Chapter IV

SUBVERSIVE PERFORMANCE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION:

PORTRAYAL OF EUNUCH LIFE IN SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE AND THE FILMS

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CHAPTER 4

SUBVERSIVE PERFORMANCE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION:

REPRESENTATION OF EUNUCII LIFE IN SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE, TAMANNA AND SABNAM MAUSI

This chapter discusses the issue of the eunuchs situated in the modern Indian socio-cultural milieu that strictly adheres to the norm of discrete gender categories as the natural option of gender. It discusses their lifestyle and status in the Indian society. This chapter also incorporates a field study, my personal interaction with a group of hijras located in Guwahati, Assam. This conversation throws light on some aspects of the hijra lifestyle and their state of marginalization. This firsthand experience, that I have gathered from my personal interaction with the hijras, goes together with the theoretical and textual inputs that highlight their stigmatization and 'difficult' existence as social 'misfits' or outcasts. Since they fail to perform their gender identity in a socially desirable way, they are seldom allowed any legitimate space within the ‘mainstream’ Indian society that follows the Western model of binary gender.

A discussion of the Indian hijra is very relevant to my thesis because the hijra community serves as a living example of social exclusion or banishment suffered by those who engage in a subversive performance. In other words, the hijra identity shows how tough it is to confront the binary and the social norm for those whose gender identity is at odds with the existing norm. It would perhaps be not irrelevant to see the hijra identity as an illustration of the key phrases of the title of my thesis – ‘Performing Gender, Confronting the Binary’. The hijra identity reveals the problem of performing
one's gender against the normative binary structure of gender. Their stigmatization and marginalization highlights the severe consequences of confronting the binary as non-conformists. Since my study focuses on issues related to gender – the difficulties faced by an individual whose performance of gender identity stands as a contrast to the expectations of the hegemonic binary structure that demands conformity from all the subjects living under its jurisdiction – this chapter has a central kind of relevance.

As I have mentioned earlier, the theoretical framework of my thesis foregrounds the theoretical insights of Judith Butler in order to 'read the complexities embedded within the structure of binary gender that permits only an obligatory existence as per the norm and dismisses other forms of sexual or gendered behaviour as 'abnormal'. Yet my analysis of her theoretical works has revealed her exclusion of the hijra community and culture of India that is arguably a living site – the praxis to her theoretical insights. Butler's theoretical domain is based upon the thoughts on the tough life that one is compelled to lead if one is located outside or tries to transgress the normative ideas of binary gender. The hijra lifestyle epitomizes the difficulties faced by those who are other than the notion of 'normal' gender and still they find no place in the theoretical domain of Butler's formulations. In other words we may say that her theory is about them but it does not speak of them. This paradox may point towards an instance of the neglect of the epistemological inputs from our part of the world that is so typical of the Western canon.

Butler talks about the concept of 'drag' which suggests that gender is a matter of imitation, where the dress code and make-up play pivotal roles. 'Drag' shows the power of outward appearance that can determine our place within or outside the socially
acceptable binary structure of gender. The Indian hijra identity stands as a living example that can illustrate such complex issues related to gender. But it is very strange that in a technologically advanced world, where one can have access to any culture at one touch, Butler has overlooked the existence of the hijra culture in India that could have served as samples for her theoretical ideas.

The hijra community is exclusively an element of the Indian cultural milieu not found in the West. While the West seldom allows any space to a hermaphroditical identity, the Indian socio-cultural milieu (even in modern times) at least allows some kind of space to these people although this space is somewhere on the periphery and not within the mainstream society. Although the hijras are marginalized, the myths about their power to offer blessing that circulates in the Indian cultural milieu provides them a way to survive as a distinctive community. Here we may refer to Serena Nanda:

Whereas Westerners feel uncomfortable with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such in-between categories as transvestism, homosexuality, hermaphroditism and transgenderism and make strenuous attempts to resolve them, Hinduism not only accommodates such ambiguities, but also views them as meaningful and even powerful (1999: 20).

There are some differences between transgenders/transvestites belonging to the Western world and the hijras who belong to the Indian society. Although the Indian hijra, the transvestite or transgender belonging to the other countries of the world indulges in cross-dressing, the hijra identity is very different from the others in the sense that they carry a cultural baggage that lends them a secluded identity and this identity is a more fixed kind of identity than the other cross-dressers. The hijras live as a specific
community sharing specific cultural codes that initiates the methods of ‘becoming’ or ‘imitating’ opposite sex mannerisms on a permanent basis. In her work *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing, and Culture* (2004), Charlotte Suthrell points out the distinction between the hijra identity in India and the transvestites situated in the United Kingdom. During her fieldwork, Suthrell compares the transvestites located in UK and the hijra community of India, who shares a common factor – cross-dressing. The transvestites situated in UK are different from the Indian hijra in the sense that they engage in cross-dressing for varying occasions but they do not have any intention of ‘becoming’ the opposite sex permanently as has been pointed out by Suthrell in the following few lines:

...for the Hijras, transvestism creates ‘difference’ but, because it has an essential element of a cultural, ceremonial context, it also constitutes a form of ‘belonging’. U.K transvestites, unlike hijras, have little history, no ‘tribe’ to join with associated ceremonies of belonging (2004: 116).

The Indian hijra serves as a good example of ‘drag’. Strangely, we find no reference to them in the theoretical works of Judith Butler. Their presence cannot be denied but they are not allotted any legitimate space within the socio-cultural milieu. And they are literally pushed back to some dark corners of the society, far away from the society of man and woman. In North East India and especially in Assam, the sight of the hijras is very rare. Information regarding where they live and how their life is is not easily accessible. They are mostly encountered in trains. In order to gather a firsthand experience of the hijra lifestyle in Assam, I had to spend several weeks to track them
structures" of a particular culture or society, imposes rigid set of rules which are internalized to such an extent that they begin to seem part of the individual. Femininity for instance is achieved through a process of forcing the body and behavioural modes into compliance with a feminine ideal. A body has to fulfill certain criterions in order to be known to the world as a male or a female body. As such gender identity becomes something that people acquire from existing “discursive practices”, rather than something they possess.

The operation of this ‘power structure’ results in the stigmatization of the ambiguous body like that of a eunuch that tends to violate the norm of a socio-culturally or linguistically intelligible body. The power structure is always at work and it exercises a kind of hegemonic power over the ambiguous body like that of a eunuch that tends to violate the norm of a socio-culturally or linguistically intelligible body. The body of the eunuch is therefore taken to be a ‘defective’ piece that needs either to be corrected (through corrective surgery) or banished from the socio-cultural domain as it is different from the dominant concept of the human body. Even though the existence of the ‘intersexed’ person has been recognized, medical literature and physicians still insist upon ‘male’ and ‘female’ as the ‘natural’ options.

Transgendered individuals have to pay a heavy toll for confronting the essentialized binary structure as non-conformists. Living thus becomes intensely problematic for those who are anatomically unintelligible to the existing socio-cultural matrix. In History of Sexuality, Foucault focuses on the views of sexuality and the consequent conceptualization of the self since the Greeks. The characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity varies with respect to variation in time and place and it
seems to strengthen the cause of the social constructionist point of view. Foucault's investigation reveals that the concept of perversity or abnormality ascribed to the world of gender are 19th century constructs.

Pursuing the trend of Foucault, Judith Butler constructed her theory of gender performativity where she advocates that gender is more a matter of performance than the expression of some inner essence. And if gender is taken to be a matter of performing or representing oneself, then the stigmatization of non-normative gender patterns seems to be unjustified. In other words Butler deviates from the earlier feminists in her attempt to 'deconstruct' the grand narrative of gender and in the process she challenges the binary structure that divides all into two categories – 'male', 'female'. Butler questions the categories called 'man' and 'woman'.

The act of stigmatizing those who are different from the majority is actually the significance of the terms – abnormality, perversity. 'Normal' behavioural patterns of gender are those that are shared by the majority and the tag of abnormality is vested upon minority practices. One who is different from the majority is regarded to be abnormal. Foucault's investigation on the ancient Greek society has revealed that, during the 19th century, homosexuality began to be seen to constitute a particular short of individual who would engage in specific acts and no other. They were regarded to be inverts or biologically perverse individuals. Foucault analyses the process of confession which is a part of the religious ritual of the Christians and revealed that homosexuality was seen as a sin which needs confession and redemption.

