwise forbidden in mainstream society. Describing the various configurations of masculinities and ideological systems