Writing Otherness: Uses of History and Mythology in Constructing Literary Representations of India’s Hijras

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Abstract

This thesis explores the construction and use of the hijra figure in fictional literature. It argues that hijras are utilised as both symbols of deviance and central points around which wider anti-sociality circulates.

In order to contextualise these characters and offer a deeper understanding of the constructed nature of their representations, this thesis works with four frames of reference. It draws respectively on Hindu mythology (chapter one), the Mughal empire and its use of eunuchs, which the authors of fiction use to extend their representations of hijras (chapter two), British colonialism in India and its ideological frameworks which held gender deviance to be a marker of under-civilisation (chapter three) and the postcolonial period, in which hijras continue to fight for their rights whilst attempting to survive in an increasingly marginal social position (chapter four). Examining the literary material through the lens of these four frameworks shows, historically, the movement of the hijras in the public imaginary away from being symbols of the sacred to symbols of sexuality and charts the concurrent shift in their level of social acceptance.

In terms of their literary representations, it is seen that authors draw upon material informed by each of the four frameworks, but never in simple terms. Rather, they work imaginatively but often restrictively to produce an injurious or detrimental image of the hijras, and they apply multiple historical frameworks to the same narratives and individual characters, with the result of marking them as timeless figures of eternal otherness. The image of hijras as sacred beings in Hindu mythology is recast as them being terrifying figures who are liable to curse binary-gendered citizens if their extortionate demands are not met (chapter one). The political prominence of Mughal eunuchs and their position as guardians of sexual boundaries and purity become treasonous political manipulation through the enactment of secret plots, often involving sexual violence, to impact on political events (chapters two and three). The criminalisation of hijras as a means of pushing them out of public visibility becomes naturalised anti-sociality and a shadowy existence at the social margins (chapter three). Finally, in a public environment which has both seen a major increase in campaigns for hijra rights and acceptance, but which has met with fierce opposition, the hijras are overburdened with associations which render them as hyperbolic and ultimately unsustainable figures (chapter four).

Ultimately, these constructions facilitate sensationalised storylines set in the criminal underworld. Whilst the thrilling nature of these stories has the potential to capture a readership, this comes at the expense of the hijra characters, who are rendered as inherent criminals, sexual aggressors and wilfully anti-social. Campaigns to protect hijras as a third-gender category, guarantee their legal rights and end their criminalisation for the first time since 1860 have been publicly prominent since 2001; these campaigns are now coming before parliament and formal decisions are expected imminently. Examining understandings of hijras outside of their communities is thus politically timely and necessary for disrupting the cycle of overburdening them as society’s gendered scapegoats, contributing to a project of more nuanced understandings necessary for their social integration.
DECLARATION

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This work is dedicated to the dispossessed. It is for all those who are suppressed not by their own actions but by what others think of them, and it is for their struggles to have their own voices heard.
Introduction:

Mapping Identity: Constructing and (Re)Presenting Hijras Across Contexts

Whilst a binary reading of gender is undoubtedly still socially prevalent, the last three decades have witnessed a definitive shift towards recognising both the constructedness of the gender binary and the existence of gender identities beyond this narrow remit. Several countries now legally recognise citizens who identify as a third gender; many more, including the UK, formally recognise non-binary markers such as gender-neutral pronouns for official purposes. Simultaneously, the validity of gender binarism is being questioned within the binary system, particularly through feminist activism, which draws attention to and attempts to break down the expectations attached to the identity ‘woman’ in favour of individual agency.

In 1990, Judith Butler made perhaps the largest contribution to the idea that gender is a social construct unconnected to but socially determined by biological sex and enforced through social protocol with the publication of Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, a text which has become the academic go-to for the idea of gender being socially constructed and artificially limited.¹ This is the underpinning concept from which both feminism and Queer theory have drawn, two areas which heavily inform this thesis. The notion that the expected conventions attributed to a given gender, both in terms of the individual and on a more conceptual plane (i.e. concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ detached from a given subject), are socially constructed and thus are sensitive to sociological, geographical and historical variation is now commonplace without, as is socially evident, being exclusive.

Beginning from an underpinning theoretical position of recognising gender as socially constructed, this thesis recognises that not only do a large and increasing number of individuals self-identify as something other than the binary categories of ‘man’ or ‘woman’, but in certain sociological locations additional

genders are recognised within literature, within wider cultural productions, and in some instances by the state. Drawing on Butler, I distinguish sharply between the self-identificatory experience of embodying a third gender and the public construction of understandings and representations of that gender. That is to say, in the same way that Butler is not referring to the felt experience of every woman when she argues that certain values - such as passivity, grace and nurturing - are socially coded to the marker 'feminine', it is likely given the public and conceptual work that gender as an organisational system is made to do that there are values which are made to correspond to the marker 'third gender'. This thesis explores the ways that thirdness is marked in literary representations as a unique exploration of the work that 'third gender' is made to do, the conceptual space that it is made to provide, and the social function that it is made to perform. It grounds itself in representations of a particular socially-established, third-gender group for the purposes of identifying what these particular traits are and how they are utilised; to analyse representations of a largely unrecognised group self-identifying as third gender would provide a limited analysis in terms of the aims of this thesis, as it positions itself explicitly to explore the social take-up of thirdness rather than individual experiences of it.

The group identified for this purpose are hijras. Arguably the longest-standing gender-diverse group in South Asia, hijras traditionally identify as a third gender distinct from men and women. The vast majority of hijras are born biogenetically male, though rare cases of biogenetically female people who never began to menstruate becoming hijras have been recorded. Most hijras leave their families to live in hijra-exclusive household units, though some maintain contact with their families after this move, depending upon the level of acceptance they individually experience. In the context of India, which is the focus area for this thesis, these households are in turn organised under seven national hijra gharanas or conceptual houses, with each hijra household being aligned to a gharana and a new hijra automatically joining the gharana of their household. Each hijra house has its own rules and restrictions for its members, and fines can be enforced for breaking them, as well as in extreme cases - excommunication.

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The official narrative holds that hijras must undergo a ritual form of complete genital removal in order to become true hijras, at which point they are granted the powers of the Mother Goddess Bahuchara Mata to bless and curse the fertility of binary-gendered people. Because of this power, their traditional work, known as badhai, is to perform at occasions associated with fertility, most commonly the day a recent bride is brought home to her in-laws’ house and following the birth of a child, particularly a male child. On these occasions, hijras sing, dance and bless the couple or child with enhanced fertility if their demands for payment are met; if they are not, the hijras curse the recipient with infertility up to and including the ultimate rebuttal, lifting their skirts to show their mutilated genitals, which as well as being socially shameful to the viewer is also said to curse them with instant and permanent infertility.

However, in reality waning belief in the hijras’ powers has driven many to seek alternative forms of work. Hijras can often be seen begging at shrines and historical monuments, as well as at traffic lights, and whilst it is difficult to get a precise figure, it is now widely understood by activist organisations working on hijras’ behalf that the majority engage in sex work to ensure their economic stability. Given that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code prohibits ‘carnal intercourse contrary to the order of nature’ and The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956) bans activities often inherent in hijra prostitution, this leaves hijras open to prosecution.3 Whilst official numbers of hijras prosecuted under these laws are extremely low, this masks the reality of the situation on the ground; a major study undertaken in 2003 found that police abuse of hijras (in which they are picked up without formal charges being made, then released after paying a bribe or, ironically, being sexually abused by the police themselves) is prevalent and a constant fear for many hijras when out in public, whether or not they really are soliciting for prostitution.4 The result is that hijras, out of self-defensive necessity, are made to retreat further from public life due to their fear of state and

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3 Receiving payment for sexual acts is not illegal in India, but the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act prohibits engaging in prostitution in a public place (section 7) and soliciting for prostitution (section 8), so hijras who find their clientele and/or ply their trade on the streets, often due to economic necessity, are engaging in illegal activity. Indian Penal Code, Section 377, Advocate Khoj <www.advocatekhoj.com/library/bareacts/indianpenalcode/377.php?Title=Indian Penal Code, 1860&Title=Unnatural offences> first accessed 8th September 2013; The Internet Archive, The Immoral Traffic (Prevention Act (1956); <https://archive.org/details/ImmoralTrafficPreventionAct1956>, first accessed 30th October 2017.

police persecution; this in turn makes their perceived social marginality into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Already the importance of intersecting identity categories on the construction of the individual is becoming clear. Precisely such interdependencies are foregrounded by theorists working, in particular, in the fields of non-Western feminisms. Commonly, these works insist upon the nature of societal labels - third-world woman, activist, widow or hijra as the case may be - as a meeting of social cross-roads with histories, interactive changes and the potential for different expressions precisely because of their multiple dimensions. These works theorise the absolute inextricability of diverse, hierarchising lines within systems of identity building and of oppression, with a particular focus on intersections of race, class and gender. The overall effect on the represented individual often differs from the expected sum of these descriptive parts, carrying expectations and implications precisely at their meeting points. As such, whilst beginning from Butler’s premise that gender is a socially-constructed phenomenon, as stated earlier, this thesis must look beyond the Western academy in order to understand the intersectionality of gender and other axes of identity in constructing hijras, as well as using this opposing perspective to interrogate the Westernised view of gender embedded in many of the texts to be examined. The sensationalised otherness ascribed to hijras in these texts can then be understood as, in part, a result of an orientalist adherence to the gender binary as normative and other identities as exotic and/or deviant.

Evidently, the structural and continuing ideological divisions caused or at least substantially exacerbated by colonialism are of great concern to critics writing on South-Asian social theory and praxis. Given the dominance of Western literary theory in the academy, it is unsurprising that these critics pose serious concerns about the applicability of Western theory to South-Asian contexts. Setting out their analyses of contemporary concerns, these critics are careful to distinguish their theoretical approach from these hegemonic norms, allowing them to meet their subject insightfully and to understand them on their own terms.
To take one strong example of a broader theme, in a detailed critique of Western hegemony over feminist theory, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practising Solidarity*, argues that the ‘two-thirds world’ woman subject has been silenced in dominant Western theory on two levels.\(^{5}\) Firstly, the contexts, aims and objectivities stipulated in dominant academic theory construct ‘the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently all women are expected to organise’ but which in reality vary between entirely excluding ‘working-class feminists, and feminists of color around the world’ and missing the more pressing points for their emancipation, such as access to a safe community over financial individualism.\(^{6}\) Mohanty argues that where two-thirds world women’s oppressions are recognised, they are subsumed under a generalised heading of women’s oppression, ignoring both the specificities of their situation and histories of Western colonialism which contributed substantially to these continuing positions. In attempts to demonstrate gendered universality, non-Western women’s problems are, Mohanty argues, theorised according to the formats of Western theory, and as such lose their specificity and poignancy, and thus the potential for direct, constructive action. As I aim to demonstrate throughout this thesis, these issues are not limited to women, but to other theorisations of gender including hijras.

However, rather than arguing for a separation of the two worlds of theory, Mohanty calls for a reformulation of the terms for thinking about feminism. Solidarity, it is argued, is not coterminous with universality. What is needed is recognition of the specific oppressions faced by individuals and collective struggle to fulfil their needs and desires as a corrective, in order to provide an active, valuable community with the potential to raise the overall status of women as a collective; women (and in my reading, all those who are oppressed as a result of their gender identity, which certainly includes hijras and other non-binary people) must recognise their different experiences but ask each other ‘to stand by me over and against a third’.\(^{7}\)

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7 Jodi Dean, paraphrased in Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, p.7.
To take another representative and well-known example, much of Mohanty’s theory, including the insistence on dialogue and support over claims to universality, is echoed in Spivak’s iconic essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’. Here again, we see calls not simply for the inclusion of other experiences in the already-established Western academy, but rather a recognition of these experiences in their own terms. Rather than seeing these figures as subjects of anthropological writing (rather than writers in and of themselves) or as writing from so deeply within patriarchal systems (as laid out through Occidental Western theories) that their opinions and experiences can only be evidence of these systems, Mohanty and Spivak call for recognition of the historical, social and political formulation of these writings viewed through their own contexts.

