CHAPTER 2
ON THE MOVE: TABOO, ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES AND CHOICES

Queerness being repeatedly symbolised in terms of movement/movability and an overall resistance against ‘standing still’ (emphasis is mine) is a powerful, recognisable trope and one of the regular features of films dealing with the queer identity and it is often expressed through the recurring motif of the road - queerness is constantly ‘on the go’ (emphasis is mine). Eve Sedgwick, once claimed that ‘queer’ is movement, not only in the sense of referring to a communal, shared, or even a cinematic crusade, but because it moves in the literal sense too (Sedgwick xii; emphasis belongs to the author). Queer is all about being fluid; it is about moving or fleeting across genders, sexualities, needs and practices. If queerness doesn't stay in sync with the spasmodic pulse of identity politics, perhaps it moves more literally across a backdrop that occasionally has trouble securing the fluctuating, unstable ground upon which queerness often travels.

This notion of the queer being ‘on the move’ (emphasis is mine) is quite suggestive, given that in some queer films, the subjects don't inhabit any one specific place for too long- they are factually and figuratively in a state of flux. Instead, such characters keep passing through and between places, identities and things- young, untethered characters who hustle their way through life. If anything, the persistence of the road motif underscores the idea that the queer characters of these films are restless identities, unable to be moored in any one ‘space’ (emphasis is mine). Unlike the usual exaggerated, romanticised mode, the road in these movies doesn’t assure narrative closure, but seems to lead to the unanswered and the unfound. These films
engage with similar ideas involving 'movement' (emphasis is mine) in the manner in which they feature protagonists whose circumstances and subjectivities are informed by the act of moving across the landscape.

The films in question also use the elements of the road film genre. To an extent, the road functions in these films as a site of escape; a means of being able to float throughout life- embarking on a journey about longing and searching. The principal characters in the films are looking for recognition, civil courtesy and love but their search for these is almost prompted after escaping from troubling situations. One of the paradoxes of the road is that on the one hand, it suggests freedom and escape because it conveys an ongoing sense of self-transformation; on the other hand, the road proposes a sense of estrangement, vulnerability and hazard because it can trick the subject into a vicious cycle of change. In other words, the transgender characters’ endeavour to transmute their circumstances or identity always leads them into the same perilous predicaments - they may be able to alter their circumstances, but are always brought to another similar point of extreme crisis.

In the light of an analysis of the manner in which discursive practices are able to generate diverse views of the subject and subjectivity, the emergence of identity serves to be a viable ground for an argument against an essentialist view of human identity. The subject is created within the “discursive practices of disciplinary regimes” (Order of Things xiv) and the repetitive performances of "technologies of the self" (Redman 10). If discourse is what constructs the subject and hence, the identity then they must be produced through historically instituted actions of performance- amidst conditions, and at moments, that are distinctive; Stuart Hall suggests that this makes identity a “historically constituted creation” (Hall 17) fluctuating across the continuums of both time and space and thus, much removed
from an essentialist perception that sees it as trans-historical human nature. Instead, identity is now a process, “always under construction, a strategic and positional concept” (Hall 17). Foucault’s ideas around identity, gender and sexuality are intimately caught up in knowledge and power. He himself points out that sexuality, for example, is a:

...historical construct...a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (History of Sexuality I 105-106).

Judith Butler draws on a range of varied sources including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Luce Iragary, to problematise all our modern notions around identity. Building on Foucault, Butler describes modern notions of identity as being made up regulatory ideals.

Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform, to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. Butler argues that we all put on a gender performance, whether traditional or not, and so it is not a question of whether to do a gender performance, but what form that performance will take. By choosing to be different about it, we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. One of the key ideas in queer theory is this idea of identity as free-floating, as not connected to an ‘essence’ (emphasis is mine), but instead a performance. Seen in this way, our identities (gendered and otherwise) do not express some authentic inner ‘core’.
(emphasis is mine) self but are the dramatic effect (rather than the cause) of our performances.

In relation to discourse, Butler argues that performative acts are statements which also produce that which they say. Her classic example is that of the midwife cry of ‘it’s a girl’ (emphasis belong to the author) which is not merely a reflection of a biological given but a “performative act, binding a gender onto the body” (Bodies that Matter 7); it produces that which it names and thus, forms the one domain in which "discourse acts as power" (Bodies that Matter 225). Thus concepts of male and female, of gender are historically and culturally unique. The baby girl is not a girl until the midwife declares her to be so and thus curtails the possibility of other genders being created and explored. But we cannot assume that the same categories existed in the past. As Butler herself points out "these regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter" (Bodies that Matter 14). Indeed there is much evidence anthropologically that shows that other genders are possible, further weakening any position which sees the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman (emphasis is mine) as universals. Societies may have plural and fluid gender categories which refuse to be categorised along the one-dimensional male/female division of the modern west.

A noteworthy account posing as a sustainable alternative to the simple male/female split in western gender comes from the works of Celia Busby1 and Serena Nanda2, centred in Southern India, chiefly their depiction of a third gender, the ‘hijra’3 (emphasis is mine). Busby states that in context of the western view of gender, the ‘hijra’ are primarily males, who have usually undergone a procedure of ritualistic castration (Busby 265). They dress and act as women (though not particularly
feminine women), actively engage in prostitution and also solemnise ceremonies and occasions to celebrate, such as weddings and the birth of male children. The term ‘hijra’ is inclusive of hermaphrodites and women who are unable to reproduce (Gilchrist 60); due to being defined in a negative light rather than positive, they are not ‘part male’ and ‘part female’, but ‘neither’ man nor ‘woman’ (Nanda 14; all emphasis belong to the author). With the incapacity to procreate/ reproduce being the decisive factor in becoming a ‘hijra’, it’s very common for most impotent men to often become one. Thus, men are classified as ‘hijra’ not because they are defined by the certainty of reproduction (because homosexual men may never reproduce) but because they are unable to hold the position to retain the probability for reproduction. The ‘hijra’ thus form a third gender within Indian society, performing in their own way and defined through the inability to reproduce, rather than the absence of sexual organs.

