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“Transgendered, castrated, effeminate”? Gender and Ambiguity in Cross-Cultural Perspective

1 The Song of the Hijra¹: Introduction

Sitting in the corner of a shop, a person wearing a *shalwar kameez* is singing a song while playing a *dholki* drum.² The singer’s throaty voice resonates; undisturbed by the noise of cars from the nearby street, the singer seems absorbed by the song and the rhythm of the drum. The person’s outward appearance and voice defy categorisation along the binary of male or female. The short video clip identifies the singer as a *khawaja sira*,³ and thus as a member of Pakistan’s hijra community. You can find people like the singer anywhere on the streets of the subcontinent. Around the cars stopped at the signal lights, at the Sufi shrines, and in the marketplace. The most distinctive elements one can observe about them are their flamboyant gaits and their characteristic claps. They are commonly perceived as men dressed as women. They are the hijras, a community of people in the subcontinent who have been described “as eunuchs, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, and gynomimetics; and as if this multiplicity of terms was not enough, they are also referred to as a people who are intersexed, emasculated, impotent, transgendered, castrated, effeminate, or somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional” (Lal 119).

Our project⁴, in which we focus on ambiguity in Orientalist discourse, has led us to detect perceptions of gender in multiple, overlapping, and transnational perspectives. These representations of ambiguous gender identities, as well as the existence of multilayered gender regimes, challenge binary constructions of gender that emerged in Europe across the eighteenth century. While ambiguity is in itself an ambiguous term that has variously been defined as vague, difficult to categorise, contradictory, doubtful, inconclusive, having double or multiple meanings, our research group defines ambiguity as being indeterminate (uneindeutig). Although the current renaissance of ambiguity studies has led to a rediscovery of William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), a study of stylistic ambiguity, the authors of the present article, subscribe to an understanding of ambiguity as a subject for cultural studies. According to Thomas Bauer (2011, 2021), cultural ambiguity is characterised

“by the fact that mutually exclusive norms may be valid at the same time” (Bauer 2021: 11). We take our cue from the colonial archive, and focus in particular on travel discourse, a genre that since its emergence in the early modern period was conceived of as a medium of distinction; exact and exhaustive observations of ‘other’ cultures were intended to generate knowledge and contribute to the growth of empire. Although travel literature consists of a plurality of voices, observations and perspectives, binary structures have been particularly persistent in Orientalist travel writing, in which the harem, as the alleged site of pleasure and perversion, held its place at the centre of the Western obsession with the Orient across the centuries.

There is one figure, however, that disrupts this set of gendered binaries: the figure of the eunuch. Eunuchs were individuals who were “created” through emasculation and employed as the guards of the harem in the Ottoman empire. These emasculated men, many of whom were of African origin, remained in the service of the Ottoman rulers until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 (Junne 146). In antiquity eunuchs had claimed a similar space and status. There is no historical evidence of when and how castration became a method to create these outsider bodies. In Achaemenid Persia, the eunuchs were found in almost every powerful man’s household in the east so much so that “eunuchs were present at the seats of power in the late Roman Empire, Christian Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire as well as Imperial China” (Llewellyn-Jones 21). This was also the case in Muslim courts where “eunuchs were not only the guardians of the *harim*, themselves physical symbols, like the veil, of the ideals of domestic seclusion; they were also neutral emissaries in a moral universe highly charged with sexual tension, a universe in which the forces of *fitna*, a word that signifies sexual temptation as well as political discord and civil strife, were seen as an omnipresent threat to the social and moral order” (Marmon 5–6).

In contrast to occasional references to the ‘monstrous bodies’ of eunuchs in travel reports of the early modern period, English travellers of the eighteenth century notice eunuchs merely in passing. In her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, written during her 1716–18 journey to Constantinople,

¹ An earlier version of this article is available as a podcast cf. www.uni-due.de/forschungsgruppe_2600/podcasts.php.

² “Pakistani khawaja sira [kusra] beautiful voice”. 9 January 2015. 15 August 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fz3v1NLIYI>.

³ The is an Urdu term for “eunuch”; other words used to identify members of this community are hijra, khusra, mukhanass, moorat etc. In the following, we refer to them as hijras.