The argument coming through from these critics is, then, that Western contemporary theory is insufficient as a means of theorising South-Asian subjectivities. However, the influence of these theories is a necessary component in any adequately rounded analysis, particularly given historical circumstances of empire. The difference, it appears, is that Western models are not admitted as totalising, but rather as one dynamic in an intricate web which comes together to form the present subject, be that the nation, a particular community, or an individual in question. Especially poignant are the dynamics of race, class and gender, seen in historical flux and for the multiple influences they have on each other. In attempting to properly theorise subaltern subjects, these critics have repeatedly demonstrated the necessity to look beyond selective, blinkered readings dealing only with one strand of selfhood at the exclusion of other aspects. Instead, attempts are made at viewing or speaking as the subject in recognition of the many historical, social, political, familial and confrontational forces which work together to pinpoint the unique position of the individual in question. As such, gender theory is a key component underwriting my analysis here, but it is the way that concepts of gender intersect with other aspects of selfhood and, particularly, the way that these identities are formulated by others to construct the other-gendered subject which is of primary concern.

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In this thesis, I analyse representations of hijras across a range of texts written by cisgendered authors. A comparative study of the way the hijras are represented, and in what contexts, will occupy an important knowledge gap crucial to examining how this community are viewed by and perceived to interact with others around them, and thus towards considering how gender as a social and communitarian symbol operates in Indian contexts. Despite hijras’ inclusion in texts ranging from colonial legal acts to contemporary health policies, and from travellers’ accounts to postcolonial fiction and graphic novels, little consideration has been given to the forms and functions of hijras as literary constructions. By analysing the ways that hijras are used in these texts, I pave the way to an understanding of the uses to which ‘otherness’ is put, particularly where it intersects with the orientalising projects of Western authors in ways that heighten the exoticism of their racial and gendered otherness.

The corpus of texts chosen for analysis in this thesis represents the majority of the literature available in English which includes sustained use of hijra characters. The intention was to provide a comprehensive overview of fictional representations of hijras as presented to an English-reading audience; whilst inevitably there will be volumes which have not come to the attention of the thesis’ author, the chronological (1990-2017) and genre range of the eight texts analysed here offer a representative example both of the range of texts which utilise hijra figures and of the similarity, startling in the face of the diversity of the texts in terms of scope and genre, of tropes and devices used across texts when dealing with these characters.

The earliest text is Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel*, first published in 1990. More widely known for his 1956 novel *Train to Pakistan* and his multi-volume *A History of the Sikhs*, which ‘remains the standard work’, Singh built a reputation as ‘a historian of authority’, ‘revered and feared for his political

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10 Texts which only very briefly include hijra characters, such as Salman Rushdie’s 2015 novel *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, have not been included owing to their unsuitability for sustained analysis of these figures. Whilst the reference supports my reading of the hijras as figures constructed to demonstrate hypersexuality and sexual deviance, the lack of wider contextualisation has little to offer to a thesis seeking to investigate the uses of history and mythology in formulating these characters. Salman Rushdie, *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015).
knowledge and ability to attack where attack was justified’.\(^{11}\) Singh is also said to have ‘liked to cultivate a rakish reputation, and the sexual daring of some of his earlier work was regarded by some as scandalous.’\(^{12}\) Delhi brings together both aspects, offering a deeply layered historical account of Delhi’s past in a fictionalised, often sensationalist, form; the ‘sexual daring’ of the work is largely concentrated in his hijra character, Bhagmati, and as such is ripe for analysis here.

William Dalrymple’s travelogue City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi (1993) is unique in the corpus of this analysis, as the only text which is not overtly fictional, instead being a travelogue. I believe this to be a valid inclusion because the genre leaves space for sensationalism and an entertainment factor, rather than presenting itself as a strictly neutral account in the style of a report. Given that the emphasis of this analysis is on how the idea of the hijras is (re)presented for public consumption, and Dalrymple’s account overtly ascribes to a storyteller style and is targeted at a lay audience, it contributes greatly to an informed understanding of the way that hijras are exoticised and repackaged, particularly for a Western audience.\(^{13}\) In a similar vein to Khushwant Singh, Dalrymple is widely known as a historian and, as such, both the deviations from accepted history and the emotive slant given to aspects of the hijras’ public presentations, both historically and in the contemporary period, warrant scrutiny in this context.

Leslie Forbes’ 1998 murder mystery novel Bombay Ice expands the range of this corpus substantially.\(^{14}\) Its genre is unique amongst the eight texts, bringing with it opportunities for sensationalism and the uncovering of secrets which, I shall argue, are played out through the hijra characters as narrative devices; it is also the first of the texts produced by an author without a reputation as a prominent historian of India, and so the choices, connections and elisions made contribute to establishing how hijras are understood in the broader social


\(^{13}\)William Dalrymple, City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi (London: Flamingo, 1994)

imaginary. Additionally, the plot device of the main character being a BBC journalist visiting India to investigate both hijra murders and her own family history positions the first-person narrative from an explicit outsider-looking-in perspective, useful for interrogating the way that hijras are constructed for a Western audience, in particular.

Moving forwards into the present century, Hari Kunzru’s 2003 debut novel *The Impressionist* is the fourth text to be considered here. The *Impressionist* is quite possibly the most overt of any of the texts in terms of using the novel form to investigate identity politics, a project it embeds in the fractured story of its main character as he takes on, critiques and discards a wide array of gendered, racial, class and social identities. Here, then, we have the first opportunity to explore the construction of a hijra identity from the perspective of a character who is themselves interpellated as a hijra; however, as shall be seen, this is neither a comfortable nor a permanent identity for the character, and its use ultimately works to bring up issues regarding the negotiation of social space. As an examination both of individual hijra identifications and wider uses of hijras in both social spaces and fictional narratives, *The Impressionist* is indispensable for this analysis and will be analysed at length in numerous chapters to follow.

*River of Gods*, a sci-fi novel written by Ian McDonald and published in 2004, takes the corpus in another direction again, in terms of genre. Set in a heavily futuristic 2047, the novel’s value for this thesis is drawn from three aspects. First, it enables consideration of imagined futures (or lack thereof) for non-binary gendered people, a preoccupation which will be foregrounded in chapter four of this thesis and which is telling in relation to their level of social acceptance. Second, the novel does not refer to these people as hijras (though the term is used euphemistically on a number of occasions) but rather as ‘nutes’; it does, however, show clear connections with hijras which will be explored in due course, which render the novel a unique reworking of hijra representations and, in particular, a reworking of the history and mythology attached to them to somewhat different ends. Third, despite both this change in subject and the displacement to an

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imagined future, the novel still utilises and even extends numerous negative connotations widely attached to hijras in other texts; as such, it is a substantial contributor to the argument that there are particular associations being consistently made with hijras, and specific use value to them as narrative devices, independent of genre and setting.

Seven of the eight novels to be examined are purely written, but the sixth to be published, Craig Thompson’s *Habibi* (2011), is a graphic novel, broadening the analysis to account for the way hijras are represented visually and how this interacts with and extends the textual analysis. This is particularly poignant as *Habibi* gives a great deal of space to eunuchs, in addition to hijras, and the relationship between the two will be explored at length in chapters two and three, dealing with Mughal and British imperialism in India respectively. Comparing the associations and graphic depictions of the two communities, as well as the way that characters move between them in ways which connect with the analysis of *The Impressionist* sheds light on the use of hijra characters as, in particular, developmental categories which have more to do with establishing heteronormative masculinity than enabling a permanent, viable third-gender identity.

*Habibi*, however, is disorientating in its approach to chronology, appearing to be set in a Mughal past for large parts of the novel before switching to a capitalist, modernised urban environment towards the end. Jeet Thayil’s novel *Narcopolis*, on the other hand, was published in 2012 mid-decriminalisation, with Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (which criminalises sexual activity other than penile-vaginal sex, and which was read down in 2009 but reinstated in 2013) and is more overtly concerned with the politics of its period. *Narcopolis* not only highlights a key hijra character as being a prostitute and drug-supplier rather than a traditional performer, but also investigates the complex social position which has brought her to this position. Alongside *River of Gods* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, *Narcopolis* is concerned with the position afforded to hijras by a rapidly

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modernising and global-reaching 'new India'. Like *River of Gods*, however, it is ultimately unable to secure a position for its hijra character in this new environment and ultimately uses her as a narrative device in its portrayal of black market, underground life before dismissing her in the shift from old Bombay to new Mumbai.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, written by Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy and first published in 2017, does deeply consider the future possibilities for hijra. Whilst demonstrating concerns about the impact of other forms of non-binary gender expression on the unique identity of hijras, leading to the possibility of hijras being replaced by Trans* identities without the concurrent third-gender and community-based attachments, the novel is deeply sympathetic to the fact that this shift is part of a wider negotiation of social space, rather than a comment on the redundancy of the category. The novel's main hijra character, Anjum, must work within an overtly violent and identity-stifling environment underpinned by right-wing Hindutva ideologies; ultimately, she as an individual is successful in rejecting her reduction to a symbol of Hinduism and in starting her own community of marginalised people, but a question mark nonetheless hangs over the broader category of 'hijra' as a socially-condoned grouping.

The range of texts considered here thus demonstrate the variety of uses to which the hijra figure is put, coming from an array of genres. I feel strongly that this lends credence to the idea that the consistency with which hijras are portrayed as hypersexual criminals and gatekeepers of the secrets of the Indian underworld is not coincidental, but rather a narrative device built around the concept of hijras which is picked up time and again by authors. This point is especially poignant given that the corpus spans almost thirty years, a period which has seen monumental changes in hijras’ activities (with a shift towards prostitution through economic necessity), their legal rights (in having been decriminalised and recriminalized, and having organised to campaign) and their social position (both through a decrease in public belief in their abilities, and in a rise of right-wing Hindutva ideologies which see them, in part, as an element of a Westernising LGBT discourse which threatens what are seen as traditional family beliefs). In this sense, the texts chosen are incredibly useful as a collection both in terms of
analysing where they, despite their differences, appeal to the same historical and mythological references to strengthen fundamentally similar constructions of hijras despite their gaps in other areas. Conversely, the texts also assist in charting a shift in usage across time as public debates around hijras have changed. That is to say, though they ultimately use references drawn from a shared pool of resources, and do so to demonstrate the anti-social, negative aspects of hijra existence, over time they do so to somewhat different effects, due in large part to the weight which is gradually placed on the wider social environment as a way of understanding why this marginality exists, as opposed to the naturalisation of alterity attested to in the earliest texts.

Whilst one aspect of the decision to analyse only English-language texts was based on the linguistic limitations of the author, there is also a key critical component. The fact that all of the texts were originally written in English, and that those authors amongst them who are ostensibly Indian are either writing with acknowledgement of their global audience (Singh and Roy, in particular) or from a British background, by birth or education (Kunzru and Thayil), demonstrates their awareness of a broader, largely Western, readership. In addition, all eight of the authors are cisgender. Though I do not wish to overburden the authors' role in the interpretation of their text, these facts cast the authors as outsiders to the hijra community giving their understandings of what hijra might mean or, socially, enable, and in the context of Western audience in particular casts them largely as gatekeepers of knowledge about the hijras rather than as insiders. In sum, their constructions are useful both in understanding the wider concept of hijras outside of the community itself, and in understanding how these figures are utilised when constructed for an audience who are also understood not to be of the community. As such, this analysis is embedded within a postcolonial discourse which interrogates knowledge-making and identity-affirmation as a practice which is done to, rather than in collaboration with or initiated by, those to whom it applies.

A thorough discussion of how subjects are constructed or made invisible, and on what other, interacting planes their gendered identity is construed, is a pressing and essential issue, especially evidenced by daily media reports of widespread sexual violence across India and particular spot-lighted responses.
heightened awareness of gender violence is leading to an increased push towards official response, the nature of gender oppression and, concurrently, social and legal views towards the gendered positions of individuals need to be carefully scrutinised before an appropriate response can be considered.