A second example can be drawn from a part of literature on the Native American culture. The existence of a third gender was reported in the ethnographic documentation of several Native American tribes until the middle of the 19th Century. According to R.L. Gilchrist, the individual would take on the clothing, dress and manner of a member of the opposite gender and was called "two-spirit" (Gilchrist 61) and although this was usually a man putting on women’s clothing, in many tribes the opposite also occurred. Due to the death of this practice in the mid-19th century, the certainty of their specific position now is nearly impossible to determine, but they seem to have been both privileged and stigmatised by different tribes. Originally male two-spirits were said to be occupied with domestic errands including basket making, while female two-spirits were more involved the supposedly male dominated areas of warfare and hunting. Even though many two-spirits have been depicted to have
engaged in same-sex relations, they were not defined by this (Andersen 608); the performance and the costume were more imperative in defining gender than sexuality.

According to Gilchrist, like the ‘hijra’, the two-spirits were also a vital element of certain ceremonies like the burial and mourning rituals, helping the wounded, dancing at the return of warriors and so forth. It becomes clear, then, that the two-spirits occupied a “liminal zone, between man and woman, human and god, living and dead” (Gilchrist 62). Both these examples of the ‘hijra’ and the ‘two spirits’ (emphasis is mine) show the scope of possible genders available to human beings; the existence of diversity in gendered positions in ancient societies is unquestionable. Multiple genders may have had important roles in the rituals of the Neolithic, just as the ‘hijra’ do in India and the ‘two-spirits’ did in Native American culture.

The presence of male and female ‘hijra’ further complicates the view; that whilst gender is constructed, sex is a biological constant. Judith Butler has challenged this point of view (through her work on the body, performativity, gender and difference) in some of her major works like Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter. Sex, Butler argues, is just another regulatory ideal, like gender, that we are required to live up to by society (Bodies that Matter 1). Far from being a biological given, sex is an “idealised construct...forcibly materialised through time” (Bodies that Matter 8) and categories of sex and gender are constructed against an outside, against non-viable choices, that secure the boundaries of sex. The construction of these categories is through segregation, through abjection, through making some bodies inconceivable. In the heterosexual hegemony of modern western society, these abjected bodies maybe homosexual, but in other societies, different bodies may lie outside the regimes of power and discourse constructed through performativity.
It is important at this point to emphasise that despite the above discussion one aspect of identity, be it sex or gender, cannot be privileged at the expense of another. All areas of identity, be it age, race, status, sexuality, sex, or gender, interrelate with one another. Gender may be understood very differently depending on the age of the subject or the sexuality. We cannot assume either that all of these areas had an effect on the identity of people in the past. Foucault has demonstrated the changing concern with sexuality since classical times. There may also have been alternative categories of identity that remain hidden from us. However, the need for a vocabulary in order to discuss these issues means that despite difficulties surrounding them, these terms will continue to serve as shorthand for the various areas of identity we wish to discuss. Despite this, it is essential to remember that each area is entirely interdependent on the next, no-one area can be understood without reference to another (Bodies that Matter 116).

For a particular and significant length of time, the only visual media that dealt with non-heterosexual issues/identities was underground and counter-culture film (Field 4) - media programmes that were not widely distributed, and were produced ‘by’ lesbian/gay people ‘for’ (emphasis is mine) a lesbian/gay audience. During the last decade, there has been a proliferation of films with lesbian/gay themes and content emerging from the large Hollywood production companies and this is an important development in available resources that constrain and reinforce discourses of sexuality. Film and television have become important, perhaps competing, resources of information. Generally, when a wide-distribution film with lesbian or gay characters is released — no matter how small their part — it is praised by lesbian/gay critics and newspapers as an important film, and is recommended and noted for its contribution to lesbian and gay visibility.
More significantly, these films and television programmes might often be the point of ‘first contact’ (emphasis is mine) a spectator/viewer has with issues and sexual desires of a non-heteronormative nature; for many such media could be the only resource providing evidence of sexualities that deviate from what is still posited as the heterosexual norm. While visibility of non-heterosexual sexualities can be important in conveying a social sense of alternatives to heterosexual sexual arrangements, the concept of ‘visibility’ (emphasis is mine) is clearly more complex than one that should unwittingly be advocated. What is being made visible? What are the characteristics of those visible lesbian and gay personages in film and television? And what do they teach about non-heterosexual sexuality?

In his film *All About my Mother*, Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar, once again eulogises the margins. As with almost all his other films, he shows how experiences at the margins can both reveal and transgress the mechanisms of power that are naturalised in dominant ideologies and lifestyles in contemporary Western urban societies. In this film, desire and suffering interlink and construct a plot that soon begins to dissolve some established principles concerning the body, gender and identity. The film centres on Manuela, a nurse who oversees donor organ transplants a hospital in Madrid and single mother to Esteban, a teenager who wants to be a writer. On his seventeenth birthday, Esteban is hit by a car and killed while chasing after actress Huma Rojo for her autograph following a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in which she portrays Blanche DuBois. Falling into a deep depression, Manuela decides to return to Barcelona, the city she left when she was pregnant and where she hopes to find her son’s father, Lola, a transvestite she kept secret from her son, just as she never told Lola they had a son.

When she arrives there, she meets up again with Agrado (Fig: 2.2), a warm and witty transvestite who is a sex worker in the prostitution area of the city, and she
Figure: 2.1

Figure: 2.2

Figure: 2.3

Figure: 2.4
attempts to begin a new life without her son. She also meets and becomes deeply involved with several characters. One of them is Sister Rosa, a nun who is involved with charity work with transvestites and sex workers and who discovers that she is HIV positive and pregnant with the Lola’s child.