153
In the ancient Greek society, homosexual acts were not seen as something that defines one as a particular type of individual. For the Greeks, what differentiates a man from another is not exactly the type of sexual practice he/she prefers. It is the moderation of sexual practice and control of lust that defines a "moral self". Until the 18th century there was a concern with the 'control of desire'. But since the 19th century, the sexual preference or sexual behaviour (i.e. homosexuality or heterosexuality) of an individual started to determine the identity of an individual. Individuals are obliged to recognize themselves as subjects of their sexuality. Foucault analyses the stereotypical image of the homosexuals portrayed in the 19th century texts.

An essential notion of the human anatomy holds good in the world of medical science and it acts as an extension of the socio-cultural structure by carrying out the sex reaffirmation or corrective surgery. The culturally unintelligible bodies are either forced to acquire desired shape and perform gender in a 'correct' way or else be pushed out of the 'human' world. Corrective surgery is imposed upon individuals in order to restore anatomical 'normalcy'. Thus 'medicalization' becomes an extension of the socio-cultural normative system. In Foucault's memoirs of the 19th century French hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin demonstrates how Barbin was raised as a woman but later on, medical experts recognized him as "really" a man. Unable to adapt to this new identity, Barbin committed suicide. Every individual is caught up in the web of the societal norm that consists of language, religion, law and so on. These factors tend to construct 'human' identity and since a hermaphroditical identity defies the norm, it is never incorporated into the mainstream society.
An individual's identity as a member of the social world is greatly determined by social factors like language, religion and law among others and a hermaphrodite seldom has a place in any of these areas. Language plays an important part in constructing the gendered self. The “I” that makes itself known to the world as a male or a female is subject to language and representation. As I have mentioned earlier, Monique Wittig\(^3\) tries to look at the place in language where gender begins: the personal pronouns like ‘he’, ‘she’ put us within ‘discourse’ as male or female and impose specific gender identities on us. If one fails to cater to the pronouns like ‘he’ or ‘she’ which are the only morphemes that confers socially meaningful and acceptable ‘human’ identity, there is a high possibility of one being banished from the ‘mainstream’ society. A hijra identity seems to blur the distinction between ‘he’ and ‘she’. Due to their ambiguous identity they could not be defined by the linguistic categories called he or she and as such they are seldom allowed any space within the mainstream society that allows space only to a ‘he’ or a ‘she’.

More than being what it is or expressing its inner essence, the ‘I’ has to be what others permit it to be. Most importantly the ‘I’ has to be what language defines it to be and not what inner essence wants it to be (if there is anything like inner essence). Everyone is caught up in the web of language and one who slips out of it will have to face social exclusion. The hermaphrodite for instance cannot be defined by the language provided pronouns ‘he’ or ‘she’ and therefore will be referred to as ‘it’ — the neuter which linguistically does not refer to a human being, but is often used to denote inanimate objects or entities other than human.
Moreover religious and legal codes also take active part in constructing the gendered self. Religion prescribes behavioural patterns for gender roles. In Hinduism for instance, there are certain norms for woman. To attain the identity of a woman, one will have to represent the idea of woman prescribed by the religion to which she belongs. Dress codes, modes of behaviour, duties towards family and so on are prescribed by religion.

Legal codes too regulate human life. In India, there is a law specific to the hijras and homosexual communities – section 377 of the IPC (Nanda, Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India 1999) which criminalizes 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature', until 2010 when the law has changed and accordingly homosexuality has been allowed space within the Indian legal system. The earlier legal system (section 337 of IPC) had also rendered the eunuchs as incapable of acting as a guardian or adopting a child. The hijra community is deprived of several rights since Indian law recognizes only two genders. They do not have the right to vote, marry or claim employment and health benefits as a specific community, without submitting to being categorized within the male/female gender identities. Religion and legal system are two indispensable organs of the operating system of the society.

Human beings are subject to the dominant ideology of the gendered world and as such the human subject or self seems to be more a product of the social determinants or external factors like language, religion, and legal system than the expression of some inner essence. Therefore the notion of gender as a construct, or a performance of the normative idea of gender, perhaps carries more weight than the idea of gender as solely the expression of some inner essence. But since the system, that comprises the sociolinguistic structure, recognizes only two options of gender, the third gender, that could
not be placed into the linguistic categories of either 'he' or 'she', is seldom allowed any legitimate space in the 'human' world. So if we think of gender as a kind of performance, then the stigmatization of the third gender does not seem to be legitimate. Let us now take a closer look at the status of the hijra community, inhabiting the modern Indian society which adheres to the Western model of the binary structure of gender.

Although the present structure of the Indian society follows the Western model, yet evidences can be found in the Vedic society of India, where the third sex or a hermaphrodite was not deprived of social recognition. Moreover, in Indian scriptures, evidences of Gods and deities switching from one gender to the other or heroic figures like Arjuna in *Mahabharata* taking recourse to the hijra identity when he turns into Brihannala shows that the hijra was not totally stigmatized in the Indian cultural milieu. The Hindu social ideology, since the remote past, has provided space for gender overlap, alternative genders and gender transformations whose evidences could be seen in the myths and rituals of Hindu culture. But after the advent of the Muslims and the Britishers, the scenario has undergone a drastic change and the modern Indian society is found to follow the Western pattern of gender where heterosexuality is the norm and discrete gender categories are the exclusive options of gender.

The relevance of the eunuchs in this study is that they represent that part of the gendered population which is often marginalized, stigmatized and regarded as social outcasts because they do not fit into the dominant idea of gender that follows the pattern of compulsory binary. They represent the severe consequences of transgressing the binary. They are often compelled to lead a derelict and secluded life away from the
world of men and women because of their ambiguous gender identity. In a county like India that strictly adheres to the binary structure of gender, the hijras as they are popularly known, exist in a very paradoxical position. They are placed outside the ‘mainstream’ socio-cultural matrix, inhabit the fringes of Indian society, but at the same time, this very socio-cultural milieu provides to them the mythic power of conferring blessings on auspicious occasions like marriage and childbirth. This myth has in modern times, proved to be the very source of their survival — both economic and social. Thus the Indian society both closes its door to this community and also allows them to somehow survive in some dark corners of non recognition.

What does the Hijra identity signify in the Indian cultural context? The moment we call ourselves a man or a woman, we are in the process of reciting a norm — culturally naturalized modes of conducting oneself as man and woman. We are in other words, enacting the culturally inscribed norms of gender. Since the hijra identity fails to reiterate the socio-cultural script of ‘normal’ gender, they are deprived of developmental projects that are accessible to common man and woman.

The Hijra identity is quite problematic because it does not fit into the culturally scripted norm of gender that approves man and woman as the only “natural” option of gender. The term ‘Hijra’ refers to eunuch or hermaphrodites that are born with an ambiguous body having attributes of both male and female. But the Hijra community inhabiting the Indian territories does not consist of ‘born’ hermaphrodites only — there are also those people who would psychologically prefer to live like a woman rather than as a biologically compelled man (and vice-versa). However, in India it is often believed that the Hijras are hermaphrodites by birth. At this point we may refer to important work of
Serena Nanda who conducted her fieldwork with Indian Hijras. Her study revealed that most of the members of the hijra community in India are not born hermaphrodites; most of them are castrated males or males imitating womanly mannerisms out of psychological compulsions.

There is a widespread belief in India that Hijras are born hermaphrodites and are taken away by the Hijra community at birth or in childhood, but I found no evidence to support this belief among the hijras I met, all of whom joined the community voluntarily, most often in their teens. The hijra role and identity...born that way (Nanda1990:XX).

The hijras exist in some corners of Indian Society as a distinctive or secluded community and the role they play in the Indian Society is that of performers on the occasions of child birth (usually a male child) and marriage. These kinds of performances of the hijras are extremely common in North India but the tradition is not so much a part of the socio-cultural milieu of North East India. The social structure of North East India seems to be an amalgamation of various non-vedic cultures. Since the North East is basically the abode of tribal population, there seems to be a cultural alienation from the rest of India. The North Eastern region is having its own cultural values that are very different from the ‘mainstream’ Indian society. Perhaps due to the influence of non-vedic tribal cultures, the hijra identity and the myths of having the power of conferring blessing associated with the hijras are not available in the North Eastern society.