⁴ The authors are members of the DFG-funded interdisciplinary research group “Ambiguity and Distinction: Historical and Cultural Dynamics” at the University of Duisburg-Essen, cf. www.uni-due.de/forschungsgruppe_2600/. Our project is titled “Unveiling Orientalism: Gender and Ambiguity in 18th century British Discourse on Travel” cf. www.uni-due.de/anglistik/postcolonial_studies/unveiling_orientalism.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu mentions brief encounters with eunuchs who met her at the harem entrance or “helped her out of the coach with great respect.” The Earl of Sandwich recalls palace gates being guarded by eunuchs during his 1738–39 *Voyage Round the Mediterranean*, and Aubry de la Motraye includes the important detail that eunuchs “have all that part cut from them, that distinguishes a man from a woman” in his *Travels through Europe, Asia, and into Parts of Africa* (1723–24). These brief acknowledgments of the presence of eunuchs in the Ottoman harem constitute one strand within the entangled discourse on gender, ambiguity and the Orient across the long eighteenth century. While travel writers noted their perceptions of Ottoman eunuchs in diaries and letters, Italian castrati appeared on the London stage in the Italian operas popularised by Handel. Initially mocked in contemporary reviews for their effeminate “squeaky” voices, they would eventually prompt fascinated audiences to wonder “is this a man or a woman singing”? Meanwhile, the expanding East India Company resulted in a growing British presence on the subcontinent, including colonial officials such as James Forbes, who lived in India from 1765 to 1784. In his *Oriental Memoirs* (1813–1815) Forbes records the medical examination of “disgusting” hermaphrodites; in a similar vein, other officials declared the customs of the hijra community as “revolting” (Lal 121). Eunuchs, castrati and hijras existed in different world regions, their experiences shaped by specific cultural and religious traditions. Their presence was perceived and recorded across different British genres and media, their distinct identities becoming increasingly blurred as their existence was perceived as deviant, defined solely by the act of castration. These processes of scrutinising ambiguous identities while categorising, and thus submitting them to a system of control and regulation, are the focus of our current research. By analysing the perception of ambiguous gender identities across empires, we bring them into ‘Shared Focus,’ a comparative perspective suggested by historian Almut Höfert (2018).

2 Ambiguity or Third Gender? Hijras in South Asia

Serena Nanda notes three important disjunctions “that exist between the cultural definition of the hijra role and the variety of individually experienced social roles, gender identities, sexual orientations, and life histories of the people who become hijras” (Nanda xix). One of these disjunctions is the fact that many hijras do not

perform at all, the second is the “cultural definition of hijras as neither men nor women and the experienced gender identity of many hijras as women”, and the third disjunction regards “the definition of the hijra role as based on sexual impotence due to an ascribed physical condition of intersexuality, and the reality that most hijras are not hermaphrodites” (Nanda xix–xx). Similarly, Vinay Lal draws attention to the ambiguous, complex and multifaceted conditions of hijras, who are also referred, by Serena Nanda, as neither man nor woman (Nanda 5). This often reiterated phrase, “neither man nor woman,” points to the ambiguation of difference.

In principle one can be a hijra or one can become one. This gap between being and becoming is the gap we explore in this article by engaging with debates on gender, sexuality, performativity and ambiguity. The ambiguous position of being neither one nor the other has motivated researchers and lawmakers to create a third gender category. In 2007, Nepal was the first South Asian country to assert the rights of the hijras. In 2009, the Pakistani Supreme Court accepted hijras as a “third gender.” The court ruling (*Khaki v. Rawalpindi*) specifies hijra bodies as follows: “it is to be noted that this class of the society has been neglected merely on account of *gender disorder* in their bodies [...]. Similarly, NADRA⁵ is required to adopt a strategy with the assistance of the concerned departments of the Govt. to record *exact* status in the column meant for male or female after undertaking some medical tests on hormones etc.” (*Khaki v. Rawalpindi* 2). Even in this landmark decision, celebrated by the Pakistani hijra community, the body of a hijra is imagined as “abnormal” as hijraness is equated with a “gender disorder” requiring the medical intervention of an authority. Hijras are once more categorized, in this case as a deviation from an implied norm; this treatment is justified by the pretext of providing “protection and respect” so “they can spend their life in respectable manner” (*Khaki v. Rawalpindi* 3). In Bangladesh, the year 2013 the hijras were acknowledged as the third gender when the Cabinet decided to “recognise the Hijra community and to reflect their presence in national identification documents and censuses” (Titir 1). Bangladesh, like Pakistan, struggles with defining the mechanisms for the identification of hijra bodies. Titir reports that “in the absence of any guidance on how to identify members of the Hijra community and Hijra culture, relevant authorities often resort to carrying out physical examinations to verify whether a person is an ‘authentic Hijra’” (Titir 2). Authorities thus resort to a method originally employed by British colonial administrators to identify hijras