This thesis draws throughout on legal documents, archival records, mythology, activist campaigns and other socio-political sources, situating its analysis in living, shifting and constructed social contexts, the analysis of which is informed rather than dominated by more traditional critical theory. Not only will consideration of these documents enhance my analysis of literary representations, but they will be highly pertinent in themselves; both the context and language of these documents broadens the scope of this thesis when it comes to considering how and on what terms the hijras are conceptualised, informing the theoretical backdrop of the literary analysis. The specific historical and cultural debates in which the relevant bodies felt it necessary to include the hijras is telling of their imagined social position, ranging from their criminalisation under the British Raj to debates around their place in an increasingly globalising postcolonial India. However objective the producers of these texts may attempt to be, the hijras are nonetheless being imagined at particular social junctions, which illuminate wider conceptions of society and its sub-communities. These placements necessarily evoke wider connotations of hijra identity, both material, such as the wearing of women’s clothes in public, and ideological, such as conceptualisations of the hijras as alternately dangerous and in need of protection. These reflections will form a crucial intervention, helping to complete the picture of gender in India as a starting point from which to move forwards.

For this reason, I believe that the value of the texts to be analysed—both literary and other—lies in the intersections they demonstrate between concepts of the hijras and wider comments on society and its citizens. Gendered representations will feature strongly, but it is their intersection with concepts of religious identity, work practices and social positioning invoking class/caste dimensions, amongst others, which will be most enlightening in an analysis of the overall place of the hijras as textual symbols. In their diverse uses, these connotations form a matrix around the label ‘hijra’ which spans far beyond limited
considerations of their gendered identities. As such, these texts preclude conclusions on the hijras’ materiality whilst offering original insight into the theoretical terrain mapped out by these multiple applications. I analyse the often-symbolic use of hijra figures precisely for their multiplicity and for their seemingly contradictory associations.

This will by no means be the first time scholarly attention has been paid to the hijras. As Reddy acknowledges in her own anthropological study, itself dating back to 2005, ‘in the last decade or so, there have been at least four documentaries or news features… four ethnographies or book-length monographs… three books of fiction… at least two dissertations… and several undergraduate honors these s that focus explicitly on hijras.’ Since then, the numbers have increased in all these areas, including half the corpus of literary texts to be scrutinised in this thesis.

Despite the proliferation of academic interest in hijras, Reddy’s study and what is widely hailed as the seminal anthropological study of hijras, written by Serena Nana, remain the two most often-utilised core texts for academic interest in the hijras. The two studies, both broadly anthropological in nature whilst contextualising the studies with a large amount of historical, mythological and theoretical material, appear to offer the most complete studies of contemporary hijras’ lived experiences and the most depth in relation to their histories and the roots of their current difficulties. However, when comparing the two it becomes immediately clear that the writers of fiction are not the only ones to construct hijras from specific vantage points which distort the material to particular ends. This is not to unduly criticise Nanda and Reddy as authors, but instead demonstrates that, when it comes to defining and describing hijras and their associations, a level of constructedness is inevitable, woven together as the subject is with intersecting religious, political and sexual concerns which cannot but be affected by the theoretical approach of the researcher. For this reason, it became clear in the writing of this thesis that it would be inappropriate to lean too heavily on the anthropological literature as a way of understanding the ‘truth’ of hijras’ lives, or to put these accounts in direct contrast with the fiction as, supposedly, the constructed texts. Instead, I explore here some of the issues to which I am

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19Reddy, With Respect to Sex, pp.2-3.
referring, as a way in to understanding the loaded nature of the hijra category in wider discourse, and its intimate connections with concepts which go far beyond the individual.

First published in 1990, Serena Nanda’s study *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* was reissued as a second edition in 1999 with relatively substantial changes; though chapters one through nine have not been altered, there are ‘major revisions in chapter 10’ which Nanda argues have been ‘necessitated by burgeoning new cross-cultural research on gender variation, the historical work by Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet on third genders in ancient Indian texts, and new, exciting ethnography among hijras by Gayatri Reddy, Lawrence Cohen, and Kira Hall’, as well as a wider academic attentiveness to distinctions between gender, sex and sexuality and ‘increasing acceptance of the cultural construction of gender’ necessitating re-phrasings and re-conceptualisations of some of the concepts with which the text works.20

However, despite this reframing and the fact that Nanda does consider numerous axes of hijra identity, she consistently reads Hinduism as the primary category through which hijras must be understood. Even where other factors, such as sexuality or social marginality, are considered, Nanda reads them through the initial category of religion. Whilst I have no disagreement with the linking of hijras and some form of Hindu history, or (where relevant and reliable) a continuing association with Hinduism, I do - as shall become clear in the following analysis, particularly chapters one and four - recognise that this has had the effect of deeply skewing, and in many places limiting, representations of hijras. In addition, working almost exclusively through this frame of reference has the dangerous potential to depoliticise, indeed to justify, hijra marginalisation through Hindu mythology, or to use the hijras’ past glory to mark yet more strongly their current ‘fall’ to marginalisation and stigmatisation. This recognition may be valuable, but its abstraction to just one line of reasoning fails to tackle the range of social issues which hijras face and thus limits the capacity to provide a fully comprehensive account.

20Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman*, xii.
The reduction of hijras to symbols of Hinduism becomes clear immediately, with Nanda stating in the second sentence of the preface that ‘[t]he hijras are a religious community of men who dress and act like women and whose culture centers on the worship of Bahuchara Mata, one of the many versions of the Mother Goddess worshiped throughout India.’ She goes on to repeat the claim that they are ‘hijras- eunuchs- neither men nor women’ and argues that ‘[i]t is through their identification with the Mother Goddess, and the female creative power that she embodies, that the hijras are given a special place in Indian culture and society. Hijras, as neither men nor women, function as an institutionalized third gender role.’

Within the first paragraph Nanda undermines the hijras’ gendered identities by defining them in negative terms, then attempts to rescue their social position from this status-of-lack by appealing directly to Hinduism to give them credence. There is a semi-explicit argument here that, without Hinduism to grant them a place, the hijras would be simply imposters, dressing and acting as something they are not; they are not men or women, but they get to fulfil a third gender role because of the Goddess.

Reading Nanda’s enquiry as coming almost exclusively through a lens of religious investigation is not simply an interpretation of the text, but something Nanda herself makes clear near the end of the book. Here, Nanda explains how she put forward her research to the hijras she met, saying that she decided against ‘social work’ as she didn’t want to interpret them as a ‘social problem’, so instead she ‘decided, rather, to introduce my research to the hijras by focusing on my interest in Indian “religion,” a topic of great interest to almost all Indians, and a tradition within which the hijras place themselves with pride’. When explaining the testimonial chapters, in which Nanda recounts hijras’ own life stories gathered during her fieldwork, Nanda states that she ‘organized each narrative around topics that seemed to me to have the most significance for the narrator, indicated by the person’s statement about their importance and also by the emotional quality of the speech and nonverbal behavior accompanying the telling of the

21 Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, ix.
22 Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.153.
Evidently, the information given will have been effected by the way the research was initially presented to the hijras, and this doubly selective process further frames their stories through the lens set up by the researcher.

The first three chapters explicitly foreground Hindu mythology as a key component of hijra identity; given that this is their overt remit, the content (which focuses largely on Shiva and Bahuchara Mata) is unsurprising. The placing of this material up front does, however, privilege a religious basis as a way to understanding the ideas raised later, in which Nanda discusses the wider social positioning and the sexual and gender connotations attached to hijras. There are also explicit elisions of Indian culture to mean Hindu culture in these early chapters, such as the comment (during a badhai performance) that ‘[t]he hijras called on the Indian Mother Goddess, Parvati, and their own special goddess, Bahuchara Mata… It is for this role that the hijras are given the greatest respect, and it is this role that defines their identity in relation to the world around them.’

This point is repeated a little later on, in the argument that ‘[t]hese performances are the sanctioned cultural function of the hijras and the major legitimization of their existence’, which both appeals to Hinduism as the only way for hijras to form a social niche and narrows the concept of culture to this framework.

The major challenge to Nanda’s reading of hijras comes from their links to Islam, including clear evidence given by the hijras she studies that Islam is central to their understandings of themselves and their community. Once again, the issue is not that Nanda omits this material, but rather that she reads it through a primarily Hindu lens and attempts to incorporate it within her prior understanding, rather than allowing the material to expand her premise:

[W]hat seems a great contradiction - the prestige accorded Islam in a community that centers on the worship of a Hindu goddess - did not seem to pose any problem for the hijras I met. Nor did any of the Muslim hijras I knew seem to have any problem belonging to a community whose religious

\[\text{Nanda, } \text{Neither Man Nor Woman, p.114.}\]
\[\text{Nanda, } \text{Neither Man Nor Woman, p.2.}\]
\[\text{Nanda, } \text{Neither Man Nor Woman, p.6.}\]
aspect centers on devotion to a Hindu goddess and other rituals that are contrary or even offensive to Islam.26

A similar reframing takes place when Nanda interprets the story told by Kamladevi, one of the subjects of her anthropological study. Kamladevi argues that young people/new recruits become hijras ‘because of the sexual desire [for men]. Why else would we wear saris?... Someone who has already had a relationship with a hijra, he will come to us and show us the state of his desire. Then we are attracted.’27 In contrast, ‘when you become old you become less desirous of this sexual interest and think more of religion. It is only from getting older.’28 Rather than accept the linear progression attested to by Kamladevi, Nanda comments that ‘[w]henever she talked about her life among the hijras, she seemed to alternate between viewing it as having authentic ritual validity and as being merely a convenient niche in society for gender “misfits” like herself,’ finding ways, even uncomfortable ones, to make the religious aspect relevant to each and every hijra. 29

Reddy and the authors following her mark a (partial) turn towards a more diverse religious association, as well as non-religiously based understandings of hijra identity and community. In With Respect To Sex, Reddy does take account of Hindu aspects of hijra social organisation and identity formation, but does not read hijra identity through these aspects, nor reduce the hijra category to a form of Hindu devotion. Instead, Hinduism is more firmly placed within a matrix of associations which intersect, and in which hijras are cast as active participants rather than symbols of pre-determined structures.

For instance, Reddy opens with a story about being perceived as a possible hijra when she first approached the group; once the hijras realise this is not the case, they attribute the unusual aspects of her appearance (including ‘uncommonly short hair for a woman’) ‘not to [Reddy’s] sexuality or sexual orientation, but to

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26Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, pp.41-42.
27Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.51.
28Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.51.
29Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.55.
[her] upper-middle-class status’. Reddy then explains that she mentions this for the following reason:

Quite apart from privileging a particular theory, history, and politics of representation, I raise this issue to underscore a fairly simple point: the notion that sexual difference is not the only lens through which hijras perceive the world and expect in turn to be perceived... hijras are not just a sexual or gendered category, as is commonly contended in the literature (e.g.... Nanda 1990). Like the members of any other community in India, their identities are shaped by a range of other axes. Though sex/gender is perhaps the most important of these axes, hijra identity cannot be reduced to this frame of analysis... this book explores the domain of sexuality as well as its articulation with broader contexts of everyday life in South Asia, including aspects of kinship, religion, class, and hierarchies of respect.

As well as situating hijras in a broader discourse generally, Reddy also avoids strictly defining them in gendered and sexed terms, instead saying that:

For the most part, hijras are phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation— that is, an excision of the penis and testicles— dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata [sic]. Subsequently they are believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on newlyweds or newborn children. They see this as their “traditional” ritual role, although at least half of the current hijra population (at least in Hyderabad) engages in prostitution, which hierarchically senior “ritual specialists” greatly disparage.

30 Reddy, With Respect to Sex, p.1.
31 Reddy, With Respect to Sex, pp.1-2.
32 Reddy, With Respect to Sex, p.2.
Very similar information is given here to Nanda’s introduction, but it is mitigated and contextualised to a much greater extent, clearly differentiating between the official narrative and lived reality. Yet whilst Reddy is evidently more conscious of the tendency to construct hijras through one core frame of reference, and the potential dangers of doing so, she does ultimately follow Nanda’s approach. Instead of privileging Hinduism as the primary locus of hijra identity, Reddy uses izzat, which she translates as respect, and co-ordinates her understanding of hijras’ intersecting identities through this concept. Overall, according to Reddy, the book argues that...