The hijra role and performance found in India could be seen to be a very good example of ‘drag’. The term ‘drag’ refers to those performances where the boy plays the role of a
girl. It is a matter of imitating gender. A drag performance shows how the outward imitation of gender--dressing up and making up oneself as a girl can give us the impression of "real" gender. Thus a boy can represent himself as a girl by imitating womanly mannerisms, dress code and make up. The same thing happens with the hijra man imitating a woman. The concept of drag tends to challenge the question of gender as an essence. It can question the association of reality with gender. Since the imitation of the outward expression of gender can enable one to switch from one gender category to the other, a logical argument could be put forward that gender is more a matter of imitating the existing script of gender roles in a given society. As I have mentioned earlier, Butler says that "In imitating gender drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency" (Salih 2004: 112).

The same could be said about the hijra. They imitate womanly mannerisms or behavioural patterns sanctioned for women. In other words, the hijras could be seen as male voice wrapped in sarcs and this outward imitation of dress and other codes of conduct of the opposite sex makes the hijra identity problematic. They could easily hide themselves by imitating male codes of conduct and dressing modes of male. So the imitation of the outward appearance of a gender category can give one social acceptance while its opposite leads to a life of non-acceptance and non-recognition in the social world. Thus, the hijra identity shows that gender is a matter of imitation of the external signifiers—dress, make-up, style of walking, talking and so on.

With the entry of feminist scholarship in anthropology, the concept of gender was intellectually extricated to a large extent from biological determinism. Cross-cultural studies demonstrated such a wide variety of attributes of masculine and feminine roles
and characteristics in different societies that the view of gender as a cultural
construction, the content of which varies from society to society, is now widely
accepted in the social sciences. A corollary to this concept is the widespread
acknowledgement that the psychological and behavioral aspects of gender are a product
of socialization rather than of biology.

In India the eunuchs or hijras exist as a distinct ‘community’, constituted of ‘born’
hermaphrodites and castrated figures who indulge in ‘cross-dressing’. They are, quite
literally, an ‘invisible’ group that exists on the fringes of society; but detached from the
society of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. They are thought to have special powers of blessing on
occasions like childbirth and marriage. They perform dances on such occasions and
thereby earn their livelihood. They take on female names and overtly imitate ‘womanly’
mannerisms. The presence of these eunuchs is both auspicious and terrifying, and in the
Indian cultural context, loaded with myths.

Their identity is highly problematic since they do not fall into the paradigms of
dominant classification: they are both male and female; and none. This chapter ill now
look more closely at the structuring of the gender system in India and its consequent
imprints on the lives of the individuals that are located in the ‘Indian’ socio-cultural
milieu. ‘Indian’ society could conveniently be called polyphony of cultures where
diverse ethnic groups having different cultural values co-inhabit. But these diverse
groups are more or less attached to the same backbone of gender norm that claims
uniformity and tends to dictate everyone’s life irrespective of and without regard to the
variations in individual tastes and temperaments.
The Indian society adheres to the norms of the compulsory binary; prohibiting homosexuality and stigmatizing the eunuchs. This ‘Indian’ society is obviously structured around the patriarchal set up. A look into the ‘Indian’ socio-cultural milieu seems to be essential in the context of my work because it would help me in analyzing and comprehending Mahesh Dattani’s plays *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and the Hindi film *Tamanna* that are situated within the Indian socio-cultural milieu. In other words there is no place for those who are other than ‘male’, ‘female’ and/or heterosexual.

While the presence of the Hijra community in India cannot be denied, they are officially absent. An official census stipulates a choice between ‘male’ and ‘female’ and since they are none, they are left outside the official record.

Eunuchs have existed in most parts of the world with their own local identities. They are called ‘baklas’ in the Philippines, ‘Serrars’ in Africa, ‘Aravanis’ in South Asia and Hijra in India. But in India the scenario of the hijra social life is different from other parts of the world. While comparing the hijra culture of India with the transgenders inhabiting other parts of the world, we need to take note of the following few points that have been discussed earlier. Unlike other countries, in India they live as a distinctive community laden with specific cultural myths. They are believed to have powers of blessing in occasions like childbirth and marriage. On such occasions, they perform themselves in a way that further aggravates their ‘strangeness’ or ‘queerness’ – dressed up as female dancers and singing with deep male voices. But at the same time these performances that exhibit the hijras as ‘queer’ beings, different from the world of ‘normal’ man and ‘woman’ also provides them with their livelihood. The cultural myths associated with the hijras in this sense acts as a survival strategy for them in the modern
Indian sociocultural milieu. Their presence cannot be denied, yet officially their presence is not recorded. Although the contemporary Indian social system adheres to the Western pattern of hetero-normative gender binary, yet it perhaps looks back to the past and consequently the hijras are offered a path for survival -- confer blessing and earn your living.

The hijras do not have the right to vote, marry, own a driving license or claim employment. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh, the high court struck down the election of Kamala Jaan as the mayor of the municipal corporation of Katni. The court’s logic was that since Kamala Jaan was not a ‘woman’, she could not contest the seat which was reserved for women. Thus, those who possess culturally unintelligible bodies like the hermaphrodites are compelled to adhere to the codes of gender structure or else they will be left ‘nowhere’ in the arena of ‘human’ world.

Living communally, usually with a guru, they inhabit the dark corners of towns and cities in India, detached from the society of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. They are not allowed any ‘legitimate’ space within the gender structure. Although the hijras are thought to have the power to bless in occasions like marriage and child birth, these are paradoxically, activities that they cannot themselves take part in. Their subversive performance of gender identity tends to disrupt the binary heterosexual structure. A eunuch does not fit into the definitions of human beings provided by language. If one has to be a human being one has to be able to identify with the pronouns – he/she, the only two options provided by language. From the anatomical point of view, homosexuals are different from the hermaphrodites. In Serena Nanda’s work *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, we can get an account of the hijra lifestyle, their
religious life, sexuality and many others. From my reading of this book I have come to know that Bahuchara Mata is their patron goddess and her main temple is located in Gujarat. One of the major festivals of the hijra community is the Aravan festival which is celebrated annually in a town called Koovagam in Tamil Nadu. The story behind it is that warrior Aravan wanted to marry before his sacrifice but no woman came forward for fear of being widowed. So Lord Krishna transformed himself into a beautiful woman named Mohini and married him. On the following day Mohini mourned her husband’s death. Each year thousands of hijras visit Koovagam to symbolically marry Aravan.

Their presence is noticed in the epic *Mahabharata* which is a vast store house of Indian myths, archetypes, religious practices and beliefs. Recent studies (*The Tritiya Prakriti* Wilhelm, Amara Das:2007) have shown that the Vedic society was all encompassing and that the intersexed citizens were neither persecuted nor denied basic rights. The stigmatization of deviants developed later as a consequence of the influence of the Western structure of gender – the compulsory binary. In the *Mahabharata*, there are two transgender figures – Brihannala and Shikhandi. Even Arjuna, the powerful warrior leads the life of a eunuch for short span as Brihannala; Shikhandi becomes the instrument of the great Bhishma’s end.

While tracing their genesis, the hijras often refer to legends associated with Lord Rama (*The Tritiya Prakriti* Wilhelm, Amara Das:2007). The legend goes that Lord Rama was about to cross a river and enter into the forest to spend the fourteen years of his exile. All the people of his homeland accompanied him to the river. Then Rama asked all ‘men’ and ‘women’ to go back to their home. Some of the followers of Rama did not
return and they were excluded from the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. When Rama came back after fourteen years of exile, he was pleased by their devotion, blessed them and conferred on them the power to bless (or curse) others.

Dual gender figures in Hinduism provide for the hijras other sources of identification in a religious context. The deity Shiva’s *Ardhnareshwar* form is an amalgamation of the male and the female. Many Indian Gods seem to consider gender to be a fluid affair, often switching from one gender to another. The hijras or ‘people of the third sex’ are mentioned in the Vedic literatures of India. Recent research conducted in this area has shown that the hijras or people of the third sex were not denied the basic rights in the Vedic period and they were allowed to engage in all kinds of socially meaningful work. We may here refer to *Tritiya Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*:

> The Vedic society was all encompassing and each individual was seen as an integral part of the greater whole. Thus all classes of men were accommodated and engaged according to their nature... Gay men could either blend into society as ordinary males or they could dress and behave as females, living as transvestites. They were especially mentioned as being expert in dancing, singing and acting as barbers or hairstylists, masseurs and house servants (Wilhelm, Amara Das, 2007:5-6).