⁵ NADRA (National Database and Registration Authority) is a Pakistani government agency responsible for the collection and tabulation of the familial and biometric database of the population.

as eunuchs.⁶ In India, a comparable judgement was made in 2014 in another landmark case, National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India & Ors. However, the terminology used in the court proceedings was 'transgender' which was equated with "Hijras, eunuchs, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas, Shiv-Shakthis etc." (National Legal Ser. Auth vs Union Of India & Ors 4).

It is important to note that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh inherited the British legal system after Independence, and it was within this system of British colonial law that hijras had been submitted to a regime of classification. Eighteenth-century British officials had expressed "disgust" on encountering and examining 'hermaphrodites' or 'eunuchs.' In the nineteenth century, however, these "eunuchs of India" were categorized as deviant and eventually declared "habitual criminals" in the infamous Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. In an attempt to govern these unruly bodies, "criminal and immoral 'eunuchs'" needed to be registered. To complicate matters even further, authorities discovered "various other persons with non-binary gender expression who were not castrated and did not describe themselves as 'Hijra'" (cf. Hinchy 167). 'Eunuch' thus became an increasingly ambiguous shorthand for multiple gender identities construed as deviations from a norm imposed by the colonial administration. 21st century court rulings across the subcontinent accepting hijras as 'neither man nor woman' thus explicitly undo the 1871 CTA while they implicitly continue colonial procedures of inspecting and controlling 'deviant' bodies. It is also important to note that this ambiguous non-binary state of 'neither/nor' leads to their categorization as the "Third Gender", a category that has recently been introduced in several European countries (Germany 2018, Netherlands 2018, Austria 2019, Spain 2021). Does this category of "Third Gender" accommodate or reject the ambiguity of the hijra community, which had, after all, been included in the Hindu ternary category of *Tritiya Prakriti* or Third Gender? Among others, the contemporary category deals with hijras in either/or scenarios. For example, one is either born a hijra or one can become a hijra later in life. Most of the time it is the realisation of one's inner-self as different from the physical-self that enables one to determine their belonging to the hijra community. Vern L. Bullough refers to hijras as "an Indian male cult" the members of which believe that "asceticism and renunciation of sexual desire are proven by total castration or emasculation in an operation called *nirvan*, a term for the state of mind where the individual is liberated from the finite human consciousness and is approaching

the dawn of higher consciousness" (Bullough 2). The responsibility of castration falls on the shoulder of a *dai ma*⁷ (Bullough 3). For this reason, Renate Syed argues that hijras should not be defined as transgender but as cisgender: "It might be confusing for some Westerners to learn that Hijrās do not fit and do not want to fit into the taxonomy of Western theories of sex and gender, and that their resistance challenges familiar Western models and patterns: the Western binary concept of sex and gender travelled to India, while the Indian ternary sex/gender model was not meant to be sent abroad to influence or transform Western cultures. Western countries sent missionaries to India for hundreds of years, but Indian culture is self-referential, complacent, and never made efforts to convince other cultures concerning religion, philosophy, concepts, or ideas. Cross-cultural differences should be respected and recognized" (Syed 234). Significantly, Syed identifies the ambiguity of the hijra identity in the phrase, "the body is male, the soul female" (Syed 236). This co-existence of two distinct selves is often referred to within hijra discourse on the construction of the self.⁸

3 "Me Hijra": Finding a Voice

In *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Story* (2010), the first life narrative ever written by a hijra, the author, A. Revathi, states that she "was born a boy but behaved like a girl" (blurb). Revathi recalls: "In class, I would be staring at the girls, taking notes of the way their braids fell, the intricate knots of their colourful ribbons, the jasmine and kanakambaram they wore in their hair, and their skirts and blouses. I longed to be like them and suffered that I could not dress so" (Revathi 6). In her memoir Revathi uses similar expressions for showing the truth about herself along with the discrimination she faced while growing up: "I am one such individual who has been marginalized because I was born a male and wanted to live my life as a woman" (Revathi v). This quest of finding one's true identity is presented as an effort to cross over from one category to the other, and thus within a Western gender regime based on a system of binaries. The author adopts these signifiers to maintain a notion of difference by establishing her sense of unbelonging to the former categorization.⁹ This method of identifying remains within binary categories and corresponds with a Western notion of individualism, which can be supported by the choice of the memoir as a genre. This difference of being and becoming is further explored by Laxminarayan Tripathi in her memoir

⁶ In the terminology of the legal system the words Eunuch and Hijra are either used interchangeably or without giving much attention to the historical and cultural differences in meanings. Similarly, both words refer to a particularly different discourses which works behind the construction of both type of "gendered" bodies.