...the axis of sexual difference through which hijras have traditionally been understood is intersected by a variety of other axes of identity, including religion, gender, kinship, and class. Further, in each of these interconnected domains, hijras, I argue, are deeply implicated in the local moral economy of izzat, or respect, a value that provides the primary impetus for the construction of their identities.33

Between this text and Nanda’s, then, the core information being put forwards is not contradictory, but whilst both draw on similar issues, it is the weighting they give each framework of reference and the way that certain concepts are read as extensions or manifestations of underlying ones, that leads to different constructions of hijras overall. Where Nanda reads hijras as symbols of Hinduism, and can only take her investigation of secular and other-religious aspects of their identities as far as it can be subsumed within this wider understanding, Reddy is attentive to the need to look at intersections and overlaps between different factors, but still ultimately funnels them through a core concept of respect. Whilst this does seem to be productive for broadening the text’s remit, ultimately it is clear that the anthropological material is as deeply invested in constructing hijras in particular ways as the fictional material. As such, I tread lightly with this material in this thesis. Yet it is fruitful, nonetheless, to begin this analysis by

acknowledging that even the academic and anthropological material is deeply invested not just in understanding who the hijras are, but with questions of what they stand for, how they negotiate space and what frames of reference they draw on to do so. It has been seen that the answer to these questions varies between authors, pointing to the social impetus to explain and categorize them at odds with the complexity of their reality. With this understanding in mind, I can approach the constructions of hijras featuring in literary representations as one realisation of this broader debate.

The emphases of this project may be unique, but consideration of identity labels as part of a complex, interdependent matrix of forces coming together to represent the individual have been and are being discussed at length by academics concerned with alternative sexualities. A substantial amount of this body of theory places itself at a distance from hegemonic theories of identity, such as the canonical Queer or Feminist texts which have mostly come out of the Western academy.

Borne out of a concern with both the distorting effects of Western approaches and the need for contextual knowledge, specific criticisms of these approaches have been put forward by numerous authors, including Spivak, Mani and the work of the Subaltern Studies collective. These critics stress the need for the subaltern subject to tell their own story, not out of divisive individualism but rather as a means of avoiding the pitfalls of distortion or consumption of particular

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Here I am referring to work by writers such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, J. Halberstam, Luce Irigaray and Sigmund Freud; whilst these theorists have made huge advances in thinking about alternative sexualities in a range of historical and spatial contexts, there are two major issues for these purposes. First, there is a tendency to isolate gender and/or sexuality running through these works, which whilst seeing these elements as influential to a person's subjectivity does not do justice to how their subject location has constituted their sexual or gender identity; rather, gender identity and sexual orientation are seen as fixed, though by no means inherent, identity factors which may conflict with one's situation but stand alone from one's racial or class position. Whilst gender and sexual norms are admitted as changeable and outwardly imposed, there is presumed to be a core gender and sexual identity which can be established if these norms are not taken as truth. This is at odds with the different presentations of alternative sexual and gender identity evidenced by considering different geographical and historical subjects. Second, and in connection, these writers assume an American or Euro-centricism which, as shall be seen, is disputed by those writing outside of the Western academy for presuming one particular approach to identity as universal. This approach, being distinct from the way in which identity is envisaged in many other locations, cannot fully take on non-Western subjects' understandings of their own position, and so is only able to understand these subjects from its own structural basis rather than on their own terms, giving an incomplete and misguided picture. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble; Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Vintage, 1990); J. Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (London: Imago, 1949).

grounded experiences when they fall within the purview of the Western academy. Consistently, they argue, the subject becomes objectified and thus silenced when viewed through this lens, and thus there is a need to look closely at the particular conditions appropriate to the subject, and to allow their voice to be accurately heard rather than only noted as that of the occidental other subsumed as an alternate version of the West’s own vision. This is not to say that only self-identified third-world feminists can address these works. Writers such as Mohanty and Narayan in particular argue that such divisions are detrimental to the project at hand. For one thing, third-world subjects are often as invested in hegemonic theory as many Western writers, identifying their position relative to the Western academy and ‘imposing’ on themselves’ specific, non-disruptive roles ‘because of their own concerns and sense of location as Third-World subjects in mainstream Western settings, and due to their own sense of the “cultural politics” of these settings’, becoming ‘emissaries’, ‘mirrors’ and ‘authentic insiders’ of the third-world within the first-world’s academic limits. Any hope of altering the structure of such fields can only come about through solidarity which not only recognises but harnesses diversity; rather than eliding individuals’ subjectivity into hegemonic structures, all participants must ‘be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances’, and must be understood as capable of representing themselves rather than relying on representation by others assuming academic and cultural privileges.

In addition, it is evident that many Western writers, such as the influential anthropologist Bernard Cohn, are also making important contributions to the field, owing more to their methodologies and attention to context than their own background. To value here only those writers who fall into a narrow definition of South-Asian Queer or feminist theory at the expense of all others would be detrimental and to label this body of work in opposition to ‘Western writers’ would be reductive and divisive; indeed, the most likely outcome of this

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37 Narayan, Dislocating Cultures, p.122.
methodology would be the creation of a parallel and equally flawed version of exactly the structure which Mohanty and others criticize, namely a narrow, exclusive academy with little recognition of the larger historiographical landscape in which it inherently operates. Rather, it seems appropriate to discuss theories of alternative sexuality which move away from or contest dominant, hegemonic academic theories, and are particularly relevant to the Indian contexts at hand.

I locate my work in parallel to this discourse, taking as its starting point the recognition that in the process of being written/spoken about, subjects are constructed in ways which are not only imprecise but manipulative, problematic and can be made to work contrary to the ideals of those being spoken for, actively extending and justifying their oppression. However, this work departs from the aforementioned account in that instead of replacing colonising accounts with self-writing, it seeks critically to interrogate the former representations precisely as orientalising, neo-colonial fantasies. In part this stems from my own position: though I locate myself as a queer subject, I also recognise myself as a white, British, cisgendered academic and therefore as a potential replicator of exactly the kind of speaking-for account which writers from outside the Eurocentric mainstream seek to counter. Instead, and more importantly, I recognise that texts about marginal subjects which present them in distorted and politicised ways are still culturally dominant and have biopolitical implications for the lived experience of these subjects; my project is fundamentally to interrogate rather than replace this corpus, though this act will hopefully contribute towards ongoing de-centring of Eurocentric, homo-normative and patriarchal narratives as the cultural norm. The majority of the literature being analysed in the course of this thesis is particularly recent, with all having been written in the last three decades, and so the imperative to interrogate its claims from the beginning rather than offer a revisionist analysis later on is particularly acute.

This thesis begins from a Foucauldian approach to knowledge construction, in which biopolitical tensions around gender, identity and representation are seen to manifest in cultural production. At first glance its four chapters appear to

construct a historical analysis, one using broad, troubling religious categorisations as its framework, and immediately questions are raised. However, expansion upon the terminology and methodology used will demonstrate that it is precisely through unravelling these terms, and a close reading of the overlapping, overlaying and overriding going on between them, that I intend to construct a reading of hijra representations which explores very little that represents a search for the ‘connaisance’/truth of the hijra, but rather a reconstruction of the ‘savoir’/knowledge of the hijra from the available literature.41

That is to say, the separation of the material into blocks of religious-historical time works as a means of organisation to allow the interrogation of ethico-political discourses at work in changing contexts. The aim of this thesis is to explore the way that hijras have been represented by other writers, and not to offer an alternative commentary on hijras’ lived experiences. As such, as problematic as it may be to divide time into discreet blocks governed by Eurocentric understandings of power and the nation state, it is essential that this enquiry follows the path taken by earlier writers, as a means of following their constructions to critique and dissect them. By bringing to the forefront the frameworks within which different ideological systems have operated, this methodology underlines the conscious organisation of state projects of biopolitical control and ideologically-informed systems of social organisation. This methodology enables the analysis to ask questions akin to those put forward by Richard King in his interrogation of the concept of ‘mysticism’ as applied to Hinduism from those outside of it, a useful comparison for this context. King asks, ‘[i]n any given sociohistorical context, what is the agenda of power underlying a particular characterization...? What evaluative judgements are being made in the decision to include or exclude certain phenomena from the category? What is at stake in giving a particular definition of the subject matter?’42 Understanding the need to ask these questions and the variation in responses coming from different sociohistorical backgrounds would, rather than strictly dividing the material into Hindu, Muslim, Christian, secular, organise it under these terms only as a means of accessing the wider socio-political currency with which the image of the hijra has been invested in historical contexts.

41 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, p.11.
In all, then, this thesis does not aim to ask what was the position, played out in lived experience and documented in the available literature, of the hijra community when [Hinduism/Islam/Christianity] was the order of the day?, but rather to begin to query, what has been the impact on the accumulated socio-symbolic status of the hijra, when the dominant contextual, ethico-political ideology was informed by understandings of social order backed, in discourse, by doctrine(s) informed by, and at many points asserted as having been derived from, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, or a secular state narrative?

In these ideological frameworks, I see the building blocks of biopolitical control which have opened up opportunities but also created serious barriers around the hijras, and between them and their peers. In this, I take my lead from Gayatri Reddy, who identifies these issues and utilises the same methodology in addressing them. Reddy argues that ‘[f]our somewhat distinct constructions of the third sex dominate the existing literature, which I broadly categorize as the ancient, medieval, colonial and contemporary anthropological, each representing both a chronological moment and an analytic concern in the representations of hijras. I address each of these representations... as they analyze hijras in different epochs, each with its own particular critical agenda.’

In this thesis, I devote the early stages of each chapter to expanding on the relevant historical context- Hindu mythology, the Mughal period, British imperialism and Postcolonial India in turn- and its moral and religious, as well as legal, dimensions when it came or comes to the hijras and, more widely, the organisation of gender as a system of understanding and efficiently utilising the available population. The later stages of each chapter are devoted to an analysis of the uses to which these cultural archetypes are put in the project of cultural knowledge-building. I examine the literature which has used and embedded history’s shifting associations with the hijras, to better understand the role each has played in the construction of its counterpart and the cumulative impact on the hijra as social symbol in contemporary Indian socio-political imaginaries.

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43 Reddy, With Respect to Sex, p.18.
Without wishing to unreasonably overrepresent the British influence on what is clearly a much longer-standing and more complex community, it will be seen in the course of this thesis that there was a deciding shift in the hijras’ public understandings and opportunities instigated by their criminalisation under the British Raj. This key rupture in their social standing is still being actively fought in the present, with campaigns ongoing to decriminalise hijras’ identities and secure their rights, a debate which will be investigated in chapter four. The decision taken by the British administration to criminalise hijras was premised partly, as chapter three explores, on negative understandings of Mughal eunuchs, and so as well as exploring the British colonial period in depth it is necessary to gather an understanding of the way the categories of hijra and eunuch have been individually constructed and then made to interact with one another prior to British involvement. This line of enquiry forms the basis of chapters one and two, which explore representations of hijras drawn from Hindu mythology and Mughal eunuchs respectively. Two points become clear by regarding the thesis as a whole in this way: first, that although the chapters use an underlying framework of blocks of religious-historical time, they do not function as discreet investigations but, rather, there is a clear overarching conversation occurring between them; second, that following the chronology used by those impacting upon the situation is highly constructive for an enquiry such as this. In this case, building on colonial anxieties around eunuchs and hijras, and following the results of their amalgamation into the present day, helps to unpack the highly-charged web of associations which surround and construct hijras.

Chapter one explores the hijras’ relationship with the sacred in Hindu mythology and its retellings. These myths and their widely varied re-readings are understood as, on the one hand, contributing to theoretical, cultural concepts of gendering in India, creating a social space into which hijras have attempted to fit, and on the other hand as part of the hijras’ on-going shift into a role incorporating other, sometimes conflicting, social narratives, loaded with public associations which extend beyond their gender.