Manuela also meets Huma, the theatre actress her son was an ardent fan of, and who is linked to his death. Huma is the producer of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* and is living her own drama with her fellow actress and lover, who is addicted to drugs. It is in Barcelona that Manuela also meets the father of her son, Lola. Rosa dies giving birth to her son, and Lola and Manuela finally reunite at Rosa’s funeral. Lola (whose name used to be Esteban), who is dying from AIDS, talks about how she always wanted a son, and Manuela tells her about her own Esteban and how he died in a car accident.

Manuela then adopts Rosa’s child, who is also called Esteban and stays with him at Rosa’s parents' house. She also takes little Esteban, named after his father (or the ‘Mother’?) to meet Lola (Fig.2.4). Manuela flees back to Madrid with Esteban; she cannot take living at Rosa’s house any longer, since the grandmother is afraid that she will contract AIDS from the baby. She writes a letter to Huma and Agrado saying that she is leaving and once again is sorry for not saying goodbye, like she did years before. Two years later, Manuela returns with Esteban to an AIDS convention, telling Huma and Agrado, who now run a stage show together, that Esteban has miraculously not inherited the virus. She then says she is returning to stay with Esteban’s grandparents.

In the plot, Almodovar continually plays with the audience’s expectations and with the margins: a husband with breasts, a wife that stays with her/him, a transvestite father and a nun who is pregnant by the same transvestite. But
what is most surprising is the naturalness with which scandal and transgression appear, and how they themselves become objects of attraction and even identification for the audience. Almodovar’s films, originally produced on shoestring budgets with minimal technical support, came, in short, to embody a new and dynamic Spain firmly at home in Europe and far from the relative isolationism that characterised Francoism.

Almodovar has been read both inside and outside Spain in relation to the opening, unfolding, and deepening of a democratic project in which difference and diversity were and remain prominent if still contested values. As Marsha Kinder notes:

> Almodovar’s films have a curious way of resisting marginalisation. Never limiting himself to a single protagonist, he chooses an ensemble of homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, doper, punk, terrorist characters who refuse to be ‘ghettoised’ into divisive subcultures because they are figured as part of the ‘new Spanish mentality’- a fast-paced revolt that relentlessly pursues pleasure rather than power, and a postmodern erasure of all repressive boundaries and taboos associated with Spain’s medieval, fascist, and modernist heritage (all emphasis belongs to the author).

Although pleasure is never simply opposed to power, as Michel Foucault well knew, its place in the public, political realm had rarely been as vibrantly visible in Spain as in the 1980s, when Almodovar shot to stardom.

General Francisco Franco’s regime in Spain lasted from 1939 to 1975- an authoritarian and nationalist regime whose unique leader, Franco, ruled Spanish society personally and with an iron fist for nearly 40 years. Using propaganda,
censorship and repression, he controlled Spanish society in the conservative and traditional way- official institutions controlled the content of new creations and an official school of cinema was meant to supervise young directors. Actually, new creations were less promoted than the praises of the fossilised national symbols such as bullfight (symbol of virility) or flamenco (symbol of grace and femininity)\(^7\).

After the collapse of his regime, artists felt that their new liberties allowed them to express whatever they wanted to. This cultural effervescent euphoria was called La Movida (which means ‘the move’) and mainly took place in Madrid. Hence, during the first ‘free’ (emphasis is mine) years, films, music, literature, and TV programs (occupied with the idea of taking revenge) tried to get rid of all the national symbols and myths formerly extolled by Franco, pointing out the endless possibilities in terms of identity for example, which appeared after Franco’s years (Vernon and Morris 26). Breaking prejudices and deconstructing the normativeness that used to be promoted by Franco, Almodòvar has followed the path of La Movida. His vision of gender is similar to Judith Butler’s idea in *Gender Trouble*. Manhood and womanhood are socially constructed- they reflect power structures, and especially masculine domination; in order to upset this gender dichotomy, and to become free from social categories that annihilate our liberty, we should at our individual level perform the gender we choose, independently from our sex and sexuality.

Working on body is also what Almodovar stages through drag queen’s shows. Isolina Ballesteros argues:

> It is often through performance that Almodovar’s characters - and especially his female characters - affirm or contest their gender identities, whether they are understood in terms of biological essence, social construction, patriarchal imposition, or camp impersonation…It
is arguably the transgendered Agrado’s onstage confession in *All about My Mother* that serves as the emblematic moment of revelation and confession for women—and for men (Ballesteros 87).

Agrado remarks, “It’s not easy being genuine. But we mustn’t be cheap with anything relating to our image. Because the more a woman resembles what she has dreamed for herself, the more genuine she is” (*All About My Mother*). Agrado likes to talk about her body—“All I have that is real are my feelings and the litres of silicone that weigh a ton” (*All About My Mother*). When she goes on to the stage to use her act as a substitute for a play that cannot be staged, she amuses, intrigues, entertains and seduces the men and women in the audience by narrating the history of her life, which develops into a speech about her body. Claiming that her authenticity lies in “her silicone and her sentiments” (*All About My Mother*), she remarks:

I’m very authentic. Look at this body - all made to measures. Almond-shaped eyes: 80,000 (pesetas), my nose: 200,000... a waste of money. Another beating the following year left it like this. It gives me character, but if I had known, I wouldn’t have touched it. I continue. Tits: two, because I’m no monster. 70,000 each, but I have more than earned that back...Silicone in lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and ass (*All About My Mother*; Fig: 2.3).

She continues:

A pin costs about 100,000, so you work it out, because I’ve lost count. Jaw reduction: 75,000. Complete laser depilation...because women, like men, also come from apes, 60,000 a session. It depends how fairy you are. Usually, two to four sessions. But, if you’re a flamenco diva, you’ll need more...Well, as I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic,
ma’am. And one can’t be stingy with these things... because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being (All About My Mother).

It appears that authenticity is as much the core of Agrado’s notion of identity as it is Almodovar’s. Nothing can be considered intrinsic - individuals have no ‘nature’ (emphasis is mine) by virtue of identity being plural, fluid and complex. Thus, instead of being an expression of our personal nature (the traditional presumption) authenticity is the free expression of our aspirations, whatever the perception of society. That is what Agrado suggests in her monologue in All about my Mother.