But in the modern Indian society or after the colonial period, the attitude of the Indian society towards these hijras seems to have undergone a drastic change. In the 19th century when Great Britain had established itself as a colonial power, and had taken hold of the Indian territories, homosexuality was referred to as a sin and this notion gradually becomes an indelible legacy of the colonial ‘Indian’ society. During the era of British Rule, authorities attempted to eradicate hijras whom they saw as “a breach of
public decency”. Anti hijra laws were imposed. Also during the British rule in India, the hijras were placed under Criminal Tribes Act (1871) and were thereby labeled as criminal tribes.

Consequently they were subjected to compulsory registration, strict monitoring and were stigmatized. But before the advent of the British they were provided employment facilities by the Muslim rulers. The hijras worked as guards of harems and were also appointed in the armed forces. But soon after, the social scenario changed and in the modern society they are seldom provided any space. In the contemporary social scenario, the eunuchs in India have virtually no safe spaces, not even in their families. They are renounced by their family and society. They are often exposed to brutal violence in public spaces, police stations, and even in their homes. For most of the hijras, the occupation of a sex worker is the only option since no one is willing to employ them because of their gender ambiguity. Even the law is biased against the hijras. The hijra community is deprived of several rights since Indian law recognizes only two genders. They do not have the right to vote, marry or claim employment and health benefits as a specific community, without submitting to being categorized within the male/female genders. In her work on the hijras, Serena Nanda (1999) emphasizes upon traditional Indian society’s tolerance for diversity. But in our present gender system, with its dichotomous and permanent gender categories, the hijras might well be rendered obsolete. In her sensitive work (1996), Zia Jaffrey endeavours to find answers to some vital questions related to the hijras and their living conditions in Indian society where they are considered ‘lucky’ and are yet ostracized. Gayatri Reddy’s illuminating work (2005) provides detailed accounts of religious practices and kinship structures of
hijra community. Reddy questions the representation of hijra identity that attempts to reduce them by simply visualizing their identity solely from the sexual or anatomical point of view. She argues that the hijras fabricate their selfhood from a complex framework of criss-crossing of gender, religion, kinship and class.

In the context of the Indian social scenario, the hijras are found to exist as a community aloof from the world of 'normal' man and woman. In other countries, the view of this communal life of the eunuchs is not to be found. They work together as members of a community by participating in dancing and singing performances. By dint of this collective work, they earn money for their survival. The unified group of the eunuchs, clad in sarees, entering marriage parties and other such occasions to perform dance establishes their identity in Indian socio-cultural milieu and thereby provides an opportunity for them to earn their living.

But at the same time, this act of representing themselves as members of a specific community alienates them from the 'mainstream' society and confers a queer identity on them: 'strange' creatures, male voices and big frames wrapped in sarees. Thus their act of living like a community, provides them an identity and simultaneously consolidates their alienation from the 'acceptable' or normal human identities – neither man nor woman or both man and woman.

Speaking about the socio-cultural discourse, we need to look into the gender dichotomy, since Indian society is mostly seen to adhere to the patriarchal set up; not only the hijras but the women are less prioritized. An interesting point to note here is that, the hijras identify with the females by imitating womanly mannerisms while they are in a position
to switch to any of the two gender options. They live under the garb of being females with the aid of dress and make-up, while they could have also comfortably imitated manly mannerisms. They often choose to identify with the ‘weaker’ section of the patriarchal set up. But again it is perhaps a very difficult task to categorise them because of the ambiguity that abounds in their identity. They often appear to be entities with male voice and female clothing.

Their dress code that defies the socially intelligible or ‘normal’ codes of dressing of the Indian society becomes the most important factor in determining their identity as people with a ‘perverse’ or ‘obscene’ taste. At this point it is worth noting that along with the other factors (like cultural values, norm, language, religion, law) that regulate gender identity in a specific socio-cultural milieu, the dress code or clothing is also a significant factor in determining one’s gender identity. Butler uses the concept of “drag” that suggests the idea of dressing up as a member of the opposite sex and performing a given role by which drag artists are subvert the ideas of gender fixity and challenges the “constitutive categories”.

It is clothing that provides us an opportunity to construct our self image and our gender identity. One’s way of dressing oneself determines his/her place in the social space. Thus dressing oneself according to the socially approved codes of dressing can provide social acceptance to a person while the contrary act may bring in severe consequences and can contribute a lot in declaring one to be a social outcast. It is the dress of a hijra that further complicates his/her identity. A homosexual male may hide his homosexual identity by dressing like a man and thereby get acceptance in the heterosexual world. Similarly a hijra could also dress and disguise as a man – with a male voice in male
clothes. But their act of violating this 'normal' code of dressing— a male voice in female clothes alienates him/her from the 'acceptable' genders of man and woman.

An example of the severe consequences of violating the normal codes of dressing can be seen in the Hindi film Tamanna (1997) directed by Mahesh Bhatt. Here the Hijra Tiku (actor Paresh Rawal as Tiku), is seen to be dressed like a 'man' in kurta and pyjama unlike the stereotypical hijras who wear sarees. Tiku adopts a girl child whom he names Tamanna (Pooja Bhatt), and brings her up with immense love and care. Tamanna also loves her 'father' Tiku very much. But Tiku encounters a tempest of hatred when he is compelled to dress like the stereotypical hijra so that he can earn money for his daughter’s studies. When Tamanna sees Tiku dressed like a hijra, she starts to hate him. Not just this, she begins to hate herself because of the fact that she was brought up by a hijra. All this happened, simply because of the clothes that her 'father' has to wear as a hijra. Tiku, inspite of being a hijra, enjoys the bliss of parenthood until it is disrupted by his act of dressing himself up.

Tiku’s act of dressing himself as a male provided him ‘acceptance’, love and reverence from his daughter. His daughter thought of him to be a male but the moment he violated the norm of dressing, he was stigmatized as a hijra— a ‘horrifying’, strange being who is not eligible to be the father (or mother) of human beings. Thus, dressing here becomes an extremely significant part of one’s gender identity.

It is perhaps possible to camouflage oneself by the aid of dress and find acceptance in the socio-cultural milieu in which one is situated. Thus dress and make-up become integral and embedded parts of their identity. It is the dress code and make-up that goes
a long way in constructing a strange kind of identity for the h'jras and establishes them
as separate community, different from common man and woman. While discussing the
significance of dress in the construction of gender identity or in performing one's
gender identity, we may once again refer to Judith Butler's concept of drag. Butler reads
gender in terms of performance and the very idea of performance itself rules out the
possibility of any kind of fixity. Performance suggests the idea of representation and
when applied to the world of gender, it tends to reshape gender by suggesting the very
idea of gender to be the re-presentation of the existing idea of gender categories that
confers 'human' identity on us\textsuperscript{5}.

Thus, in case of Tiku in the film \textit{Tamanna}, the conflict arises from the matter of
'wearing' a gendered identity. Wearing an acceptable gender identity provides social
space whereas wearing an unacceptable identity may denigrate one to the realm of
societal 'non-recognition'. Gender seems to be a kind of 'drag' indeed. One is capable
of switching from one gender to the other by the aid of clothes and what matters is to
switch to an 'acceptable' code of dressing.

Mahesh Dattani's play \textit{Seven Steps Around the Fire} deals with eunuchs who do not
have a place – either in language or in society. This play portrays Subbu (a gay man)
and Kamala (a eunuch) who lose their lives for entering into a 'wrong' wedlock.
Subbu, in trying to marry Kamala (dressed as a bride), in a sense tries to reinforce the
binary heterosexual structure, but since they engage in subversive performances – both
are performing their gender 'wrong' – they are not allowed any 'legitimate' space
within the gender structure.
Uma, a research scholar of sociology and an emissary from the ‘normal’ world of man and woman is found to be putting forward her steps to the ‘untrodden’ world of the eunuchs. ‘Untrodden’ in the sense that it is scarcely visited by people occupying privileged space in the society. Uma Rao is the wife of a police officer of high rank, the Superintendent of Police. She is conducting research on the hijras for the purpose of studying their status in the society.

Uma: The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable—marriage and birth—ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature (Dattani, 2000: 356).

Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire God, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, the blessings of ‘May you be the mother of a hundred sons’ (Dattani, 2000: 11).