When used by the hijras, these origin myths generally demonstrate their importance and prestige and are used to substantiate their position within Indian
culture, coded as ‘tradition’, and to attest to a lost golden age in which they had rights, value and status.\textsuperscript{44} However, the hijras are no longer, if indeed they ever were, read exclusively through a Hindu framework, and where they are these references are not always positive. From being the brunt of jokes framed within stories from the Ramayana to the complex relationship between hijras and Hindutva in the current political climate, the hijras’ position within Hinduism is as much a negotiation as the other elements of their identity matrix. Themselves outside of the reproductive, familial cycle of life, hijras are said to possess the ability to bless or curse the fertility of others, leading to their traditional role singing at the bringing home of a new bride or following the birth of a son. The centrality of family to Hindu views of the world means there is a place for those who assist families even though they ‘can’t’ form them, but simultaneously that they will never be fully human in themselves. Hijras occupy dual positions of being at the margins of society and being symbolically outside of it in their ‘transcendent’ position with regards to human sexuality; they are, in the social imaginary, both more and less than human. Their image as sacred and their physical outcaste status go hand in hand. This renders them, in the broad outline presented to Western audiences, as figures of the ‘present absent’; visible and narrativised, their position is nonetheless fixed outside of the social margins, a spectral social figure which takes part in social rituals without being a part of the cycle of life. Whilst not without its benefits, this body of literature therefore reinforces the hijras’ passive marginalisation, setting up many of the misunderstandings and misappropriations of the symbol of the hijra in Western attention.

Following the establishment of this academic and cultural backdrop, I begin to interrogate the ways in which ‘hijra’ as a symbolic category has come to be loaded, leading the way into a consideration of how this image has morphed, fractured and been multiply claimed over time. The primary focus of the chapter is on the way that an image of the hijras as sacred and traditional has been renegotiated in its literary uses. The literary analysis demonstrates first a movement over time away from seeing the sacred as a justificatory narrative, moving into irrelevance as other dimensions of hijra representations take centre stage, and then, secondly, a shift in

\textsuperscript{44} Reddy, \textit{With Respect to Sex}, pp.89-91.
the actual nature of the relationship between hijras and Hinduism as this public image, of them being read through axes such as public sexuality, comes into conflict with revised understandings of Hinduism in a Hindu nationalist context. This chapter demonstrates poignantly that stories can be reused for entirely contrary purposes, coming together to form an image of hijras as peripheral, archaic and irrelevant, or as aggressive, manipulative and terrifying, harnessing the worst of their mythological associations and disregarding the positives. This chapter finds its natural complement in chapter four, which explores the political environment of present-day India in sharper focus, an environment in which the strained relationship between increasingly narrow and politicised readings of Hinduism are brought into direct conflict with gender alterity and the figures who personify it.

Chapter two moves on to analyse the meeting of this understanding of traditional, Hinduism-inflected hijras with a bio-genetically similar, but socially very distinct, group in the form of eunuchs in the Mughal empire. From at least 1526, a highly specific idea of ‘eunuchs’ collided with pre-existing hijra-identified non-binary gendering. The idea of the eunuch brought its own political, social and religious ramifications, as well as a new relationship with the marketplace focused on the body, perceived as sexually neutral, as the enabling feature, rather than any supernatural powers with which it was invested. But simultaneously the earlier understanding of hijras discussed in chapter one continued through this period, and it would be wrong to assume that imperialism wiped out traditional understandings or even that the state intended to or in actuality did impose itself on the mass of the social body.

It is clear then that the approach set out in my methodology - in which each subsequent chapter is laid over those prior, rather than being seen to replace it - is going to be essential for this discussion, in which it is often the interplay between co-existing social, ethical and religious codes which produced marginal identities. In a sense, hijras were becoming ‘Hindu’ for the first time in being defined against eunuchs, who were not. However, as the literary analyses will demonstrate, authors of fiction distinguish the two categories not to strengthen the hijras’ associations with Hinduism, tradition or the sacred, but to cast them as being
hypersexual and associated with marginality and low status in contradistinction to eunuchs. At other points the authors take a different turn, once again with the result of casting the hijras in a negative light; in these instances, the categories of hijra and eunuch are both read as having negative elements and the two are then merged to construct figures of hyperbolic deviance and danger.

Bearing in mind this historical context, I turn my attention to literature which features hijras and eunuchs alongside one another; some of the texts conflate the two identities in ways that are constructive for considering 'thirdness' as a conceptual category utilised by binary-gendered authors, whilst some of them do the opposite, standing the figure of the hijra against that of the eunuch in order to encode particular attributes distinctly in each identity. Whilst I understand the two identities to be distinct from one another, it seems useful to follow the train of thought happening in conflation alongside that of separation as a way in to understanding the uses to which alterity is put by wider society; indeed, as shall become clear in chapter three, this conflation became codified in the law as British imperialists read hijras as eunuchs and criminalised them under that name, in the process demonstrating that some of the fears involved in this legal attack on both communities stemmed from the perceived political threat of the eunuchs as well as the threat to social order represented by non-binary genders.

This analysis underlines the defining elements which facilitated and cemented the new identity of 'eunuch': the specificity of their position as third-gendered, and not simply as 'lacking men', for solving the complex social protocols brought up by interactions between genders; their connotations of being trustworthy and dependable precisely because of their third-gender status (being separated from the reproductive order and thus unable to establish a dynasty of their own); and the introduction of the idea of slavery to the experience of gender alterity. The figure of the hijra is then defined in opposition to these attributes: where eunuchs can act as a go-between protecting the propriety of interactions between the binary genders, hijras are peripheral, and can access social interactions only at moments specifically marked by fertility and the coming-together of binary genders; where eunuchs are trustworthy and dependable, hijras are marked by fear and suspicion from those outside of their community, and by mystery and
superstition within; where eunuchs are slaves, hijras are free, but this if anything lowers them on the social ladder by begging questions of what sort of person would choose this life for themselves, becoming loaded as figures of deviance rather than simply viewed with pity. Through these constructions it becomes evident that authors use eunuchs not to add historical weight to the idea of long-standing gender alterity in India, but to cement their negative image of the hijras by opposing the two categories at strategic points, strategic because they are carefully chosen to cast hijras in the lower position.

Though the British may have encountered a decentralised Mughal state which enabled them to begin annexation of Indian territory from 1759, it is my argument in chapter three that they also found, and reacted strongly to, integrated systems of gender alterity and productive roles for third gender individuals, though bound up in discourses of slavery, sexuality and religious service. In British imperial ideologies, sexual degeneracy was a marker of under-civilisation. As such, the inclusion of third gender individuals in political systems was not only intolerable, but actively attested to the Mughals being unfit to rule, and India as being in need of the interventions of the civilising mission. This discussion stems naturally from the context defined in chapter two, but I first contextualise the British imperial project of the civilising mission and corresponding attempts to 'rationalise' and restrict gender and sexual performativity for biopolitical reasons of state control and ordering. Equipped with an understanding of the colonial outline for a viable Indian gendered social body, it will be possible to move further to consider the effects upon the hijras of the legal boundaries set under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 and the Criminal Castes and Tribes Act of 1871.

This chapter also uses archival records of discussions between British officials preceding the introduction of laws relating to the hijras which attest to the processes of colonial decision-making involved. Terminologies of natural law based on the colonisers’ view of themselves as the bringers of order, and order itself as the necessary foundation for civilization, here go hand in hand with legal shifts which introduced formal registration and control structures, and colonial ideologies of social structuring can be seen hard at work. Ideas of appropriate gender performance and sexological knowledge were undergoing major shifts in
Britain contemporary to these interventions, and recognition of the imposition of these forms of knowledge is vital in this section.

Important decisions were being made here about what constituted the private and what constituted the public, with different answers for different people. By making this separation between the private, which was to some degree sacred, and the public, which was territory fit for legal control and in which gender alterity was to be included, the hijra is separated from religious tradition and status; the seeds of the hijras’ secularisation are being sown, even as the conscious aim is to ‘Christianize’ the moral grounding of the Indian population. This project becomes visible as a distinct, colonial codification of gender as a technology of biopolitical control: a task not only of outlawing that which currently exists, but of grafting alien knowledge structures onto Indian society to create its own frameworks and categories. The analysis recognises the criminalisation of the hijras, through both the Criminal Tribes Act and Section 377, as a mechanism in this machine rather than goals in isolation.

The first section of chapter three therefore examines the discourses surrounding the introduction of the Indian Penal Code, specifically Section 377 (‘Unnatural Offences’), and the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) in particular, set within a backdrop of legal interventions into Indian community organisation, and a pervasive colonial restructuring of sexual interpellations and gendered possibilities. The colonial state in India attempted to establish British rationalism as the singular path to progression, renouncing local models and structures, seeking to manipulate social reality rather than to comprehend it in any reflective form. The legislation under discussion marks two sites of this manipulation: active sites of negotiation and direct action, and the trickle-down effect on both being and representing the hijras in a redefined social landscape.

The chapter then turns to consider these themes- of the enforced disappearance of the hijras from community life, of their associations with deviance and criminality, and with wider questions of social order and control played out through structures of gender- in relation to three literary texts for which silence, secrecy and deviance are central tropes surrounding the hijras. In
the British imagination, the Mughal eunuch and the Hindu hijra, both part of a chain of gurus and disciples who acted as the guardians of sexuality, became the innately criminal urban eunuch, infected with deviance through the guru-disciple structure and always ready to contaminate the social populous further. It is unsurprising then, given this framework of fear and disgust, that the image of the hijras as deviant guardians of the underworld have permeated much of the fiction which considers them, and that silence and invisibility have come to be major associations gathered around their mysterious, often threatening, forms. In considering such cultural productions, I situate the hijras in a wider discourse which is both fretful over and endlessly intrigued by 'delving into' this underworld, considering in the process the colonial image of the unsettlingly uncontainable nature of India, representing the constant threat of the re-emergence of sexuality and disorder.

The final chapter works with postcolonial literature, both in a chronological sense and in making most explicit the postcolonial theoretical framework which informs this thesis throughout. Chapter four examines how the hijra image is made to represent in a contemporary India which is simultaneously positioned as a postcolonial, secular democracy and as a nation in which the political right is gaining strong ground, allied with an overt and narrow image of Hinduism encapsulated in the Hindutva ideology. The chapter questions the discourses these terms create, used as identity claims and as labels, around ideas of nationality, tradition, the remit of the social corpus and from what sources the state’s underlying ethico-political framework(s) ought to be drawn.

At the time of writing, Section 377 is currently still in force, having been read down in 2009 but reintroduced in 2013 and currently awaiting the verdict of a constitutional review bench. Simultaneously, a law which deals explicitly with those identifying as gender non-binary has undergone numerous manifestations in the Indian courts and is still currently pending. What began as the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill (2014) has morphed into a worrying and biologically-determined manifestation in its current iteration as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016, prompting the campaign #stopTGBill because of fears about it being used for exactly the opposite of its earliest remit. The 2016 bill
no longer holds the state accountable for ensuring its stipulations are carried out, effectively stripping it down to a list of suggestions for how non-binary people might be better served by and treated in society, without any oversight to ensure this is the case. Simultaneously, the revised version of the bill has replaced the ability to self-identify as transgender with the necessity for individuals to present themselves to a committee for bodily examination, an invasive and reductive understanding of gender. However, application of the analysis in this thesis to contemporary debates around sexual and gender minorities, including the ongoing struggle for permanent decriminalisation and an end to police and public abuse, is beyond the scope of this thesis; in my conclusion, I articulate the uses to which the findings of this thesis may be put in such a project.

Instead, the chapter considers this context alongside the narrative of state secularisation in India to pinpoint the changing community position of the hijras. Evidently, moral judgement continues to be applied to their actions from the state level, and persecution on the grounds of identity (through police abuse and targeting) is still very much a threat. Yet simultaneously, within India—indeed, even by the Supreme Court itself—hijras are formally being understood as a part of India’s religious and spiritual heritage, even as they are condemned in their present guise. This combined nostalgia for a ‘traditional’ hijra past is set against aversion to the perceived hijra present, in which hijras are seen as aggressive, often ‘fake’ in their gender representation (with strong associations of deviance mixed in with the idea of this as a performance) and almost unanimously identified with prostitution.