Her act is “presented as impromptu, though in effect it is clearly one for which she has long ‘studied” and the positive responses of the audience in the scene is “undoubtedly more a manifestation of Almodovar’s attitude towards gender ambiguity” rather than depiction of “spectatorial identification” with the predicaments of transformative surgery (Ballesteros 87). Agrado’s description of the changeability of the body and its predisposition towards (re)construction problematises the footing on which identity and identification normally depend, without presaging the end of either identity or identification; if anything, Agrado seems to magnify the field of identity. Agrado’s monologue serves to suspend the lovely illusion to extend a compensatory gesture by which an artificially ‘constructed’ woman would be the most accurate and reliable extension of the ‘natural’ woman (emphasis is mine).

Stella Bruzzi has analysed how classical films dealing with the topic of transvestism have a crucial common component of concealment of the identity of the transvestite character and the limitations to knowing about true identity⁸. These include Tootsie (1982), Victor Victoria (1982), Yentl (1983), Mrs. Doubtfire (1993) and La Cage aux Folles (1995). There was a concern to conceal “the shapes and
forms of the body that could reveal him as a member of the opposite sex” (Bruzzi 149). *All About My Mother* is a little different from these films that focus on the tension between concealment and discovery (and which are based on another tension: one is either a man or a woman, and the proof is in the anatomical, substantive and objectified body). Unlike the vast majority of these classic transvestite characters, the lead transvestite character in *All About My Mother*, Agrado, does not seek concealment. She doesn’t pretend to be a woman. Her public affirmation is carried out by exhibiting her body exactly for what it is: a body that has been transformed, manufactured, that appears and affirms itself as a manufactured body, not a substantive, objectified body but embodiment, a vehicle and meaning of experience. The authenticity of this body, according to Agrado’s own discourse, her ‘nature’ (emphasis is mine) is part of the process that manufactured it. When she says that what is most authentic in her is silicone, Agrado is revealing that the authentic element in her is exactly that, which is the product of her creation, the intervention of her desire, of her own agency.

If gender identities are repeatedly brought center stage in Almodovar’s films, sexual identities are rarely performed publicly. Instead, they remain tellingly discreet and ambiguous. The gay male characters who populate Almodovar’s cinema do not engage in acts of revelation or ‘coming out’ (emphasis is mine) - perhaps because they are already out. They neither hide nor publicly reveal their sexual preferences, which are assumed in the diegesis and flow liberally between the public and private spheres. Homosexuality here enjoys the same ‘taken-for-grantedness’ (emphasis is mine) as heterosexuality, and coexists easily with transvestism, transsexualism, and pansexualism. The non-revelatory nature of gay identity in Almodovar’s films mirrors the director’s own quite public disavowal of normative homosexuality and his
reluctance to engage in identity politics and to endorse its often rigid categorisations in favour of ambiguity and queerness. Accordingly, it is not surprising that he confers a special role to drag and cross-dressing in his depiction of the ultimately ‘authentic’ (emphasis is mine) artificiality and instability of gender and sexual identity.

According to Sharon Cowan, *Transamerica* which is a film following the journey both literally and metaphorically) of a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual named Bree, paradoxically reinforces and challenges the dichotomies of sex/gender politics (Cowan 104). Historically, transgender people were expected to lie about their identities and about their pasts, as Kate Bornstein discusses in “Gender Terror, Gender Rage”9, yet this film openly documents Bree’s past as a male and lays emphasis on the need to accept her past in order to be able to continue her new life as a surgically constructed female. Bornstein goes on to inform that when dealing with transgender issues, the old medical model ordered the suppressing of patient’s childhood and biological sex, favouring a denial of existence as the sex into which they were born and/or raised. In this way, the medical, psychiatric and psychological institution encouraged transsexuals to lie about their gendered histories in order to smoothly enter into agreement with the hegemonic, binary gender system and live stealth lives’ says Joelle Ruby Ryan in Reel Gender (9).

The film echoes this older concept however, as at the beginning of the film, Bree’s therapist tells her, “You look very authentic.” Bree replies, “I try to blend in, keep a low profile. I believe the slang terminology is living stealth” (*Transamerica*). The suppressing of one’s biological sex in cultural history, as opposed to the film, helped to ensure ‘trans subjectivity’ (emphasis is mine)as totally invisible and as a fleeting mode of being that indicated passage from one physical state to another.
However, *Transamerica*, as Cowan argues, also substantiates itself within this binary framework as its success alone demonstrates, that “the transsexual who wants to cross and pass is, more than ever, accepted by mainstream culture—Bree does not want to live as a trans person continually calling into question our safe, comfortable categories of male/female” (Cowan 107; Fig: 2.7).

Bree, in her own and her therapists terms, is suffering from “gender dysphoria”\(^{10}\), historically and medically referred to as “gender identity disorder” (Bullough 311, 313) which is still listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-111-R) and still considered an illness. Therefore, it is not surprising that the central precept of the theory of gender dysphoria figures large in many trans-narratives, says Sally Hines, in “Trans Forming Gender”\(^{11}\). It would seem that the film places too much emphasis on the labelling of Bree’s condition and on her desire to transition surgically, in the process neglecting an opportunity to portray trans identities as ‘normal’ (emphasis is mine) when sitting outside the binaries of the sex/gender classification system (Fig: 2.5).

Butler argues that precisely because certain kinds of gender identities fail to conform to those “norms of cultural intelligibility”, they appear only as “developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (*Gender Trouble* 24, 24) from within that domain. Their tenacity and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to “expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility,” and hence, to open up within the very terms of that “matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder” (*Gender Trouble* 24, 24). However, the representation of trans-visibility that Bree embodies misses this point all together. Rather than explore the fluidity of gender, *Transamerica* arguably constructs what can only be described as the stereotypical story of transition. The
founding representation of trans-identities as a whole in the film is to build trans bodies as normal in an effort to render trans people endurable, understandable or justifiable. For Bree, her desire for normality is paramount and not wanting “a liminal life on the frontier- on the threshold between genders” (Cowan 107) which makes her embark on a journey towards sex reassignment surgery.