In the ‘Indian’ cultural context, the hijras are thought to have the power to bless in occasions like marriage and interestingly this is an occasion where they cannot take part, since their subversive performance tends to disrupt the binary heterosexual structure. In my interview with the Hijras, I asked them about marriage and they answered that “…marriage is not for them”. God has selected them only for blessing others on their weddings and ‘happy’ moments like the birth of a male child. In a poignant tone of voice, the eldest Hijra or the Guru Haldhibai said to me that on days of the Ambubasi Puja, she went to the shrine of mother goddess Kamakhya and prayed for the welfare of the children of all other people although they are deprived of this ‘blissful’ privilege of begetting children.
A eunuch does not fit into the definitions of human beings provided by language. If one has to be a human being one has to be able to identify with the words – he/she, the only two options provided by language. According to Wittig (The Straight Mind and Other Essays, 1992) the personal pronouns ‘he'/she’ positions us within discourse as male or female and confers specific gender identities. Therefore the identity of the eunuch becomes highly problematic.

Munswamy, the constable is highly amused by Uma’s reference to the hijra Anarkali as ‘she’ because he prefers the term “it” for such ‘creatures’, thus emphasizing the unintelligibility of the eunuchs possessing ‘ambiguous’ bodies.

Uma: (referring to a hijra): “Will she talk to?”

Munswamy (chuckling): “She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn’t” (p.07).

If one ceases to be a he or she one seems to even cease to be a human being and become strange beings, because these are the words that locate us in the human world which remains under hegemonic gender structures. Monique Wittig, in her work The Straight Mind and Other Essays (1992) tries to look at the place in language where gender begins: the personal pronouns like ‘he’, ‘she’ put us within ‘discourse’ as male or female and impose specific gender identities on us. Similarly, Lacan in “Psychoanalytic Drives” suggests that “language subordinates the subject to its own orders. Instead of asserting self-sufficiency, the “I” within language can only know itself in terms of the other that recognizes the “I” (Lacan in Bristow, 88).
Their body violates the codes of ‘normal’ gender categories and this endangers their gender identity. They have a certain kind of ‘unintelligible’ body but it is also the performance that makes them more ‘strange’. It could only be a matter of performing—with a male voice, dressing up like a ‘man’ and be acceptable; or dressing like a ‘woman’ and engaging in a subversive performance, become a ‘strange’ creature. Dressing up and wearing make-up (which are indispensible for performance) are extremely important aspects of gender identity. The eunuchs do engage in it but their performance as women subverts the other performance as men and aggravates their strangeness—a male voice in female clothes.

The modes of dressing, behaving or performing their gender identity are in a sense exposing their gender ambiguity and thereby making them victims of social stigmatization. While talking about stigmatization of the eunuchs, we need to refer to Irving Goffman’s notion on stigma. In his text *Stigma*, Irving Goffman has tried to explore the problem of the “gap” between what a person ought to be (“virtual social identity”), and what a person actually is (“actual social identity”). Goffman’s insight on “stigma” focuses on the “dramaturgical interaction”, that takes place between ‘stigmatized’ people and those that are socially conferred the identity of ‘normal’.

According to Goffman, there are two types of stigma—“discredited stigma” and “discreditable stigma”. A “discredited stigma” refers to the situation where the actor’s difference from the ‘normal’ folk is evident or visible to the viewer or audience. In this regard, we can refer to the hijra identity. The hijra identity which is exclusively an element of the Indian socio-cultural milieu could be seen as a specimen of “discredited stigma”. Transgender people are there in almost every part of the world, but in India
they are seen to have put on a permanent identity as hijras that are subjected to social stigmatization and exclusion. The act of performing the signifiers that constitute this identity called the ‘hijra’ adds to their estrangement and make them evident subjects of social stigmatization.

The transgender people living in other parts of the world could engage in the kind of performance which can be termed as “discreditable stigma”. In other words they can conceal their gender identity beneath the veneer of a socially acceptable performance. Like the homosexuals they can escape from social stigmatization by performing their gender identity in a ‘normal’ mode. But the case is not same with the hijra identity, since it cannot conceal its difference from the ‘normal’ folk. Unlike other cultures, the hijra identity rather exposes their gender ambiguity – male voices in female’s look. On the other hand the homosexuals inhabiting Indian society, can conceal their sexual identity and can roam about amidst the ‘straight’, ‘normal’ folk as one of them. Thus we can say that what Goffman terms as “discredited stigma”, seems to be the consequence of a certain kind of performance when applied to the world of gender – a concealing, obliged performance to the binary or an exposing, non-conforming performance that can lead one to social exclusion and non-recognition. With the aid of dress and make-up, as I have stated earlier, one can easily camouflage oneself and thereby save oneself from “discredited stigma”.

In the play Seven Steps Around the Fire, we can see how dress and make-up can help in camouflaging one’s identity. The hijra Kamala is disguised as a beautiful bride. Uma says that by seeing Kamala and Subbu’s photo it cannot be said that Kamala is a hijra.
The photograph was that Mr. Sharma was after. A Polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamla had taken soon after their private wedding in some remote temple... A picture of Kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him. The poojari probably didn't know that Kamla was not a woman (Dattani, 2000: 41).

The film *Tamanna*, represents a Muslim hijra who is not a stereotype, dresses and behaves like a male. Tiku (Paresh Rawal) lives in human society with his best friend Salim, thus highlighting the fact that hijras can live with men and women. The film does not show any kind of sexual relationship between Salim and Tiku, breaking another stereotype. The climactic point arrives when Tamanna learns that Tiku is a hijra, and responds with the socially conditioned prejudice that allows no space for the “third” gender. Mahesh Bhatt, the director, has made two different kinds of representations of hijras in this film – including a group of “stereotypical” hijras also in his film. We are shown complex sides of a “hijra lifestyle”, one being more familiar than the other (Tiku) within Indian society. Bhatt has explored issues like parenthood, friendship and many more issues in relation to a hijra. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and the film *Tamanna* both try to project the Indian hijra in a different light, concentrating on the individuality of a eunuch rather than regarding them as the representatives of a particular group laden with myths and stereotypes. These cultural texts try to present the unusual story of individual hijras having their own qualities of head and heart that perhaps enables them to earn a new identity by transcending their group identity.
Yogesh Bharadwaj’s *Shabnam Mousi* (2005) is another film that represents the hijra community, portraying a community of hijras within their social/cultural ethos. Unlike Tiku in *Tamanna*, Shabnam is a stereotypical hijra in the sense that she cross-dresses, dances for a living, keeps long hair and lives with the hijra community. But like Tiku, Shabnam too is endowed with many positive qualities. Like Anarkali in Dattani’s play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Shabnam is accused of murdering another hijra (her mother). Shabnam manages to escape from prison where she is brutally beaten up and sexually harassed by police. She has to confront severe situations that highlight society’s antipathy towards the hijras. Fighting against all odds of life, she later becomes a successful political figure, after overcoming various obstacles. The story of Shabnam is the story of a hijra proving “her” worth – a journey from despair to hope.

Rituporno Ghosh’s film *Chitrangada*, is also about performing one’s gender identity. In a very artistic manner Ghosh has tried to reveal the complexities of transgender life and gay identity. Ghosh attempts to highlight the issue of identity politics in a very subtle manner, he also seems to be questioning the gender categories and as such in the course of the film, it is stressed that Chitrangada, the princess would have to behave like a ‘man’ by exhibiting ‘manly’ qualities. Since Chitrangada was brought up as a ‘son’ by her father who had no sons or heir to the throne, she has to perform herself with ‘manly’ qualities. While discussing the films *Tamanna* and *Sabnam Mousi*, I would also like to provide a brief sketch of the representation of eunuchs in Indian cinema in order to notice the changes that have occurred with the passage of time. Besides Indian cinema, the eunuchs have also been represented in Hollywood movies, where we can see several sympathetic and sensitive representations of the eunuch life. In this regard, the
noteworthy films are *Between the lines*—India’s Third Gender, Bombay Eunuch, Butterfly Sword, Eunuch of Western Palace, Harem, Better than Chocolate, Big City Blue, Buffalo Girls, Just like a Woman, Lai Shi, China’s Last Eunuch, The Half Naked Truth and some others. These films have represented several facts and colours of eunuch life in a very sensitive and touching way. Since my area is basically concerned about Indian drama and film texts that are entrenched in Indian cultural milieu, I would like to limit myself by focusing basically on the representation of eunuchs in Indian cinema.