⁷ *Dai* means midwife and *ma* stands for mother; the term may also be used for wet nurse.

⁸ Although our research focuses on perceptions of ambiguity, we refer to life narratives of hijras here in an attempt to supplement the silence of hijras in the historical archive.

⁹ A recent article exploring media discourse on transgender women constructed as India's 'new women' in opposition to the hijras, mentions briefly that Revathi now identifies as a transgender woman (Mount 631).

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi (2015). Laxmi, who was born into a high-caste Brahmin family was identified at birth as a boy. *She*¹⁰ narrates his interaction with a hijra named Shabina, long before her parents knew about her decision to become a hijra, in the following words: “She looked every bit a woman from head to toe. [...] I knew at that very moment that I yearned to be like Shabina. [...] I learnt everything about hijras from Shabina. She acquainted me with their history, their traditions, their lifestyles and their sources of income” (Tripathi 38). Through this reference to history and traditions, Laxmi expresses a sense of kinship with the traditions of the subcontinent and the holy status hijras enjoyed for many millennia. Laxmi also points towards the fundamental difference which sets the hijra identity apart from the other genders: the way the members of the community define themselves. The *hij* of the word hijra is refers to the soul or a holy soul; the carrier body is the hijra (Tripathi 40). But this carrier body also needs a ritual to become a hijra. It is known as *reet* in the Indian state of Maharashtra, the region Laxmi hails from. It is a short ceremony that marks their *Jogjanam* (Tripathi 42). As Laxmi writes: “When I became a hijra, a great burden was lifted off my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. I was a hijra. I had my own identity. No longer did I feel like an alien” (43).

Even though Laxmi narrates her great relief on becoming a hijra, the assertion of her newly formed identity (i.e. the act of castration) was not initially carried out, possibly to prevent a reaction from her family to which Laxmi remains close. Her guru understood her dilemma and suggested that she keep on living with her family and go about her life as ‘normally’ as possible because “it is no fun wearing a sari, and nor is it compulsory to do so” (44). In Laxmi’s case this need to be secretive and selective about revealing her ‘true’ identity in order to uphold a notion of ‘respectability’ can be connected to the paradigm of caste distinction. However, the so-called shame of becoming a hijra while belonging to a high-caste family is amplified through the parallel caste systems navigated and embraced by Laxmi. The ambiguity of her identity becomes even more apparent when Laxmi recalls how she and her community revered the Muharram, a predominantly Shi’a Muslim tradition,¹¹ which is also observed by the hijras (51). Due to the various ambiguities arising from the community’s diversity with regard to gender and sexuality, ethnicity and caste, in addition to their religious pluralism and tolerance of spiritual practices, the idea of castration is not essential when one is becoming a hijra, nor is it a marker

of distinction. Therefore, castration itself is not necessarily considered a rite of passage, though the hijra who goes through the act of emasculation earns and demands more recognition. As Laxmi notes: “There are those who believe that one isn’t a true hijra unless one is castrated. But they are in the minority. The traditional castration rite is performed on a hijra by another hijra (or *dai* or priest) without the use of anesthesia. It is excruciatingly painful. [...] Nowadays hijras are also allowed to have their castration done in a clinic by a doctor. At first, this was illegal, and doctors did it secretly. Today, however, it is done more openly. Castration is a spiritual process. One has to be ready for it. It cannot be imposed” (175).

From the information presented so far, one could imagine a hijra as a transgender person, a cross dresser or a drag queen as these are some of the categories created in the West, and, more recently, increasingly in South Asia, for people who do not conform to their gender at birth.¹² Indeed, when Laxmi, the hijra, speaks English, she uses the word ‘transgender’ for herself for want of a better word in the English language to signify who she is. These complexities are addressed, but not resolved, in her following statement: “[h]ijras are referred to as transgender. To me, the term transgender means ‘transcending gender’. In the formulation of ‘LGBT’, ours is the only category that refers to gender. All the other three categories – lesbian, gay, and bisexual – refer to sexuality” (Tripathi 179–80).