There is an interesting point that David King makes while commenting on how medicine has become the “culturally major lens through which gender blending” (King 119) is observed in modern Western societies. So while the media do not simply reproduce medical knowledge, this perspective has had a major impact on the media treatment of gender blending. This is certainly true of Transamerica- using narrative to ensure gender conflict is given embodied expression through surgery, producing the body as story. The transsexual body inscribed through “textual violence” finally allows the representation of the contradictions and ambiguity, the “chaos of lived gendered experience,” to be intelligibly read (Nataf 21). Within Transamerica, the continuation of Bree’s journey towards gender reassignment surgery is amplified through a universal ‘individual progressive’ (emphasis is mine) account, stories of origin and conclusion- from wrong bodies to right ones, sagas of professional and subjective success. Nataf calls such narratives of alteration “heroic processes of self-discovery and self-naming” (Nataf 20) - from epiphany to approval, resolution and promise to transition- the embodiment or rebirth, the early stages of new life and passing.

It is during this process that some form of gender stability is sought, along with an alleviation of the anxiety and disorder of gender dysphoria, It has been argued that the media have been partly or largely responsible for promoting the idea of transsexualism as a genuine condition for which sex-reassignment surgery is an
appropriate response. The movies have so popularised the idea of sex-change that the patient may come to the psychiatrist already sure of his diagnosis and treatment. Of this, *Transamerica* could be said to be guilty. In “(Not) queering ‘white vision’ in Far from Heaven and Transamerica,” Rebecca Scherr proposes that one must adhere to a very narrow concept of transsexualism to receive the requisite medical treatment. Those whose identities and desires as the opposite sex most closely suit the normative conceptions of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality are more easily permitted through the devices of control.

Bree therefore is presented in the film as a trans-woman, sexually attracted to men (therefore reinforcing the hetero-binary) and, as made evident in a scene in which she stumbles upon a transgender party made up of trans people who appear to be at ease with their gender ‘otherness’, Bree is clearly at odds with the ambiguity of sex/gender (emphasis is mine). However, in this scene, the trans people who are not interested in passing or going “stealth” are made to be seen as “freaks” (*Transamerica*). Bree prefers to be simultaneously visible (as woman) and invisible (as trans). For Cowan, this scene reflects the apprehensions and problems that many transsexual people face around hiding one’s birth sex/gender and passing in one’s self perceived sex/gender (Cowan 107).

In this respect, *Transamerica* highlights a true-to life depiction of one trans-issue - Bree asserts her right to exist as a good citizen in a politically liberal society that admires her commitment to ‘heteronormativity’ and is exactly the sort of ‘good’ transsexual subject that the United Kingdom’s Gender Recognition Act 2004 would comprehend and reward with legal recognition” (Cowan 107; all emphasis belong to the author). This aligns with Butler’s asserted proposition whereby the unity of
gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.

*Transamerica* concludes with the surgery Bree has waited for so long and as she ‘finds’ herself, (emphasis is mine) is rendered complete with the past glitches clarified and surpassed; in cultural terms the categorization of gender is “vindicated as the misfit finally fits” (King 145). *Transamerica* could be argued as continually downplaying the social, cultural and political implications of trans people’s lives, and focussing instead on micro-level experiences and salacious personal details. For example, issues such as sexuality, sex reassignment surgery, and non-accepting family members are overrepresented. However, issues such as discrimination, the binary gender system and civil rights initiatives, which have been a focus of the transgender movement, are rarely illustrated. On another level, the manner in which Bree’s character is ‘neatly’ labelled into that of a ‘traditional’ transsexual- someone who obliges the existing sex/gender system by surgically mutating into ‘either’ male ‘or’ female, makes the film miss out on any prospect of depicting the real lives of trans people who do not undergo any medical transformations to change their physical selves in order to fit the deterministic definitions of any society (emphasis is mine).

Set in Orissa, a part of India where it is common for men to play the part of women in street theatre, Amol Palekar’s *Daayraa*, as the name suggests, signifies boundaries - in this case social codes of behaviour. The story centres around one such man, who now that his profession has become almost obsolete, cross-dresses and lives as a woman. During one of his travels, he comes across a young bride-to-be who had been kidnapped and subsequently raped by some louts targeting her for work in a brothel. He takes her under his wing and persuades her to dress as a man.
Figure: 2.8

Figure: 2.9

Figure: 2.10
And hence begins the dramatic account of these two people, living lives that they are not supposed to but the ones that they choose to live – whether out of will or compulsion, to be what one feels like being or to protect the entity that one is endowed with - the girl now acting as the man, the man now a woman (Fig. 2.9). In an interview, the script-writer and producer of the film, Timeri Murari comments that he wanted to use the female lead to discover the role of an Indian rural woman, with no or little education and limited experience, trying to savor life in the society through her new identity:

My heroine was raped and beaten. She was forced to disguise herself for the long journey, so she changed her appearance to a man's - a short haircut, men's clothes, the male strut- to reach home without further attacks...through her change, she discovered the freedom of being a man in a male chauvinistic society...Indian women are feisty, charismatic, strong and have long emasculated the Indian male through their spoiling and over indulgence. In that they deserve the men they get.13

This journey is their own that transcends the ordinariness, the superficiality of mundane societal values; it is being outcasts that they ultimately arrive at finding and owning their own selves, in relation to each other as well as the world around them. While he trains her in his craft of entertaining the masses that they encounter, the girl experiences the liberties that every man in a male chauvinistic society is born with, by default. Ironically, it is in being a man that the girl’s hitherto suppressed spirit finally breaks the fetters of traditional servility, to soar to unknown heights.