In the mainstream Hindi cinema, eunuchs have mostly been represented as clowns rather than as ‘human beings’ with head and heart. The most common scenario of the portrayal of hijras in bollywood movies are as cross dressed ‘males’ with hoarse voices, singing, clapping hands and teasing heroes, heroines or villains. During the “Golden Era” of Bollywood, i.e. the period from mid 50s to mid 70s eunuchs were generally shown as companions to heroines. They are often portrayed as buffoons kept for arousing laughter among the audiences. But now the scenario has changed due to the experimental efforts of film makers like Mahesh Bhatt, Yogesh Bharadwaj, Rituporno Ghosh and few others. They have tried their best to break the stereotypical way of portraying eunuchs as bizarre creatures devoid of head and heart or ‘humane’ qualities.

If we have a look at the old Hindi films, we can see that actors, mainly low rated comedians, would indulge in cross dressing and in a deliberate attempt tries to look more bizarre so that they would not be mistaken as woman but would be viewed as eunuchs – freak creatures that should evoke ‘grotesque’ laughter through their imitation of grotesque acts that are taken to be the mannerisms of a eunuch. Although low graded
comedians took part in executing such roles, we can also see that big stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Govinda and some others have performed the roles of eunuchs. But the majority of such actors have performed eunuch roles in a highly demeaning manner. The legendary bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan could be found to have mimicked the hijra role in a very demeaning way. We can see his performance as a eunuch in the famous hit song “Mere Angane Mein” from the film *Lawaaris* (1981) produced and directed by Prakash Mehra. It seems that the producer and director has given extra efforts to make the megastar look as ugly, repulsive and bizarre as possible in that song. If we observe the performance of the Mega star Amitabh Bachchan in this song, we can see that he is performing some exaggerated gestures putting on flamboyant make-up. From his performance, it could be surmised that he is not trying to act like a woman but trying to mimic the mannerisms of a eunuch in order to perhaps arouse laughter but it seems to be a grotesque comedy – an act of imitating hijras in a disrespectful manner.

It was only in the film *Kuvara Boap*, the great comedian Mehmood, represented the eunuchs in a somewhat respectful manner for the first time in the history of Bollywood cinema. After 1991, their occurred a change in the act of portraying eunuchs in a disregardful way. As I have mentioned earlier we will have to confer credit to some offbeat movie makers like Mahesh Bhatt, Yogesh Bharaduraj, Kalpana Lajmi, Rituporno Ghosh and a few others who have tried their best to portray the eunuchs in a ‘humane’ way. They have represented the eunuchs as human beings having emotions, thinking power and several qualities of head and heart that are often thought to be part of the ‘human world’ from which the eunuchs are excluded.
Mahesh Bhatt, for the first time, projected the veteran actor Sadashiv Amrapurkar as ‘Maharani’ in the film Sadak. Although the role of Maharani was a negative role (the leading villain of the movie), yet we may say that by the representation of this role, Mahesh Bhatt has tried to break the stereotypical image of the hijra in Bollywood movies as a headless clown.

Mahesh Bhatt deserves credit for his much appreciated film Tamanna, in which Bhatt has tried to explore several crucial aspects of human life in terms of the eunuch Tiku. It has been proclaimed that the film Tamanna is based on the real life story of a eunuch named Tiku and this transition of role from real life to reel life was very successfully performed by the versatile actor Paresh Rawal. The character of Tiku has highlighted the matter that often people born as men may be physical embodiments of manhood but in his heart and soul, he may be a transgender, having no clear gender borders – amalgamation of both and specifically none. That is perhaps the reason behind a eunuch’s condition of having no lands- Tiku refused to be a stereotypical hijra and ‘he’, was not totally accepted in the ‘normal’ ‘human’ world although he had his friends and well wishers like ‘Salim’ a representative of the ‘normal’ world. The character of Tiku is discussed later in this chapter.

Rituporno Ghosh is another noteworthy film maker who has tried to transcend the gender binary. His famous film Chitrangada is about representation of gender. Rituporno Ghosh has represented very successfully a gender role that transgresses or undermines the binary structure of gender. The film is based on Rabindra Nath Tagore’s Chitrangada. It is a meta-movie, where we can see a performance within the performance. Ghosh is here trying to instruct some actors to perform Chitrangada.
the movie goes on, we can see that Ghosh is instructing the actors to perform the role of Chitrangada in a masculine way. He says that Chitrangada the princess was raised more as a ‘male’ since her father desired a male child but had none. We find Ghosh directing the actor who is performing the role of Chitrangada to perform in a ‘manly’ way. So this act could be viewed as an act of transgressing the binary- a ‘female’ could acquire ‘manly’ qualities. Gender role is here shown to be an act of performing.

*Chitrangada* is a Bengali language film, written and directed by Rituporno Ghosh, a versatile Indian film maker. The film is centred around the act of staging Tagore’s *Chitrangada* which is based on the story of princesses Chitrangada from the Indian epic Mahabharata. In this film, Rituporno Ghosh plays the role of a choreographer who is going through a crisis of identity regarding gender. Rituporno Ghosh plays the role of Rudra Chatterjee who is portrayed to be an individual who leads his life against the ‘normal’ flow of social convention.

The element of ‘meta-theatre’ could also be seen in this film. Rudra (Rituporno Ghosh) is seen to be preparing a team of actors and dancers to perform Tagore’s Chitrangada. In the course of his preparation for staging Chitrangada, Rudra meets Partho (Jishu Sengupta) who is a drug addict. This meeting gradually develops into a deep passionate love affair between these two ‘men’? They decide to adopt a child but they have to face a problem because the law does not allow same sex couples to adopt children. Having faced a lot of troubles, Rudra Chatterjee (Rituporno Ghosh) decides to undergo a sex change surgery but the film compels us to think that will the sex change surgery put an end to the troubles of an individual’s life who does not want to comply with the binary structure of gender?
Having talked about Rituporno Ghosh’s *Chitrangada*, we can look at Mani Ratnam’s film *Bombay*. In this film also we can see a non-stereotypical representation of the hijra. In this movie, there is a touching scene based on the communal riots of Mumbai that occurred in 1992-93, in which we can see that it is a hijra who provides shelter to the twins born out of a Hindu father and a Muslim mother. Through this scene, Moni Ratnam has perhaps tried to show that a hijra who is often denied the identity of a ‘normal’ human being, proves to be more ‘humane’ than the ‘normal’ folk. In this riot scene, it has been shown that it is only the hijra who acted in a ‘humane’ way by providing shelter to the babies regardless of their religion or community.

Kalpana Lajmi’s *Darmiyan* is also an offbeat movie that tries to explore the inner recesses of a eunuch’s life. It is based on the relationship of an actress mother and her eunuch child, performed by Kiron Kher and the late Nirmal Pandey respectively.

Other noteworthy films produced in the recent times are *Sabnam Mousi* and *Welcome to Sajjanpur* that represents eunuchs as clean politicians that mirrors the real life situation of eunuchs winning elections like Kamlajaan. It is shown in these movies that the politicians are often corrupt and greedy but the eunuchs could prove to be clean politicians devoid of greed since they do not have a family. The film *Sabnam Mousi* is discussed in this chapter.

Kalpana Lajmi’s *Darmiyan* is a fantastic film that portrays among other sensational issues, the situation of a hijra who is thwarted even by his own mother and not to speak of the rest of the world. In the film Kiron Kher plays the role of actress Zennat Begum, the mother of a eunuch or hijra (Immi), according to Indian terminology. The plot of the
film presents Zennat Begum (Kiron Kher) as a successful film star who has everything including a big name and fame. An unfortunate turning point comes to her life when she discovers that her son Immi (Arif Zakharia) is a eunuch or hijra. Zennat begins to neglect her son to a great extent until her mother comes and takes the child into her custody.

Immi receives parental affection and care from 'his' grand-mother. Immi grows up within shelter of his grand-mother and eventually his mother Zennat Begum loses her position in the film industry as well as her lover. These failures push her into the grasp of depression and she becomes an alcoholic. Ultimately it is Immi who tries his best to help his troubled mother. He tries to renew her self confidence. Along with this horrible situation of a mother avoiding and neglecting her child for being a hijra, another social injustice against the hijra is portrayed in the film through the act of depriving Immi of 'his' adopted child. The social structure and the acceptable social beings like Zeenat Begum and Chitra could be seen to have made all provisions for making the eunuch's life hopeless as well as hapless. They tried to render Immi absolutely lonely in this vast world. Zeenat shunned Immi thereby depriving 'him' of parental love and care and Chitra snatched away Immi's adopted child thereby depriving him of filial affection. A family life which is perhaps the basic requirement of every 'human being' is denied to Immi. Immi's own mental strength, good qualities of head and heart and the love and care of Immi's grand-mother that enabled Immi to continue to exist amidst a cruel world and enabled him to grow up to be an individual who has the potential to pull someone (his mother) out of the marsh of depression without paying heed to the fact that she has wronged her. The plot of the movie acquaints us with a grim 'reality' – the hijra
is ‘unacceptable’ not only to the society at large but also to its own mother who has given birth to it.