The focus of the chapter is to trace the character of the hijra as a ghostly figure in fiction, ghostly in an intricate sense: present yet unsubstantiated, a being which is defined not by its absence and invisibility but precisely for making visible and forcing a confrontation with that which is itself ephemeral, a charged encounter bringing fear and disorder into unavoidable view, whilst simultaneously disallowing the ghostly spectacle a subject status beyond these conditions. In these examples of popular cultural production, hijra characters haunt the social margins as empty vessels of Otherness waiting to be filled with the living social body’s ideological refuse; they are the drug users turned pushers, the prostitutes of an
especially perverted market, the friendless murder victims who nonetheless trouble and haunt the authorities, and the neurotic, illegitimate children of more socially-fortunate characters. Either they are ‘fallen’ - an association I believe is in no small part drawn from the continued criminalisation of their actions as their identities become more and more formally recognised - or they are parodies, hyperbolic mockeries of gender which demonstrate their distance from an aesthetic, sacred past as well as from mainstream society. Always intimately connected with the crowd, they are never a part of it; these texts feature and affect the hijra, but they are not about nor are they for hijras in any true sense.

In summary, then, this thesis shows how authors of fiction construct hijra characters to operate as narrative devices, facilitating sensationalised narratives based in a world of criminality, exoticism and eroticism. These constructions are inconsistent with the hijras’ sacred positions in Hindu mythology and the esteem enjoyed by eunuchs in the Mughal empire. Yet it is not by ignoring these histories that the authors of fiction are able to depict deviant hijra characters. Instead, it is precisely through drawing on these references in distorted, negativized forms that the authors construct and naturalise these figures.
Chapter One: Hijras in Hindu Mythology and its Retellings

This chapter is concerned with mythological origin stories attributed to hijras, which take two interlinked forms. First, it explores representations of hijras within sacred Hindu literature, before turning to consider how these ideas are reworked in later use. This analysis presents an understanding of the social position allotted to hijras and the gender system this constructs before considering how this position is reimagined in fiction, which (re)presents and revises these stories to construct a different understanding of gendered otherness. Taken together, the two readings demonstrate the ambivalent and negotiated position of hijras as simultaneously conceptually privileged and physically marginalised. My examination of Hindu hijra identity formation has two overlapping areas of investigation: first, I consider understandings of gender and wider forms of alterity in Hindu cosmology, as a means of establishing the underlying backdrop upon which non-binary categories, particularly ‘hijra’, are built. Second, I consider particular, key examples of hijras and androgynous figures in Hindu mythology, which are alluded to in later academic accounts, literary renditions and by hijras themselves to point to certain aspects of their identities, and to validate certain elements of their behaviour and social expectations.

Hijras in Hindu Mythology and its Interpretations

Before discussing the relationship between hijras and specific gods and stories, it is necessary to provide something of an overview of Hindu understandings of gender and identity alterity more widely; whilst this will be, by necessity, a brief overview of the key relevant strands of argument rather than a deep analysis of the arguments themselves, it provides a much needed means of understanding the wider socio-religious landscape that hijras must negotiate both as a gender and as individuals within society. As George M. Williams puts it, ‘[m]yth’s power arises
from its ability to articulate the existential need for identity’ and allows individuals to ‘locate oneself within the community’s worldview’ and, as such, shared mythological and cosmological understandings of gender possibilities affect identity on the levels both of individual formation and social cohesion. I do not intend to make the claim that a Hindu cosmological understanding of the world is sufficient to understand the hijras. However, in the context of current Indian politics, which has seen a rise of and consolidation of power for right-wing ideologies backed up by a discourse which appeals to Hinduism, wider socio-cultural constructions of what a Hindu social system ought to look like have taken on more political sensitivity and tangible consequences for the lived experiences of hijras. Urgent academic attention to these matters is thus a necessary contribution towards contemporary discourses about the legal protection and social position made available to hijras. Many of these ideas will be returned to in chapter four, which examines the postcolonial context specifically, but this chapter acts as a necessary pre-cursor by examining shifts in public understandings, underscored by literary representations, of hijras’ social value and links, positive, negative or false, to the sacred. This chapter thus functions as an exploration of the historical Hindu origins of hijra identity and as a context for the present social terrain they negotiate.

A core belief in Hinduism is, effectively, the constant suspension of disbelief. That is to say, the idea that all things are possible is repeated numerous times in numerous texts. Unlike the Judeo-Christian idea of one world which has been created and will, when the apocalypse arrives, be destroyed, Hinduism holds that the world is in a constant state of creation, destruction and creation anew. This is not the first, nor will it be the last, iteration of the world. Natural laws and the laws of physics are thus somewhat suspendable in a Hindu cosmology; whilst this does not preclude them from working at this time, in this iteration of the world, it also does not preclude them from changing, or from already having changed from an earlier iteration. If the gods demand it, the world can be changed to a currently

46For further elaboration on the cosmic cycles and the perceived impact of the current age on world events, see Julius Lipner, Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), chapter 13, ‘Reckoning Time and Progress’, pp.275-302.
47For further elaboration on the concept of the changeability of physical laws, see Williams, Handbook of Hindu Mythology, Chapter Two: ‘Mythic Time, Space and Causality’, pp.35-44. For further discussion both of divine intervention and of its
inconceivable form. Whilst it is not possible to explore the extent to which Hinduism takes a more literal reading of the intervention of the Gods in worldly events and physical laws, this analysis offers an exploration of one incident in which this is traditionally the case, and the idea that this nonetheless does not guarantee hijras a privileged social position where it meets with an inability to fit in with secular social structures such as gender.

The idea of limitless possibilities comes into play for the hijras when considering them as a gender category. If anything is possible, then there is no inherent need for gender to operate as a binary; there is no prototypical Adam and Eve to point to in order to justify a two-gendered, heteronormative ordering of the world. Even Robert Goldman, who is generally unconvinced by the argument that hijras are a natural consequence of a Hindu worldview and favours a psychoanalytic reading of hijras as a response to the supposedly Oedipal ‘fantasized fear of harm deriving from women and sexual intercourse with them’ he attributes to Indian society, concedes that ‘it may be true that traditional Hindu mythological texts appear to be more tolerant of ambiguity than their Western counterparts and... the culture has, at least since the epic period, allowed that there are three genders analogous to and homonymous with the three grammatical genders of Sanskrit’.

Undoubtedly, the relationships between men and women are hugely important within Hinduism, as evidenced by the Ashramas, the four life stages set out in ancient Hindu texts, which set out the correct path for men, including taking a wife and becoming a father and householder, and the duties of women, explicitly as wives and child-bearers. Yet whilst the imperative to fulfil each of these stages may govern the lives of men and women, there is nothing to say that other genders cannot exist, though they may be reduced to a lesser position in the social hierarchy. Thus, as a concept or category, non-binary individuals, including hijras, are in no way at odds with a Hindu outlook on the world as a whole.

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centrality in Hinduism as against Christianity, specifically, see Marcus Braybrooke, Hinduism: Rediscovering the Mystical (Mumbai: Jaico, 2004).

The idea that every individual has their own unique role to fulfil is known as dharma, and as George Williams has argued, ‘it is the duty that one is born into (varna-dharma, caste), the responsibilities one must shoulder according to one’s stage of life (asrama-dharma). In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna told Arjuna that it is better for him to do his own duty (svadharma) than to try to do someone else’s.’ Ultimately, by working their way through the same fundamental categories, but doing so in a way which is adaptive both to their life from birth (their circumstances and caste) and their specific life as it is lived, each individual does have a correct path, but must follow it in the way which is right for them; in so doing, society will be provided with all its needs as a whole, because each different necessary function will be fulfilled by someone. Doing what you are meant to do and that being different for different people together create a cohesive society.

It is, therefore, conceptually possible that there is something which could be termed a hijra dharma; that is to say, a correct way to behave and live as a hijra, though being a hijra in the first place would not be the correct path for everyone. Nanda argues that a belief in dharma ‘leads to creating a place for an enormous diversity of occupations, behaviours, and personal styles as long as these are seen as the working out of a life path; this is particularly so when the behaviour is sanctified by tradition, formalized in ritual, and practiced within a group’. With this tentative idea in mind, the fact that hijras are strongly associated with rituals surrounding fertility and the coming together of families, such as weddings and births, provides them with a role in the life stages of others which would not be possible if they were fulfilling these life stages themselves. William Dalrymple argues in his travelogue City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi, a text which will be returned to for close analysis at various points in this thesis, that at ‘a poor family’s most crucial and most public celebrations, at a marriage or at the birth of a male child, the absence of a hijra would almost invalidate the whole ceremony’. Hijras are therefore conceptually respected as a necessary piece of the social jigsaw. Yet simultaneously, being consigned to this role stops them from fulfilling the individual requirement to progress through specific life stages through having a

49 Williams, Handbook of Hindu Mythology, p.26, emphasis original.
50 Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.147.
51 Dalrymple, City of Djinns, p.172, emphasis original.
family of their own. Ultimately, this renders them incomplete individuals whose
function is to facilitate and complete the social fabric. Already, the systemic
ambivalence between hijras’ respected conceptual status and the disdain with
which specific hijras are treated is materialising. In specific mythological
references to the hijras, this ambivalence is not commonly immediately apparent.
The stories themselves afford prestige and a sacred status to the hijras, though
some do interweave the idea that to be a hijra is a curse in itself. However,
following this exploration I turn to consider the literary uses of these stories, and
in their reworkings these stories have the potential to attribute not only
ambivalence, but also outright negativity to the hijras.

The Hindu pantheon of Gods is immeasurably large, particularly when it is
taken into account that there are an almost infinite number of local variants and
that ‘there are often many versions of the same story and one version may
contradict the details of another’. In addition, many of the stories do not appear
in formal written texts, but rather are the product of oral traditions. Whilst this
makes it impossible to develop a fully comprehensive picture of the ways that
gender is imagined within Hindu mythology and folklore, it does not undermine
the value of these stories; instead, the orality of much of Hinduism enhances its
value by acting both as a focal point around which communities can organise their
social and moral codes and as a living corpus attesting to these values.

With this in mind, it would be impossible to give a comprehensive overview of
the entire mythological canon which pertains to hijras, including those stories
which feature characters changing gender or being of uncertain or non-binary
gender; instead, I here pick up on key associations explicitly drawn from
mythology which are used to explain the hijras as a community, many of which
feature in academic texts reflecting on their traditions. The corpus of this thesis is
texts which attempt to translate or (re)present the hijras in particular frameworks,
and to examine what those frameworks construct, how, and to what ends, and
therefore limiting the scope of this analysis to those texts which will be returned to
by others is both appropriate and, in examining them on their own first, a useful

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comparative exercise from which to see the particular usages and manipulations going on when these stories are returned to.

There are two core concepts which circulate around the hijras when they appear in Hindu mythology: sacrifice and cosmic unity. The two are not mutually exclusive, with unity for the whole often being achieved through individual sacrifice. Both of these associations depict the hijras as not only positive but actively sacred. The two come together through the idea of tapas. As Julius Lipner explains:

Renunciation builds up tapas... One's store of tapas can be 'used up' in a number of ways: tapas can be willed to burn up one's past, outstanding karma; this enables one to draw closer to final liberation from samsara. But one can also expend tapas by uttering a blessing or curse, or directing it to a specific end... a curse or blessing uttered on the basis of accumulated tapas can be very effective, if the circumstances for its fruition are realized. But tapas can also be used up to no good effect by an act of self-indulgence such as a fit of anger or sexual activity that culminates in orgasm. The classic symbol of the loss of tapas is the voluntary discharge of semen.53

By their extreme act of genital removal, hijras have clear protection against using up their tapas and a socially-recognised marker attesting to their renunciation. Whilst there are subtly negative elements to some of these stories in relation to the category of hijra, this does not extend to the individuals themselves, who are depicted in positive terms for being willing selflessly to take on this identity.