On the road, they realise that their feelings for each other have grown. When they finally reach her village, she is spurned by her family and friends and driven out
to be rescued by her transvestite friend. They realise that what they feel for each other transcends issues of gender, and so the end of their journey sees them reverting to their original sexual identities to fulfill this love, but the journey that once begins might neither be necessarily destined for an end, nor can the traveler return to be the person she/he once was. Her past rejects her and her future is now irrevocably entangled with her lover, come what may. Defending the love between the transvestite and the girl, Murari says that Nirmal plays an encouraging mentor to the bitter and angry village girl, Sonali who:

...like an Alice...[had] fallen down a hole into an alien world. But as my transvestite remarked: ‘Look at the hole I’ve fallen into. A beautiful woman, trapped in this man’s body’...Gradually as they grew closer together, they fell in love. I saw no problems with them becoming lovers...so, my transvestite character could become her lover without betraying anything within himself.14 (Fig. 2.10)

The story's simplicity and the more complex issues it draws upon, render the film aglow with an eerie beauty. What does being a man or a woman finally come down to? Murari very aptly refers to the love between the young girl and the transvestite being ‘natural' while 'abnormal' is the malevolent, male-dominated, misogynistic society they inhabit (emphasis is mine):

Let's face it, all men and women have a bit of each other in them...Through custom, society's rules, cowardice even, we remain trapped in the physical roles nature has cast for us. Some men are obviously more female than others, some women more male. It was a device that allowed me to explore issues that weren't just Indian.
Wherever they're watching it, viewers will be able to find their way into the film. The film successfully crafts a pattern of empathy for the couple as the relationship between them, born out of a shared loneliness and a vacuum created by the haunting feeling of being unloved and unwanted, blooms into a supposedly odd but very convincing love. Amol Palekar’s *Daayraa* is the first in a trilogy of films dealing with issues of sexuality and accepting people for what they are; the other two films are *Anaahat* (2003) and *The Quest* (2006).

The film attempts to explore the subjectivity of Nirmal in a masculine culture, suggesting social construction of masculinity as machismo (where rape is a patriarchal instrument to show a woman ‘her place’) is an ironic look of the way stereotypes are circulated and performed in a patriarchal society where the feminine is always an 'other' (emphasis is mine). Nirmal cannot be restricted as a complete masculine identity or a feminine one- he assumes both the roles. The cultural construction of masculinity implicitly shaming the 'other' does not find expression in Nirmal. He retorts:

Man! Woman! Is it necessary to flex one’s muscles to prove oneself a man? Or will a moustache and a beard make a man? Does baring boobs qualify one to be a real woman? Or being tearful and helpless? Man’s got to be sturdy, macho. Woman? Touch-me-not-blossom? I am a miracle of nature…inside me; there is part man, part woman. It pleases me to reveal the woman within me. Whether others accept me or not…

(*Daayraa*)

He acts tough and masculinity is a negotiable space and not the ultimate objective which makes him an elusive figure in patriarchal society. Sonali questions him,
demanding to know his “true” sex, saying ‘Are you a man or a woman?’ (Daayra); it is from this demand of wanting Nirmal to conform to a category that his ‘sexual identity crisis’ (my emphasis) initially emerges. I would argue however that wanting to be a recipient of Sonali’s love which prompts his decision to start acting like a man, does not so much strip Nirmal of his ‘true’ (emphasis is mine) identity, rather it effectively queers him in its stripping of the performative elements of his gender.

Nirmal’s playing the part of a woman and dressed in clothes culturally identifiable as female, entails him to internalise and practice what are understood as signifiers of femininity. Clothing, associated with gender threatens to undercut the ideological fixity of the human subject. By pointing out the artifice of gender identity, cross-dressing can be seen here as a willful disruption of the fixity of that ideology. Annette Kuhn in “Sexual disguise and Cinema” points out:

Far from being a fixed signifier of a fixed gender identity, clothing has the potential to disguise, to alter, even to reconstruct, the wearer’s self. Clothing can dissemble... put another way, clothing can embody performance. The potential threat to fixed subjectivity and gender identity represented by clothing goes a long way towards explaining the social prohibitions on some kinds of cross-dressing, and containment of others within traditionally acceptable forms and practices. (Kuhn 172)

In films where cross-dressing is a central theme, clothing is set up as a deceptive signifier, yet suggesting the existence of a true or real self and a stable gender identity deriving from the subject’s biological sex. Films like Tootsie (1982), Some Like it Hot (1959) and so on are representative of this stance. Kuhn goes on to state that such films often end up emphasising the ‘true’ (emphasis is mine) gender of the character to disavow the idea of sexual perversion by treating sexual disguise as a
professional need and not a willful endeavor. When sexual disguise is established as transvestism, it is constructed as clinically pathological or even socially threatening as in case of Psycho (1960). Daayraa challenges these cinematic conventions and the audience’s knowledge of them by interpreting the act of cross-dressing as potentially subversive of the normative sanity in a heterosexual world.

There have been very few serious films, which have taken up the third gender as a subject. And among them, even fewer which feature real people playing themselves, Navarasa being one of the first few films that does not ridicule the third gender. Instead it tries to throw light on the mindset of such people, their agonies, and their ecstatic moments at Koovagam.¹⁶

‘Hijras’ (emphasis is mine) have an extensively chronicled history in the Indian subcontinent from the ancient times, which features a number of well-known roles within subcontinental cultures- partly gender-liminal, partly mystical and partly survivalist. According to Serena Nanda, these identities can’t be exactly matched to any specific parallels in the modern Western nomenclature of gender and sexual orientation and hence, challenge Western ideas of sex and gender:

...Hijras are primarily thought of as men who become like women, though females who do not menstruate can also become Hijras. The glosses “eunuch” and “hermaphrodite” both emphasize sexual impotence, which is understood in India to mean a physical defect, impairing the male sexual function both in intercourse (in the inserter role) and in reproductive ability (Nanda 83; emphasis belong to the author).
As mentioned earlier in the chapter, most are born apparently male, but some may be intersex (with ambiguous genitalia). They are often perceived as a third sex, and most see themselves as neither men nor women. However, some may see themselves (or be seen as) females, feminine males or androgynous. Some, especially those who speak English and are influenced by international discourses around sexual minorities may identify as transgender or transsexual women. Unlike some Western transsexual women, ‘hijras’ generally do not attempt to pass as women. Reportedly, few have genital modifications, although some certainly do, and some consider ‘nirwaan’ (castrated) ‘hijras’ to be the ‘true hijras’ (emphasis is mine).