With the projection of such kind of pathetic and even traumatic situations of a mother neglecting a child because it is born with a hermaphroditical physical condition, Lajmi has tried to highlight the issue of hijras’ banishment from their families. The film also tries to invite our attention to a very significant issue that someone’s physical condition of not being able to fulfill the norm of the gender binary that confers the tag of ‘human beings’ on us (by identifying us to be either a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’), is not an appropriate yardstick to label that individual as one who falls outside the term ‘human being’. Inspite of being unable to conform to the ideal of ‘human being’ as constructed by the social norm, Immi proves to be more ‘humane’ than the other characters in the film. It is Immi the hijra or eunuch who tries to help his distressed mother whereas the other ‘normal’ (?) ‘human beings’ – Zeenat Begum who shunned her own child, Chitra (the actress who succeeded Zeenat Begum, snatched her lover and is also instrumental in depriving Immi of his adopted child) and some others portrayed in the film proves to be devoid of the qualities like mercy, compassion, honesty, love that are regarded to be ‘humanly’ attributes.

Through this wonderful contrast between the ‘normal’ ‘human beings’ and the eunuch who falls outside the ‘human’, the film has compelled us to seek the answer to a poignant question – who is more humane, an eunuch or a woman? This film is another offbeat movie that represents the condition of the hijra inhabiting the socio-cultural milieu of India that adheres to the Western pattern of binary gender. The portrayal of the hijra Immi in the film Darmiyan differs from the traditional Bollywood style of
representation of the hijras as mere clowns that arouses laughter. Immi is a fully
developed character who represents several shades of personality. It is Immi who
ultimately proves to be of worth unlike the other characters – Zeenat Begum, Chitra and
others who either becomes prey to depression, alcoholism (like Zeenat Begum) or
indulges in unfair means to fulfill one’s selfish motives (like Chitra). Immi proves to be
mentally more stronger and better than these ‘human beings’.

*Bombay Eunuchs* (2001) is another documentary where we can find a sympathetic
portrayal of the pathetic decline in status of the Indian hijra. Colonial modernity or the
Western pattern of binary gender that stepped into Indian cultural milieu with the
advent of the British, the hijras were deprived of their earlier position in the Hindu
society as individuals having divine power to bless or curse. The film shows how the
hijras were gradually pushed to the state of being social outcasts, alienated from their
families and reduced to begging and prostitution for survival. Many hijras are dying due
to AIDS.

The film offers a concise history of the hijras who were regarded to be an auspicious
presence in occasions like child birth, marriage and other religious rituals in the Indian
socio-cultural milieu except for the Northeastern region of India. This film tries to
penetrate deep into the world of the hijras. The world of the hijras has traditionally been
inaccessible to the journalists and hence the existence of the Bombay eunuchs is an
enigmatic issue. As the film starts, we can see that Meena, a hijra guru or leader is
allowing the filmmakers to enter into their cocooned world in the hope of getting some
exposure that would help in improving their condition.
Meena, a stubborn individual with strong determination is holding together a large family of beggars and prostitutes. In the early scenes of the film, this family of hijras inhabiting the Bombay slum seems to be happy and stable. But when the filmmakers return to this family after a gap of eight months, they find that the family is not functioning properly. Most of the younger hijras have become sick and the family is financially very weak. Everything has changed including Meena who refuses to cooperate with the filmmakers any more.

This documentary is narrated by its producer Alexandra Shiva who directed with Sen Mac Donald and Michelle Gukovsky, ends with the portrayal of Meena and her group making a living as debt collector. This film highlights the important issue of the decline in status of the hijras due to the impact of Western modernity or what we may call colonial modernity. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter the Vedic society granted space to the third gender who is neither 'man' nor 'woman', but along with the change of time and with the advent of Mughals and finally the Britishers, their position in the Indian society has undergone a drastic change. Once upon a time the legendary hero Arjuna of Mahabharata changed his gender for a certain time and became a transgender Brihannala. But gradually the scenario has changed. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, due to the influence of other cultures that entered the domain of Indian cultural milieu, with the entry of Mughals and Britishers, the Vedic pattern of gender tolerance or social recognition of all types of gender categories was replaced by the Western model of binary gender. The hijras or the third gender which is exclusively an element of the Indian cultural milieu have started to face intense stigmatization and now they are
inhabiting some dark corners, hiding themselves from the eyes of the ‘mainstream’ society that visualizes them as queer misfits.

To conclude the analysis of the representation of hijra or transgender characters in Indian cinema, we can look at some photographs from the movies – *Lawaaris, Sabnam Mousi* and *Chitrangada*. These photographs show the drastic change of Bollywood’s attitude towards the representation of hijra or transgender characters. In the film *Lawaaris*, the megastar Amitabh Bachchan is given a grotesque look while in the subsequent films like *Sabnam Mousi* and *Chitrangada*, the actors Asutosh Rana and Rituporno Ghosh respectively are represented in a way that tells us that the hijras or transgender people are not mere clowns meant for arousing grotesque laughter. They have their own stories packed with emotions, qualities of head and heart like common human beings. The photographs that highlight this issue are given in the next two pages:

Amitabh Bachchan in *Lawaaris*. The actor is made up to look bizarre
Amitabh Bachchan in *Lawaaris.* The actor is projected with a grotesque image to arouse laughter.
Ashutosh Rana in *Sabnam Mousi*. The actor is represented as a transgender in a decent way.

Rituporno Ghosh in *Chitrangada*. The actor is represented with a beautiful look.

After the above discussion that focuses on the hijra identity with the aid of theoretical and textual inputs it would be relevant to present an account of the interview or conversation that I was able to have with the hijras in Guwahati. The questionnaire is included in the Appendix. This firsthand experience provided me with an opportunity to observe the marginalization and stigmatization of non-normative gender categories that has been discussed with the help of the theories and texts.

Although I am a student of English literature and my research work is conducted within its parameters, my area of study regarding gender issues makes it imminent for me to
bring in interdisciplinary inputs, especially from sociology and history. This is how I have situated the hijras of India with regard to the stigmatization and social exclusion of those who fail to fit into the normative ideas of gender and as a variation within the system that tends to challenge the essentialized notion of gender. Having read about the Hijra lifestyle from several sources that I have mentioned in my review of literature and elsewhere, I still found it important to carry out an actual conversation and fieldwork that would enable me to get a glimpse of the living conditions of the hijras.

With this aim in view, I managed to gather information about their dwelling place. They live at a place called Kalipur, near the crematorium at Guwahati, in Assam. I went to their place for the first time on June 23, 2013 and found that they were living in extreme squalor, in very poor conditions. Our conversation could not take place on that day, as they had to go to Kamakhya temple on account of Ambubasi puja. It became just an introductory visit. Being asked their names, an interesting aspect of their identity was revealed. They all used the term “Kinnar” as their surname. The term “kinnar” (in Hindi) signifies a hermaphrodite – neither man nor a woman. This immediately reminds us of Foucault’s History of Sexuality, where he said that sexuality has become the single most important index of ‘human’ identity. Their existence or identity seemed to be nothing but their hermaphroditical state of being: something other than man or woman.

On June 28, 2013, I again visited their place along with my husband, son and one of my fellow scholars. We reached Kalipur at around 4 o’clock and found the Hijras cooking food. It was raining at that time and their roof was dripping. The house was very small and worn out. They were cooking their food in the dripping verandah with firewood. The entire atmosphere was miserable. They offered us three chairs to sit but it was very
uncomfortable since the roof was leaking rain water. We had a conversation with them for about one and half hours and confirmed many of things that I had already read about: their marginalized existence; a life full of hardship and woes; all things secretive, furtive and shrouded. I have reproduced some photographs in this thesis that attempts to visualize their almost sub-human living conditions. The conversation we had revealed that they are deprived of some of the basic ‘human’ rights like the right to food (they are not entitled to a ration card), right to vote, right to education. In other words, they are punished by social banishment for not being part of the normative design of ‘human’ gender. Their deprivation and pathetic existence demonstrates the severe consequences of confronting the binary as non-conformists.

