



Identity and Hijras

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I try to present that in Indian binary gender system, the notion of reproductive essentialism is predominant, and is the ultimate rationale based on which each of those categories and 'made-up' identities like man-woman dwell upon.

KEYWORDS : Hijras, Sexual abstinence, Heteronormativity

Introduction

A person's identity, as per modern social science understanding, is conceived as being the combination of multiple factors such as age, gender, sexuality, status and personhood. Each of these are made up of 'categories', which are taken up by us in our day-to-day life. Young or old, male or female, straight or gay, etc. - these are the choices available to us, in our society, and these are the positions that make us who we are. Often these notions are perceived and presented as unchanging, eternal, and universal.

In that way, the essentialist idea on sex and gender is very much articulated in both the Western and Indian philosophy and social sciences, though differently. Indian history and philosophy, dominated by the Hindu culture, recognises binary gender system, and this idea of two complementary yet contrasting sex and a consequent gender forms the basis for the society's understanding on every aspect of human life.

In this essay, I try to present that in Indian binary gender system, the notion of reproductive essentialism is predominant, and is the ultimate rationale based on which each of those categories and 'made-up' identities like man-woman dwell upon. Reproductive essentialism, more specifically heterosexual essentialism believes that the marriage and procreation between humans with complementary and interdependent sexual organs (i.e. penis and vagina in this case) is the 'only "natural" means of perpetuating the human race.

Theoretical Backing

Before moving on to the ritual of emasculation and the notion of sexual abstinence, I would like to delve into the sociological literature on gender identities for theoretical grip to proceed any further. One sociologist who has written more stringently than others about the nature of identity is the French sociologist Michel Foucault. Foucault argued for a theory of discursive practice in which identity becomes important to rearticulate the relationship between subject and discursive practices. In other words, identity emerges in an examination of how discursive practices can create differing notions of the subject and subjectivity (1980:135). A grounding on Foucauldian framework is helpful in examining different axes of identities that serve to construct the social world and personhood of hijra.

TButler, in her earlier *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, writes that all gender is necessarily an 'imitation' for which there is no original. She observes that the "hegemonic power of heteronormativity produces all forms of the body, sex, and gender". Heteronormativity refers to the popular belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (specifically man and woman) with natural roles in life, i.e., an essentialist view on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or other group characteristics that they are fixed traits, discounting variation among group members as secondary. Heteronormativity asserts that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation or only norm, and states that sexual and marital relations are only fitting between people of opposite sexes. Consequently, a "heteronormative" view is one that involves relates biological sex,

sexuality, gender identity and gender roles into a common shared framework.

The Hijra Identity

With Butler's view that the gender is an imitation that is neither biologically innate nor socially constructed, and does not exist in reality, let us analyse what is a hijra identity and how it is constructed (or exist). A general definition would say that hijras are predominantly male, in the western view of gender, and have usually gone through a process of ritual castration. They dress and act as women, though particularly unfeminine women, and actively engage in prostitution (Gilchrist, 1999:60). They are defined negatively rather than positively, thus they are not part man and part woman, but neither male nor female (Nanda, 1990). But all these definitions fall short in some way or the other in accounting for the whole diversities within the hijra. The hijra also include hermaphrodites and women who are unable to reproduce. In fact, those born as females but feel themselves as males and wanted to become males are totally ignored into the hijra institution.

Hijra identity is often subsumed under the umbrella term of transgenders. This is very different from trans and intersexed people who do not relate to the hijra identity. Being transgender is a more fluid identity vis-à-vis being hijra and may include a variety of other identities that are not guided by strict community norms and traditions. It may include persons who are transvestites or those who like to cross-dress; transsexuals or those people who wish to undertake sex reassignment surgery; people who call themselves she-males which is a body type under a popular category in the pornography industry; and those who call themselves kotis and are considered to be male bodies who are supposedly "effeminate" in nature and who switch between wearing male and female attires. The hijra community functions much like a caste. They have communal households; newly formed fictive kinship bonds, marriage-like arrangements; and seven nationwide "houses," or symbolic descent groups, with regional and national leaders, and a council.

There is a hierarchy of gurus and disciples, with expulsion from the community a possible punishment for failure to obey group rules. Thus, although living on the margins of society, hijras are empowered by their special relationship with their goddess and each other and occupy an accepted and meaningful place in India's social world. We can observe that the imitation of the respected behaviour and the hijra culture is the important aspect of living in a hijra world.