4 Squealing Voices? Castrati and Eunuchs

The act of castration seems to put the hijra identity quite close to, and is often confused with, the castrato. i. e. “a man gelded in childhood to preserve his youthful singing voice [who] provides a rare example of a body which was ‘created’ by surgery to fulfil a purpose” (Skuse 16). These castrated men, trained to be singers in Italy, appeared on the London stage during the eighteenth century; some acted parts of eunuchs who served as the guardians of the “sacred” spaces in various empires. The arrival of castrati on the London stage was not a small incident. Their arrival was reported in the newspapers, and caricatures of those “abnormal” singers simultaneously sparked interest and raised discontent. Their presence in England was primarily a result of aristocratic musical tastes. One of the most famous of the castrati singers was Farinelli (Carlo Broschi), who arrived in England in 1734. His contemporary, the musicologist Charles Burney, who had met with Farinelli

¹⁰ While personal pronouns are gender-specific in English as well as other European languages, personal pronouns in Hindi, Urdu and many other languages of the subcontinent, including Hindku, Pashto, Farsi and Dari, are not. While pronouns remain neutral, the verb form determines the gender of the subject. Therefore, the debate around the choice of a particular pronoun as an expression of one’s gender is obsolete in places where these languages are spoken. The ‘performative’ function of the verb in these languages essentially determines the manifestation of gender in language. However, in Tamil, the language in which *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* was originally written, pronouns are gendered. The same applies to Marathi, the mother tongue of Laxmi Tripathi, which is the original language of *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*.

¹¹ Muharram is the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. This is one of the four months when any form of warfare was traditionally forbidden. It is significant for Shi’a Muslims, who observe the 10th of this month as the day of mourning (Aashooraa) because the grandson of Muhammad was killed along with his 72 companions at the banks of the river Euphrates in 680 A.D.

¹² On the emergence of the South Asian trans movement vis-à-vis hijra traditions cf. Azhar (2017).

during his travels, describes his first impression of him in *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (1771): "I found him much younger in appearance than I expected. He is tall and thin, but by no means infirm in his appearance" (196). Having attended one of Farinelli's performances, Burney sounds ecstatic: "it was ecstasy! rapture! Enchantment!" (208).

Despite their fame, castrati often lived on the fringes of society. Frandsen notes that it was primarily "difference" which restricted these "modified" bodies to participate in the "normal" affairs of life: "Difference, it would seem, governed every aspect of [the castrato's] life, from his upbringing and early socialisation to his vocal range and physical appearance" (54). Similarly, their central position as performers and their marginality as "modified men" made them simultaneously central and marginal (Frandsen 54). Furthermore, their "indeterminate sexuality" was imagined as a threat to the established social normativity (Frandsen 54). Marriage of these castrated men was therefore forbidden: "The practice of castration, and eunuch marriage, were [...] prohibited in judicial codes across Europe as abominations which went against natural law. Undertaking deliberate mutilation of the male body was regarded as perverse and dangerous, as much for the body politic as for the individual victim" (Berry 13).

At times, the castrati shunned their invisible private life and position on the fringes of society and adopted a more heteronormative role. Frandsen notes one example of a castrato named Bartolomeo Sorlisi, who lived in Dresden and "[i]n 1667, after a prolonged and at times trying engagement, Sorlisi succeeded in marrying a young woman named Dorothea Lichtwer, the stepdaughter of a lawyer who practised in that city" (P. Zimmermann qtd. in Frandsen 55). As Frandsen points out: "Sorlisi's fascinating story, with all of its twists and turns, chronicles the experience of a castrato cum private citizen in seventeenth-century Germany. Not only does this microhistory illuminate the personal relationships that one castrato developed with the members of a *bürgerlich* Lutheran family, it also details the far-reaching consequences of his decision to push one of those relationships far beyond traditionally accepted limits" (55).