When we visited the house of the Hijras at Kalipur on June 23, 2013, we found several hijras, all literally leading a life of alienation from the 'normal' world of man and woman. They were living at a secluded place – in a bleak house as if to hide themselves within a cocoon, from the eyes of the world that would visualize them as 'shameful' 'misfits'.

Dimple Kinnar, one of the hijras told us that their place was full of guests who had come there on account of the Ambubasi Puja at Kamakhya Temple. Regarding their religious faith, they told us that they are Hindu and they worship Mother Goddess Kamakhya. They knew about Bahuchara Mata (Goddess of the Hijjras) but in Assam they worship only Maa Kamakhya. One of them could speak in Assamese and s/he told me that she was Assamese. This hijra was very beautiful like the character of the beautiful eunuch Kamala depicted in the play Seven Steps Around the Fire. On our second visit on 28th June, we found three Hijras – Haldhibai Kinnar, Dimple Kinnar and
Kajal Kinnar. Haldhibai Kinnar was the eldest member of the family and s/he was about 56 years old. S/he was the Guru or head of the house. Dimple was about 45 years old and Kajal's age was near about 35. They offered us three chairs to sit and drinking water. They treated us like guests. Haldhibai the Guru placed my one year old son on her lap and blessed him. It is said that they demand money for offering blessing but they did not charge anything from us. They said that we were their guests and so they were offering their blessing as gifts.

During our conversation, I asked them about their place of origin and their family backgrounds. They replied that they did not know anything about their family or parents. They said that their first memories are those of performing dance or learning how to dance in the house of their Guru. Therefore, for them the Guru is everything – their parents, their God and also interestingly their “pati parameshwara” – some of them put sindoor in the name of their Guru. I showed them Serena Nanda's book *Neither Man Nor Woman* and told them that it was about people like them. They looked at the pictures incorporated in the book with great interest. I asked them whether they could read or write and they replied that they were illiterate. Nobody has ever thought about their education. Their Guru and all other people with whom they grew up are also illiterate. Since they lead a secluded life, they have never thought of going to school which is again a social institution for normal men and women. They revealed that they do not have the right to vote and no ration cards. They are denied the basic democratic 'human' rights to vote, receive education and food. They cannot partake of the governmental schemes designed for the under privileged people. They earn their living by performing dances and offering blessings on auspicious occasions like child birth.
(male child) and marriage. In Assam, their income might be a little less compared to the rest of India because the Assamese cultural milieu is not accustomed to the tradition of hijras offering blessings on auspicious occasions.

Since they cannot beget children, I asked them how their community grows. As an answer to my question they said that they accept people who are hijras and who want to lead the life of a hijra. Regarding adoption of children, they said that if they get some orphans they adopt them and bring them up. They educate them and later on arrange their marriage. They said that they do not know why God has punished them with such a life and by doing such kind of noble work (bringing up a child), they hope to earn God’s blessing. They seemed to be fond of children. In the film Tamanna, the hijra Tiku is seen to be very fond of his/her adopted daughter whom s/he finds in a garbage tank. If we refer to a legal aspect of the marginalization of the hijras in India, Section 337 of I.P.C rendered the hijra incapable of adopting or bringing up a child. But this seems to be quite an unfair policy because a hijra might have parental affections for a child. The guru Haldhibai Kinnar told me with moist eyes that they pray for the well being of everybody’s children although they do not have the luck to beget their own.

Following my reading of Dattani’s play Seven Steps Around the Fire (where the beautiful eunuch Kamla attempts to enter into wed-lock with Subbu, a gay man) and Serena Nanda’s book Neither Man Nor Woman, I inquired about the concept of marriage in their society. Although Serena Nanda speaks about hijras marrying other men, in a clear answer to my query, they replied that they do not marry. However, some of them wear sindoor in the name of their Guru who they regard as their guardian and their God.
About their wearing a woman’s attire, make-up and ornaments, they told us that they are hijras and so “they are like that”. This is again an entry into a stereotype. Although they are ‘other’ than the socially approved gender stereotypes – man and woman – they follow a different kind of stereotype: that of a hijra in the Indian social context. The Indian social structure provides them a stereotypical gender role which is other than man or woman but as Foucault has said, there is perhaps no ‘outside’ to the power structure in his famous work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (1976).

The hijra identity represents something other than the normative categories of binary gender; nevertheless they are also in a sense part of the binary structure. In spite of being the other to the binary, they try to identify with the ‘second’ gender (female) by overtly imitating womanly mannerisms – not being able to dare to be a part of the male world located within patriarchy that visualizes man as the agency on whom power is vested. The hijra identity then, is in a sense reinforcing the binary despite being outside the given structure.

In contrast to this stereotypical structure of the hijra culture is Tiku as portrayed by Mahesh Bhatt. The character of Tiku in *Tamanna* is a non-stereotypical hijras who dresses like men and lives amidst ‘human’ society. It is the outward appearance of the hijras that enhances their ‘strangeness’ and alienation from the society. Their gender identity is further complicated by their ‘peculiar’ way of performing or representing themselves before the social world.

My interaction with the hijras enabled me to observe firsthand, their social exclusion, their marginalization, and the denial of basic rights to them. In this chapter, I have tried to incorporate theory, drama, film texts and an interview of the Hijras that highlights
their location in the margins of society – born hermaphrodites or those who fail to fit into the socially acceptable categories of gender. Life becomes very difficult for those who are other than the stereotypical notion of man and woman. The hijras are simply ‘different’ from the acceptable gender roles and as such they are marginalized and stigmatized or taken to be social outcasts on the pretext that they are ‘abnormal’, ‘queer’ freaks not eligible to inhabit human society. Within the scope of ‘normal’ comprehension, the image of a hijra is that of a ‘strange’, ‘terrifying’ creature – huge male figures clad in sarees, make up, ornaments. Truth be told, I too was scared of coming into close proximity with the ‘weird’ hijras. It was my guide who provided me with the courage to enter into their world; and when I met them my unease – born out of being a comfortable member of the normative social structure – changed completely. They behaved in a very polite manner and treated us nicely as guests. They did not demand any money from us, and in fact, the guru blessed us and gave us a coin which they believe would bring us good luck.

Although in the theoretical domain, gender essentialism has encountered various challenges or criticisms, yet the idea that gender is not simply the expression of essence but a social construct or a kind of performance where individuals are required to perform the existing norm of gender has not been able to consolidate itself in praxis in the socio-cultural domain. Consequently those who are different from the majority are often marginalized and are either made to conform to the ideal forms of gender identity or to lead an isolated life amidst the crowded society.

In the next few pages some photographs are given that were taken during the field work.
Fig. 1 Haldhibai Kinnar (carrying my son Araydhya) along with Dimple Kinnar.
Fig 2: Haldibai, Dimple and Kajal blessing me.
Fig: 3 Kajal cooking food at a very unhygienic place.
Fig 4: Haldhibai looking at Serena Nanda’s book *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* 1990.
End Notes

1. In *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses the constructedness of sexuality and gender identity. His investigation highlights the politics of making sexuality the most important part of human identity. To be a human one needs to be of a certain sex following the existing norm of gender identity. He shows how in the 19th century, homosexuality came to be seen as a sin that needs confession and redemption according to Christian religious codes.

2. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault focuses on the constructedness of the norm. As a model for analysis he looks at the Greek society and shows how the concept of morality and the norm keeps on changing along with the change of time.

3. Monique Wittig, in her work *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992), discusses the idea of 'human' subjects being constituted by language. She talks about the intricate relationship that exists between language and gender identity. In order to be called a human being, one needs to be defined by the pronouns – 'he' or 'she'. If one does not have a place in language, one cannot have a place in the human world also.

4. In the epic *Mahabharata*, two transgender figures are portrayed – Brihannala and Shikhandi. During the time of his exile, Arjuna (the third Pandava) disguised himself as a eunuch.

5. In her thought provoking work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the concept of drag as a parody of the essentialized notion of gender as a fixed phenomenon. Drag
suggests that with the aid of dress and make-up, it is possible to switch from one gender category to the other. Therefore, the notion of gender as a fixed structure could be challenged in favour of the idea of gender as an act or performance, where outward appearance and not some 'inner' essence is important.

Work Cited