A.D. Wilhelm says that throughout Vedic literature, the sex or gender of the human being is clearly divided into three separate categories according to prakriti or nature. These are: “pums-prakriti” or male, “stri-prakriti” or female, and “tritiya-prakriti” or the third sex” (Wilhelm 14). While some western scholars have sought to understand the term third gender in terms of sexual orientation, several other scholars, especially the native non-western scholars, consider this as a misrepresentation of third genders. To different cultures or individuals, a third gender may represent an intermediate state between men and women, a state of being both (such as the spirit of a man in the body of a woman), the state of being neither, the ability to cross or swap genders, another category altogether independent of men and women.

In the Kama Sutra, people of the third sex have been broken down into a number of categories that are still visible today and usually referred to as gay males and lesbians. They are characteristically recognisable by a conspicuous synthesis of the male/female nature (i.e. masculine females or effeminate males) that can often be identified the younger, formative years of a child’s life and are recognised through an innate homosexual orientation exhibited at puberty. The eighth and ninth chapters of
the second part of the *Kama Sutra* provide a detailed description of the homosexual conduct of these people; while gay males and lesbians are the most conspicuous members of this category, it also includes other kinds such as transgenders and the intersexed (Wilhelm 102-145).

The third sex is considered to be a natural (not artificially induced) amalgamation of the male and female natures to the degree where they can no longer be categorized as male or female in the conventional sense of the word. The Vedic society was wide-ranging and accommodated each individual as an essential part of the greater whole; thus all classes of men were accepted and engaged according to their nature. Third-genders were neither oppressed nor deprived of basic rights; they were permitted to form their own societies or town lodgings, be married and participate in any means of livelihood, including various kinds of prostitution. Gay men had the choice of blending into the society as regular males or by dressing up and behaving as females, living as transvestites. They have been especially mentioned as being expert in dancing, singing and acting, as barbers or hairstylists, masseurs, and house servants (Wilhelm 202-253). They were often employed within the female sections of royal households. Transvestites were invited to attend all birth, marriage, and religious ceremonies as their presence was considered to be auspicious. This tradition still continues in India even today.

*Navrarsa* deals with the story of a young girl Shwetha, on the threshold of adulthood, and her coming to terms with the complex and amorphous sexuality of her uncle, Gautam, (played by a real life transgender, Khushboo). She comes to know that her uncle transforms himself into a woman every night to lead a totally different life and this perplexes her (Fig. 2.12). Upon being confronted by her, Gautam
confesses his desire to run away and marry Aravan at a local festival, the Koovagam Festival. He consoles his own self:

[I am] ...by birth a man, by instinct a woman...The woman in me will surface one day...filling the deadly silence, breaking all shackles.

(Navarasa)

Koovagam is, thus, his haven. The festival is an annual affair and is a kind of a congregation of people belonging to the third gender, where they regularly meet to re-enact the story of Aravan, a character from the epic Mahabharata.

At one point in the Mahabharata war, a human sacrifice was required and a young warrior named Aravan, son of Arjuna and Nagakanniga was chosen for it. But he had a desire to marry. Since no woman was willing to be a widow just after marriage, Lord Krishna assumed the form of Mohini (the most beautiful woman) and married him, hence the third gender believe that they are the reincarnates of Lord Krishna. That’s the premise for the festival of Koovagam where thousands of the third gender gather and marry lord Aravan symbolically, and once the statue of Aravan is beheaded they break the bangles and wail dressed in white (the color of widowhood, separation) - a unique festival that commences in great joy and ends in sorrow.

The other transgenders that Gautam meets frequently express regret for his sad, secretive and dual life, they tell him that he doesn’t have to live this way any longer where, “mornings you’re the man you don’t want to be, nights you’re the woman you wish to be.” (Navarasa; Figs. 2.14 & 2.15). When Shwetha's parents are away for a wedding, Gautam leaves home to go to Koovagam. On her way to find her uncle and bring him back home, Shwetha discovers a whole new culture in her friendship with the members of the third gender who she meets during her journey. Shwetha's journey of terror and discovery is more intrinsic than political.
Santosh Sivan's strong storyline is what helps Navarasa transcend the level of a documentary - although shots of the festival and the Miss Koovagam beauty contest do give a documentary feel. (Fig. 2.13) Shwetha excels in the role of a schoolgirl who understands her uncle better than the elders do. In fact, Shwetha's father, Varadarajan seems oblivious to the problem of the young man at home. Except being confined to his room throughout the day, Gautam does nothing, but all that Varadarajan is worried about is that his brother refuses to cut his hair short. He doesn't even notice that Gautam sports a false moustache. In the first few minutes of the movie, while taking a phone call for her father, Shwetha refuses to lie about him being home, remarking "Tiny or big, a lie is a lie," to which the father responds, "You fixed me. Bright Girl!" This events seems to foreshadow how Shwetha will later on in the movie, try to 'fix' things for her uncle, Gautam by making an effort to acquaint her father with the forced duality of Gautam's life and the misery it causes him; the father, in turn, would try to 'fix' Gautam by means that he used to employ right from the time that Gautam was a child – fix him as a 'man' (emphasis is mine). He infact shares with his wife:

When eight years old, he dressed like a woman and danced in the main hall. I whipped him with a belt only then did he change his clothes...