Long before Farinelli came to England, Charles Ancillon categorized eunuchs into three distinct groups in *Eunuchism Display'd: Describing all the Different Sorts of Eunuchs* (1707). According to Ancillon, a eunuch "is a Person which has not the Power or the Faculty of Generation, either through Weakness or Coldness of nature, or who is any wise deprive of the parts proper to Gen-

eration. In short eunuchs are such, *qui generare non possunt*, as the Civil Law expresses it. Such who can by no means propagate and generate, who have a squealing languishing Voice, a Womanish Complexion and a soft Down for a Beard, who have no Courage of Bravery of Soul, but ever timorous [sic] and fearful: In a few words whose Ways, Manners, and Customs are entirely effeminate" (Ancillon 8). This interchangeability of eunuchs and castrati also establishes the possibility of engaging with the presence and reception of these seemingly "ungendered" bodies. As Ancillon states: "I shall only say, that I know it to be fact, that there can be no finer Voices in the World, and more delicate, than of some Eunuchs, such as *Tasqualini*, *Pauluccio*, and *Jeronimo*, (or *Momo*,) and were esteemed so when I was in Rome, which was in the Years 1709 and 1706, and I believe are all living at this very Day. It is impossible to give any tolerable Idea of the Excellencies of these Three Celebrated Eunuchs, or the Beauty of their several Voices" (Ancillon 29–30). A further factor that contributed to this equation of castrati and eunuchs was the presence of castrati performing roles of eunuchs in numerous popular Orientalist plays, tragedies as well as comedies, of the eighteenth century. Ann Greenfield (2019) notes that the early decades of the eighteenth century alone saw twenty-five productions featuring eunuchs on the London stage, in which the action of the performance was set in the Turkish, Indian or Persian royal courts.

5 Conclusion

Our shared focus on eunuchs, castrati and hijras has identified a dynamic interplay of ambiguity and distinction across various settings. It has become apparent that the act of emasculation is not a common denominator. While castration as a severe act of creating difference was required for eunuchs and castrati, albeit for different reasons, they were not necessarily regarded as effeminate or unmasculine. This variation in the perception of eunuchs and castrati is not so much linked to individual perceptions but may be explained by observers becoming familiar to their presence, at home and abroad, in the course of the eighteenth century, i.e. developing tolerance of ambiguity. As Greenfield observes: "during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, eunuchs would have carried a fraction of the shock value they hold today. As historians now acknowledge, it has only been in the last one hundred years or so (at which point eunuchs largely disappeared from royal courts globally)

that the world has not been accustomed to seeing eunuchs (Greenfield 24).

In the subcontinent the act of castration for a hijra continues to serve a spiritual function but it is not considered a mandatory ritual. The gendered identity of a hijra was and still is therefore fundamentally more ambiguous because one can be married with children and still be a hijra (Reddy 48). That is one of the reasons the hijra identity is read, by us, as being *more* ambiguous than the other identities discussed. However, as Greenfield points out: "In light of the complex and, at times, sympathetic treatment of these sexual and cultural Others, it is tempting to view Orientalist depictions of eunuchs as progressive steps toward today's culturally-inclusive world. After all, these plays found a place for the queer Other at a time when castrated men in real life were regularly treated as medical and sexual oddities. Yet, in some ways, this analysis of Orientalist eunuchs also underscores something surprising about our own world by comparison. While modern-day acceptance toward the queer Other, in many ways, has never been more inclusive, in the case of the concept of eunuchs, we are perhaps less at ease than we ever have been before" (24).

Finally, there is another point that needs to be addressed, specifically with regard to Western interest in and fascination for hijras. As we have pointed out, there is a current tendency to celebrate hijras as transgender, and thus as markers of 'modernity'. We have addressed the complexity of their ambiguous indigenous identities. Subsuming them into Western categories implicitly reinforces a binary structure introduced on the subcontinent in the days of the British Empire. This may result in exoticising the hijras, an aspect which is apparent in the ubiquitous images of mostly young, hyper-feminine hijras, carefully made up in their colourful clothes. This popular image seems worlds apart from the video of an elderly hijra singing and playing the drum in a Pakistani corner-shop. Even hijra activist, author and performer Laxmi Tripathi was confronted with this exotic image, when she became the subject of the documentary *Between the Lines: Indiens drittes Geschlecht* (2007). Seeking to create an 'authentic' image, director Thomas Wartmann and photographer Anita Khemka reverted to Orientalist modes of representation. In the words of Laxmi Tripathi: "Anita had her own way of looking at things, and I couldn't see eye to eye with her. Though she has observed the hijras closely, she observed them as an outsider and not as a hijra herself. That made all the difference. In retrospect, I realize that Anita wanted to exoticize – even orientalize – the hijras, but

I find such exoticism and orientalism repulsive because it 'others' us" (70–71).

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