Cosmic unity is depicted as the outcome of bringing together masculine and feminine energies, and as fundamental to achieving balance in the world. One of the most prominent uses of this concept is in the figure of Ardhanarishvara, the merged form of Shiva and his wife Parvati, which McComas Taylor refers to as

53Julius Lipner, Hindus, p.287.
Shiva’s ‘famous androgynous form, half male and half female’. To show his devotion to her, or, as other stories have it, to prove to the other gods that balance was needed for creation, Shiva is said to have given Parvati use of the left half of his body. Once they merge, the resulting Shiva-Parvati combination is known as Ardhanarishvara, a figure who can be considered as both dual-gendered, demonstrating the perfection achieved by a merging of the male and the female rather than the supremacy of one over the other, or as a third-gendered/non-binary figure in their own right, one who (having stemmed from two gods) is neither deviant nor marginal but instead ultra-positive.

Ardhanarishvara is not a figure in their own separate stories, but rather a concept designed to demonstrate a fundamental point about the universe as a whole. They represent the joining of Purusha, the masculine energy of the universe associated with the self, spirit or consciousness, with Prakriti, the feminine energy of the universe associated with nature and the tangible world. Nanda argues, in discussing androgynes in Hindu mythology, that ‘the power of the combined man/woman is a frequent and significant theme’. The synthesis of these two energies underpins and is necessary for the whole of creation and represents cosmic balance. In this way, Ardhanarishvara is more than the sum of their parts, a being who is not divided or partial (‘the Lord who is half woman’, as Vinay Lal phrases it) but rather the ultimate representative of completion and wholeness; simultaneously, in being largely conceptual rather than a distinct figure in particular narratives, they are not reducible to a multi-sexed body but instead to an idea which supersedes the physical and speaks to wider cosmological concerns. In relation to hijras, some of whom see themselves as a combination of masculine and feminine and some of whom identify as a third gender entirely, Ardhanarishvara is a positive example of the necessity for and power of non-binary being and can be used to support either self-understanding.

55 Though grammatically the use of the pronouns their/they in referring to Ardhanarishvara detracts somewhat from the argument being made here, these pronouns are nonetheless preferential when referring to a non-binary figure and so are used as a singular, neutral reference rather than indicating plurality.
56 Nanda, _Neither Man Nor Woman_, p.20.
Uniting the binary genders does not always have to be a matter of physically bringing them together in one body. One of the most common stories drawn on by hijras themselves, providing the foundation of an annual festival in Koovaganam, features Krishna transformed into the female Mohini, although Reddy argues that ‘hijras invoke’ Mohini not as a woman but as a ‘non-differentiated image’ akin to Ardhanarishvara.\textsuperscript{58} In the \textit{Mahabharata}, the Kurukshetra war is waged between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Arjuna’s son, Aravan, is one of the fighters, and has been granted a boon by Krishna that he will be married before his death. In Hinduism there is a belief in a special sacrifice to Kali in which the strongest warrior sacrifices his life in exchange for certain victory for his side. Hiltebeitel translates kalapalli as ‘battlefield sacrifice’.\textsuperscript{59} He explains the boon by saying that ‘Aravan does not want to die a bachelor, since dying unmarried would prevent him from receiving the ancestral rites of a “Father”’. Krishna is worried that no-one will marry ‘someone just about to die’ and ‘solves this difficulty by taking the form of Mohini, the Enchantress, and marrying Aravan in a last-minute wedding’, becoming a widow shortly after.\textsuperscript{60}

Whilst Krishna evidently demonstrates gender fluidity, in the process lending gender-crossing a level of sacred respect, he does so within the confines of the gender binary both literally, in his movement from man to woman, and socially by upholding the gendered social system in ensuring that Aravan fulfils his role as a man by being heteronormatively married within his lifetime. Indeed, the idea of a man marrying a woman is seen to be so crucial that it must be done even if the marriage is inevitably doomed to be short lived.

Yet it is the consistent argument of this thesis that what is most important is the way in which stories get retold, manipulated and socially utilised, and the value embedded in these exercises. With this in mind, a different side to the story of Mohini appears, in which it is evidently perceived as being crucially important to hijras themselves. Every year in Koovaganam in Tamil Nadu, South India, thousands of hijras gather for an eighteen-day festival during which they ritually

\textsuperscript{58} Reddy, \textit{With Respect to Sex}, p.91.
\textsuperscript{60} Hiltebeitel, ‘Dying Before the Mahabharate War’, p.453.
marry Aravan one day and break their bangles and weep for him the next, re-enacting Krishna’s dedication. In this usage, the ritual is focused on sacrifice: Aravan’s sacrifice of his life, Mohini’s sacrifice in becoming a widow and Krishna’s sacrifice of his masculinity— for the greater good, to win the war and bring peace. It also serves to depict a space for transformative gender potential within heteronormative systems, claiming an often-denied position for hijras, and is thus important for their assertions of social validity.

Already it is clear that, although unity and the bringing together of the binary genders to create something greater are the central points of these stories, sacrifice is a key aspect which accrues spiritual credit for the individual. In other mythological tales, sacrifice becomes even more central. To return to Shiva, the creation myth in which he features puts at its core the sacrifice of male genitalia as a source of universal energy, sacrificing the individual’s fertility to gift it to the world; as such, there are clear correlations with hijras, given that a large proportion are biogenetically male and undergo the nirvan operation to remove their genitals, in order to become hijras.

In the Hindu Trimurti, Shiva occupies the position of the destroyer. One version of the creation story centralises Shiva in a way which is directly relevant to the hijras, as explained by Vinay Lal:

Among the numerous Hindu creation myths, there is one in which Shiva is asked by Brahma and Vishnu to create the world. Thereupon Shiva retreats into the water; but as he remains plunged in it for a thousand years, Brahma is induced by Vishnu to create all the gods and other beings. When Shiva finally emerges from the water, and is prepared to commence with the creation, it dawns on him that the universe no longer has any vacuum. Consequently, Shiva breaks off his phallus and tosses it aside with the remark that he has not much further use for his generative organ; yet as the phallus falls and breaks into pieces, it extends fertility over the entire earth. Thus, even as Shiva himself becomes a sexual renunciate and loses the power to procreate, his phallus becomes emblematic of “universal fertility,” and it is to this circumstance that
one can trace the cult of lingam [phallus] worship. The hijras, in their own life, provide a mirror image of this scenario: while themselves impotent, they confer the blessings of fertility on others.61

Shiva’s phallus is therefore not thought about in terms of his own infertility, but as an act whereby, as Serena Nanda puts it, he ‘extends his sexual power to the universe’, or as O’Flaherty writes, ‘the linga becomes a source of universal fertility as soon as it has ceased to be a source of individual fertility’.62 This is claimed by hijras as the way in which they gain their powers also; by sacrificing their genitals and their fertility, they gain power over others’ fertility. For the hijras, then, Shiva represents universal fertility stemming from, but explicitly not limited to or embodied within, the individual, and sacrifice; however, it is crucial to hold on to the idea that Shiva did not tear off his phallus in order to create the earth, but as an emotional reaction which resulted in creation. Without wishing to overburden this fact at this stage, I believe that this speaks to the separation, for hijras, between the forces driving them to join the community and the powers they are said to take on by doing so, which evidently are related to one another, but are not analogous. Ultimately, hijras do not sacrifice their genitalia only in order to gain procreative powers, but are, rather, given these powers as a form of compensation for their loss.

In the Ramayana, Lord Rama was sent into exile in the Dandaka forest (sometimes referred to as Dandakaranya) for fourteen years, along with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. A folk story holds that as the three left for the forest, crowds of townspeople followed behind them, pleading with them not to go. Rama would not be persuaded, and announced ‘ladies and gentlemen, return to your homes; follow me no further’. After fourteen long years, a journey to Lanka to defeat the demon Ravana and a mighty battle, Rama and his companions were able to return to Ayodhya. Whilst crossing the same stream at which they told the townspeople to turn back, the three saw a group of hijras huddled on the bank, praying. The hijras announce that they have waited for him through his entire

61 Vinay Lal, 'Not This, Not That', p.124, emphasis original.
62 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, as quoted in Serena Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.30.
exile. ‘But I told you to go home!’ says Rama. ‘No,’ say the hijras, ‘you told the ladies and the gentlemen to go home, but we are neither, so we waited.’ Rama is said to have been so impressed with their devotion that he granted them the ability for their words always to come true, so that they could bless and curse others, and many hijras cite this as one origin of their powers.\textsuperscript{63}

This story evidently represents the hijras as a devoted group, who sacrifice fourteen years to obey Ram and are rewarded with supernatural powers. However, this has not protected the story or the hijras themselves from it being used negatively. The story does not appear in formal written versions of the text. As Vinay Lal explains, ‘[a]s might be expected, I have found no trace of this story in the Ramayana of either Valmiki or Tulsidas, and I doubt that it would be found in any of the other principal vernacular versions of the Ramayana, whether of Kamban or of Bengali writers. But there are hundreds of Ramayanas in India, and the primacy of written over oral versions is far from being universally accepted in India’.\textsuperscript{64} As shall become clear in the literary analysis to follow, the tale can and has been twisted to mock and pity the hijras, demonstrating the power of retellings to manipulate the moral of the narrative. Whilst this is not exclusively a feature of oral testimonies, the fact that this narrative is so often used and so infrequently positive in its retelling is suggestive of the idea that oral narrative is more susceptible to this treatment, as there is no archetypal original to point to in opposition; thus, oral narratives can be a strong source of social commentary, as they reflect shifting public perceptions and have a level of flexibility for changing associations. The granting of powers to the hijras may be one reason why negativity becomes attached to it; we shall see later in this analysis the way that this is transmuted into the public being afraid of the hijras and the authors of literature depicting them more often as having the ability to curse than to bless.

The same is true in relation to the final mythological reference examined here. Goddess Bahuchara Mata is often referred to as the patron goddess of the hijras and as the main origin of their powers, but the violence involved in the sacrifice

\textsuperscript{63}Whilst this story does not appear in printed versions of the Ramayana, the account given by Nanda is particularly useful in that it is paraphrased from a hijra’s own retelling and it explicitly notes the granting of powers, which it shall be seen is often omitted in literary usages. Nanda, \textit{Neither Man Nor Woman}, p.13.
\textsuperscript{64}Vinay Lal, ‘Not This, Not That’, p.123.
and the negative potential of these powers complicates the story’s public consumption.\textsuperscript{65} There are at least two versions of the story of Bahuchara Mata, but rather than this being a problem, hijras draw upon both to explain their devotion to her and her relevance for their lives.

In the first story, Bahuchara Mata was travelling along a road when she was stopped by bandits. They wanted to rape her, and to save her honour she cut off her own breasts and offered them to the bandits to save herself. In horror and awe, the bandits pleaded with her for forgiveness, and she cursed them with impotence and told them that to be relieved of their sins they must dress and act as women and pray to her.\textsuperscript{66} In the second, Bahuchara Mata is a princess whose husband disappears every night. One night, she followed him into a forest where she found him being the recipient in sex with another man. Enraged at her husband’s disloyalty, Bahuchara Mata cursed and castrated him. She proclaimed that anyone who was like him should castrate themselves and worship her; then she would favour them with powers and ensure a better rebirth.\textsuperscript{67}

Hijras often speak of being called by the Goddess to come and worship her and say that this is how they knew they must be a hijra.\textsuperscript{68} According to her devotees, Bahuchara Mata appears in dreams and demands the sacrifice of the dreamer’s genitals in return for using her powers. The Goddess is in many ways a positive figure for hijras, worshipped by them and gifting them with the powers which give them a place in the spiritual order. Yet simultaneously, both stories depict her followers as negative individuals, sexual predators in the first and homosexual (read as deviant and adulterous) in the second. The sacrifice therefore acts as a form of emancipation for hijras, turning them from negative, anti-social people into valuable, blessed figures; crucially, given the sexual deviance inscribed in the men in the stories, their becoming asexual is an act of publicly disavowing this behaviour. Whilst the stories are positive about hijras themselves, then, they are scathing of their earlier lives.