Now, I have him in control, he is scared of me. (Navarasa)

Navarasa captures the girl's responses to the entire process of sexual awakening with an apprehensive sensitivity. It's not coincidental for Shwetha to attain puberty just when the reality of her timid, effeminate uncle’s love to wear the family jewels, in the shadows, dawns upon her (Fig. 2.15). Sivan skillfully maneuvers with the concepts of light and dark, shadow and sunlight to depict the ambiguities that underline human sexuality. Shwetha's shocking disbelief at the idea of her beloved uncle being a woman in a man's body is a clever device to distance and familiarize the audience with the third sex. It is in Shwetha's journey from repugnance to acceptance
of her uncle's sexual ambivalence that the film's integrity and sensitivity comes forth in all its beauty.

The narrative comes across as a fascinating fusion of art and documentary in a partnership that's passionate and articulate. As Shwetha travels to find and retrieve her gender-confused uncle, the narrative introduces us (through her eyes) to the various concerns of the third gender. “I'm a Hindu, my husband is a Christian and my mother-in-law follows Islam. We practise religious unity in every sense. Why are we treated as sub-human by others, insulted and discarded by the so-called mainstream?” asks a ‘woman’ in Navarasa (emphasis is mine). The truth about docu-portions in the narrative cannot mitigate the incisive look at a community that mournfully longs to be embraced by the mainstream of society, accepting them for what they are.

Butler asserts that those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished (Bodies that Matter 112). If Gautam as male precedes Gautam as female, then the gender performance is revealed, in terms of heteronormativity, as being somehow ‘unnatural’ or ‘freakish’ in its denial of the ‘true’ pre-existing self (emphasis is mine). Gautam finally becomes a transitional body made violently accountable to a gender binarism which permits no alternative embodiment or subjectivity, demanding instead that both one’s body and claims about one’s self conform to (born) male masculinity or (born) female femininity, and to heterosexuality as their normative counterpart. Gautam is constantly reminded of his transgression constructed by society as sickness as we learn that his brother locks and beats him up and also gets him treated by three different shrinks. Socially he is made to believe that his act of tranvestism is a perversity which needs to be corrected. Gautam’s character hence becomes a threat to the sanctity of the heterosexual world, where his will to destabilise any fixity of gender through tranvestism is liable to
subject the family to unbearable social stigma, including his niece who is to get married.

The persecuted ‘hijra’ class of present-day India is the sad and unfortunate outcome of harsh and unfair social policies that have been directed against people of the third sex for almost a thousand years. Discarded by foreign overlords who derided and condemned any form of gender-variant conduct as essentially unnatural and evil, these citizens were labelled as social pariahs. Homosexual and transgender males could join the ‘hijra’ class by castrating themselves but were otherwise forced into marrying women and pretending to live as ordinary men (Wilhelm 207). Unfortunately, this stifling communal policy is still dominant in India and has been readily accepted by most modern-day Hindus. It is said that the easiest way to judge a society is to observe how it treats its minorities. In Vedic civilization, it was an important principle to offer social protection to the brahmanas, the cows, the women, and those belonging to the neutral gender (the elderly, the children, the impotent, the celibate, and the third sex). In modern times, however these groups are scorned, abused, maltreated, and even killed, often under government sanction.

The most remarkably shocking aspect of this gross mistreatment of third-sex people in modern times is that it is all being done under the banner of the assumed and redundant notions of morality and religion. These citizens are rejected as immoral and undeserving of human rights solely on the basis of their sexual nature, which many people mistakenly consider to be merely a ‘choice’ (emphasis is mine). This type of social rejection and mistreatment is due to ignorance. Not understanding the nature of the third sex, people become suspicious and fearful of their differences; this produces bigotry, which then festers into hatred and eventually violence.
The transgender experience is one of the topics that have led to a renovation of reflections, concepts and theory in the field of feminist and gender studies. This is because, in its different forms of manifestation, it has revealed aspects of gender that for a long time had remained relegated to its theoretical construction or its cultural variations. The most important aspects of the reflection on transgender experience are connected with the artificial and constructed nature of gender and gender differences, or in other words, its cultural, social and political construction.

The phenomenon of ‘transgender-ism’ (my term) serves to be a reversal of the dynamic in the relation between the subject and the other - the subject becomes the other. The person, structurally positioned as the subject strives to reconstruct himself as a subject, thereby abandoning the structurally fixed position for the instability of the experience of transformation – of becoming a movement without the finality of a stable locus. Agrado’s feminine breasts are not her most authentic part, but rather the experience of metamorphosis etched on her breasts that she has survived - the embodied subjectivity which is created by this movement towards the ‘other’ (emphasis is mine). Engaging in a process of locating himself from the perspective of the person who is structurally, politically and socially located as the other (and thus, becoming a non-subject), the trans dislocates the subject position from a structurally fixed place. The personified experience of ‘becoming the other’ (emphasis is mine) through a dramatisation of the apparatuses for constructing difference, can also be considered as a viable anti-hierarchic undertaking, meant to subvert the dominant politics of subjectivity. Paying attention to these experiences at the fringes can help us reconsider and revisit the concept of gender, its restrictions and potentialities, both politically and analytically.
Notes


3 The word ‘Hijra’ is a masculine noun, most widely translated into English as either “eunuch” or “hermaphrodite.” In the South Asian context, ‘hijras’ are males who have a feminine gender identity, embrace gender roles that are traditionally feminine, and wear dresses up as women. For details, see A. D. Wilhelm, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Conditions through Hinduism* (Indiana: Xlibris Corporation, 2010.)

4 Transvestite refers to person (usually and especially a male) who adopts the dress and often the conduct typical of the opposite sex particularly for emotional or sexual satisfaction.

5 Francoism refers to the political or social policies advocated or put into effect in Spain, between 1936 and 1975 when Spain was under the authoritarian dictatorship of Francisco Franco.


10 Gender dysphoria is the discord between sex (the body) and gender identity (the mind).


15 Same as 13 above.