Emasculation as 'ritual'

The emasculation process is seen as connected with the so-called cultural definition of the hijra as neither man nor woman; and as Nirvan, which stands for rebirth, is said to be the initiation of being a true Hijra. Serena Nanda's ethnographical account provides a detailed description of the gruesome emasculation ceremony and the many rituals that are associated to the whole process and aftermath.

The entire ritual is financed by guru for her chela and is a greatly celebrated ceremony which marks the removal of the curse of impotence as the Hijra is now born as a vehicle of the Mata's powers. A social sanctioning within the community occurs and the hierarchy within the community is such that having undergone the operation increases chances of upward mobility. Even for the guru, it is to her advantage to get the Chelas emasculated as this will increase the chances that the Hijra will remain in the community and reaffirm their sense of commitment.

This, with their psychosocial conduct as female that gets reconciled or resolved in a way through the mutilation of their male genitals that are useless to them.

Hijra Personhood

The prevalent notion of personhood in the west has been that of free, knowledgeable individuals, entire unto themselves. This mode of understanding has often been used to understand other societies, be they current non-western societies or those of the past. This, in effect, has thrust the modern western notion of personhood unwarranted into the past and onto non-western societies. With respect to hijra, gender in our cultural context is closely associated with reproduction as we saw earlier. Hijras are defined as neither male nor female because of their inability to reproduce. Men and women thus in contrast are defined as their gender through the act of reproduction, which in turn combines their personhood into a single body (Busby, 1997).

For instance, there are many hijras with a boyfriend and are referred to as relating to a panthi identity while hijras who practise sex work with male customers have a giriya identity (Reddy, 2005). Both panthis and giriyas are bodies with penises that never wear female attire and are always dressed in male clothing. This brings us to the partners of hijras who may be straight or gay. Furthermore, there may be a single partner or multiple partners with different sexual orientations and gender identities. It is here that we find more categories of transgender people as their trans role is often based on their assumed sexual positions, predominantly defined as "active" and "passive".

Reddy also analyses the elements of morality, culture, religion, kinship, desire, and pleasure in addition to sexuality and gender, on her investigation of hijra personhood. Such a study embeds the hijra in their social context, thereby providing a more complicated and nuanced version of subjectivity than has been provided previously. She even analyses the notions of modernity as opposed to traditional order, and locality versus trans-locality, on their impact on the subjectivity of the hijras, and comments that they all play in formulating the subjectivity.

Hijra – victim of Gender Injustice

While reading between the lines on Nanda's view on the institution of hijra as an 'accommodating' and 'empowering' system, several disagreements pop-up. In a Hindu social system, the right to sexuality and marriage is conferred only to the Brahmins, and that too, only men. Manusmriti clearly says that women born in Brahmin households are considered to be shudras. Symbolically, male sexual organ are considered to be superior and this has been established well by several mythological stories, including that of Shiva. Thus, in a framework of reproductive essentialism where the identity of an individual depends on his/ her reproductive functions, men and the masculine gender deserves to have absolute right over sexuality and marriage. Writings of Manu and Yagnavalkya state that eunuchs are not one among us and should be given harsh treatments.

Take the case of the classic analogy of an ascetic and the hijra with regard to sexual abstinence. Though both renounce their sexual power and fertility, and both are believed to confer certain powers by virtue of renouncing their sexuality, those powers that they gain (as claimed by Hindu mythologies) and the respect that the society offers them are totally unequal.

To conclude, Butler's insistence that gender is always ultimately about something else that is neither biologically innate nor socially constructed devalues, in our case, the experience of gender identity by hijra themselves, which is a profound ontological claim. To them, it is precisely about the realness and inalienability of that very identity upon which their lives revolve around, rather than about anything else that does not exist in reality. However, to say that their identity is only related to sexual mutilation and sexual abstinence, and that their personhood and social world is constructed through the emasculation of the male phallus, which itself represent a gender hegemony, is very futile and misleading.

The Hijra community in India is believed to number half a million, and all through our history, hijras are awfully suppressed and humiliated. It is undeniably true that they are not voluntarily stepped outside the mainstream social world, the usual bonds of kinship, caste, and religion. They are totally isolated and ignored, denied their absolute rights, opportunities, and thus they form a whole community with their own rituals and practices, and involve in the only occupation this society has for them – begging and prostitution.

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