\textsuperscript{65} Reddy, \textit{With Respect to Sex}, p.98.
\textsuperscript{66} Nanda, \textit{Neither Man Nor Woman}, p.25.
This is not to say that the stories give a fundamentally negative reading of the hijras, but rather to point to the centrality of sacrifice as a redemptive act, and one which allows the hijras to contribute to the greater good. In all the stories, the characters give up something important to them and it is the wider world which is rewarded (with cosmic balance, self-sustaining fertility, or blessings to aid fertility from figures who are themselves infertile). These myths should, theoretically, assure the hijras social respect for their abilities and the sacrifices they made to gain them. However, it will be seen that not only is this not the case, but that they are often actively used to depict the hijras specifically as anti-social or socially unimportant, in addition to casting them as deviant individuals.

Hindu Mythology and Hijras in Literary Representations

The aim of this thesis is not simply to chronicle the different accounts which discuss hijras, but specifically to interrogate the social use value of thirdness through constructions of hijras in public representations. Thus, the fact of hijras having appeared in sacred texts is secondary to the way in which these appearances are translated for public consumption. Whilst undoubtedly the gods and mythological characters involved are still venerated by huge numbers of people, the way that fictional representations of hijras utilise these stories to position their characters is markedly different. In all eight of the texts to be considered in this thesis, literature spanning from 1990 to 2017, Hindu origin stories of the hijras are at least noted if not extensively discussed; in almost none of these texts do these links create positive connotations for the hijra characters featured. Instead, where the sacred powers of hijras are believed in, their abilities to curse and inspire fear are foregrounded, and where their powers are disbelieved, they are presented either as jokes, lewd figures or aggressive extortionists. The disjuncture between the sacred origins of these connections and their current usage, to disparage or ridicule hijras or to show fear of them, attests to the contemporary marginality of hijras and the ambivalence of their current position.
The nature of these connotations also shifts over time, in the number of times the texts reference these stories, the way that hijras are represented in them when they are used, and in who it is who turns the stories against the hijras. The third factor becomes crucial as the emphasis shifts from public ridicule to hijras themselves attempting to break free of the constraints of these readings. In this literary analysis, I map out the changing connections between Hinduism and hijras through eight novels, chronologically ordered, which between them show a shifting social understanding of the hijras and their relationship with the sacred. In parts, texts are dealt with somewhat briefly; this is primarily due to the fact that they do not dwell at length on hijra religious origins, and that the factors with which they concern themselves instead (such as connections between hijras and gender systems, hijras and sexuality, or hijras and criminality) are more fruitfully considered in another chapter, and so the texts will be returned to in due course.

The first three literary texts all predate serious scholarly attention to the hijras, and thus their perceptions of hijras’ Hindu origins are ripe for social commentary, owing to the fact that they have been less influenced by pre-formulated theoretical positions. However, this is not to say that they do not manipulate their understandings of these traditions to suit the needs of their text and their narrative style. Khushwant Singh’s 1990 Delhi: A Novel, William Dalrymple’s travelogue published in 1993 under the title City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi and Leslie Forbes’ murder mystery novel Bombay Ice (1998) share the similarity of being, on a whole-text level, sympathetic towards the hijras insofar as they are aware of their social constraints and willing to represent them through depicting the poverty and hardship they endure; whilst all three show an aggressive, lewd side to the hijras, they make efforts to contextualise this as a response to their struggles.

However, when the specific references to Hindu traditions attached to the hijras undergo a close reading, a somewhat different image begins to appear. These sections are used to show not only the worst sides of the hijras themselves, but to demonstrate the apparent commonality of less sympathetic understandings of the hijras coming from the cisgendered public. In Delhi, their traditions are both a problem and a joke; in City of Djinns, their sacred badhai performance is a
hypersexualised intrusion; in *Bombay Ice*, terrified pregnant women hand over money to avoid their curses, and are stalked with their new-borns. Thus, whilst the texts have sympathy and sensitivity with regards to individual hijras, there appears to be a community-level disdain for them and, indeed, their traditions are positioned as partly to blame for their problems.

Singh’s novel *Delhi* makes two references to hijra traditions derived from Hinduism: the first, the story of Bhagmati joining the hijras, stems from their badhai performance and links in to a common belief that they have the right to claim hermaphroditic children from their parents. Whilst it is not presented as a positive depiction, it is not wholly negative either:

When a troupe of hijdas *sic* came to their home to sing and dance and said, ‘Show us your child. We want to see if it is a boy or a girl, or one of us,’ her father abused them and drove them away without giving them any money. The hijdas gave her parents no peace. Whenever they came to the locality to sing and dance at births or weddings they would turn up at their doorstep and say, ‘Show us your last born. If it is one of us, let us take it away.’

Bhagmati’s mother had two more children - both girls. Both times her father had taken Bhagmati with him to the hospital and asked the doctor to examine her and say whether she was a boy or a girl. Both times the doctor had looked at her genitals and said, ‘I am not sure; it is a bit of both.’ Bhagmati was then four years old. When the troupe of hijdas visited them after the birth of his last child, her father gave them twenty-one rupees and said, ‘Now I have three sons and two daughters, you can take this one. It is one of you.’

Whilst the hijra troupe is said to give Bhagmati’s parents ‘no peace’, they do little more than assert their perceived authority; ultimately, Bhagmati’s father succeeds in ‘abus[ing]’ them until he himself decides to hand Bhagmati over, rather

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69 *Delhi*, p.29.
than there being any force on their part. The episode is thus marked by a
transactional element, an understood order of things in which the hijras have a
viable claim to Bhagmati, but without associated violence, such as the fabled
kidnapping of young children by hijras. Their traditions are therefore not positive,
but accepted and generally respected.

The second episode referred to in Delhi is more conceptual, not having to do
with a particular hijra or hijra group, but instead appearing as a joke told by the
protagonist’s friend:

The Sikh journalist is a joker. He tells me an old joke as if it were the
latest one. ‘When Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were leaving Ayodhya for their
fourteen year exile, the citizens came to see them off. At the city gate Sri
Ramchandraji begged them to return to their homes: “Ladies and
gentlemen, thus far but no further.” The citizens obeyed his orders and
went back. Fourteen years later when the exiles returned to Ayodhya they
met a party sitting outside the city gates. “You did not give us permission to
return to our homes”’ they said. “You only allowed the men and women to
go back. We are neither because we are hijdas.” Sri Ramchandraji was so
overcome by their devotion that he blessed them: ‘In the year 1947 I grant
you hijdas the empire of Hindustan.’”

He bursts into loud laughter ‘Ha, ha, ha.’ I join him ‘Hi, hi, hi.’

The doorbell rings again. It is Bhagmati. ‘What is the big joke?’ she
asks me.

‘You tell her,’ replies my journalist friend, looking at his watch ‘I
must go to the Coffee House at 11 a.m.’ And breezes out of the apartment.

‘What was he saying?’ demands Bhagmati as she flops on the sofa.
How can I tell her?’

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70 Delhi, p.376.
This instance is evidently dismissive of the hijras, using them as symbols of ineffectuality to comment on the post-Independence government of India. However, whilst the mythical hijras in this story are perhaps being portrayed as somewhat stupid in their overly-literal interpretation of Ram's words, they are not themselves the butt of the joke, but rather the government is. Thus, the episode is negatively inscribed in the associations with which it links the hijras but is not representing specific hijras themselves as violent or difficult, only naïve in their devotion, which is so strong that Ram is overwhelmed. Again, the novel treads a complex line between not showing the hijras as a positive group but limiting its critique of them at the same time, supported by the wider context of the novel in which the protagonist is ashamed and somewhat disgusted by his long-running affair with the hijra Bhagmati, and yet evidently adores her and remains with her through the decades of the novel's span. Delhi thus treads a tightrope between not casting individual hijras as overly deviant, at least insofar as it references their religious origins, yet reiterating the marginal status of the hijra category in re-appropriating it as a symbol of political impotence. Hyperbole, particularly around deviance and sexuality, does, however, become an important element in Bhagmati's individual representation, as shall be seen in chapters three and four.

This combination is even more evident in Dalrymple's travelogue City of Djinns, because Dalrymple explicitly sets the hijras' characteristics at home against their public image and blames economic necessity rather than personal traits for their need to take on the latter persona. Thus, whilst he portrays the hijras' public, sacred rituals as lewd, aggressive acts, he isolates this from portraying the hijras themselves as lewd and aggressive. Depictions of the hijras as a general category or group use negative language and foreground the fear and disgust they inspire. They also limit the amount of sympathy they show for the hijras on this level.

For instance, before Dalrymple meets and introduces a specific group of hijras, he introduces them to the reader as follows:
Today eunuchs have apparently died out everywhere except in the subcontinent. Here they are still not uncommon figures in the poorer parts of the larger cities. In all there are thought to be some three-quarters of a million of them surviving. Modern Indian eunuchs dress as women and arrive uninvited at weddings and birth celebrations. They dance and sing and make bawdy jokes. From the poor they extract money in payment for the good luck and fecundity that their blessings are supposed to impart. From the rich they take larger sums by threatening to strip naked unless paid to leave; terrified middle-class party-givers will give them anything as long as they go quickly. They are volatile, vulgar and can sometimes be violent...

To give birth to a hermaphrodite is still considered by simple Indians to be one of the most terrible curses that can befall a woman. At the same time the blessing of a hijra is considered to be unusually potent. It can make a barren woman fertile. It can scare off malevolent djinns. It can nullify the evil eye. In the streets hijras are jeered at, sometimes even pelted with rubbish. Yet at a poor family's most crucial and most public celebrations, at a marriage or at the birth of a male child, the absence of a hijra would almost invalidate the whole ceremony. 71

Whilst the above excerpts demonstrate acceptance of the hijras and their traditional role, particularly in the reflection that 'the absence of a hijra would almost invalidate the whole ceremony', they are nonetheless constructed as a necessary risk that is taken by those who believe in them, one which is accompanied by the threat of curses and the expectation of extortion, and thus as more a religious necessity than a positive encounter, neutralising at best the image

71 City of Djinns, p.170 and p.173; Dalrymple emphasises, through his use of the term 'eunuch' here and more explicitly in the following pages, the hijras' links with the eunuchs of the Mughal courts. This aspect of the depiction is explored in chapter two, which considers the ways that constructions of Mughal eunuchs influence hijra representations, both through merging of the two identities and, conversely, through pitting them against one another to highlight particular connotations of hijras. At the current stage of the analysis, therefore, the focus is on how this framing to Dalrymple meeting the hijras uses their associations with badhai and the idea that they have the ability to bless and curse to construct a particular understanding of their otherness.
of the hijras as sacred beings. Whilst this lends a level of security to their socio-economic niche, it promises the same of their marginalisation.

More specifically, belief in the hijras’ powers (both blessings and curses) is, in Dalrymple’s reading of their social positioning, associated with the poor, which is in turn conflated with ‘simple Indians’, both being portrayed as the people who believe in the hijras and actively require them for their ceremonies. On the contrary, ‘middle-class party-givers’ are not framed by belief, but by shame; they pay the hijras to leave rather than to accrue any positive benefit, and because they are ‘volatile, vulgar and... violent’ rather than because they are perceived as having abilities to curse.

This differentiated construction of hijras’ receptions is subtly dismissive of the sacred element of their characterisation, associating it with simplicity and desperation, and constructing it as something that lessens in negative correlation to education and class status. When put together with the fear they are said to inspire and the aggression they use to do so, foregrounded through Dalrymple’s use of such terms as ‘uninvited’ and ‘threatening’, badhai work is constructed as an aggressive charade that takes advantage of the vulnerable rather than a legitimately sacred event. Thus, Dalrymple twists the sacred connection into another form of extortion, referencing their mythological origins but doing so only to underscore their anti-sociality rather than attest to social prestige.

So far, we have seen hijras’ sacred origin stories being turned against them to contribute to positioning them as aggressive and marginal and their gender identity as a joke or symbol of ineffectuality. It is crucial to recognise that these traits are not being constructed by ignoring their mythological connections, but precisely being constructed through reworked versions of them. These versions vary widely in their portrayals, positioning hijras as cursed themselves or able to curse others, as unimportant, peripheral figures or as dominant, vicious figures who cannot be ignored. What is consistent in these reworked images of hijras is that, in whatever form it takes, their portrayal is ultimately one of being outside of society (rather than transcending it) and naturalising this position by portraying them as anti-social.
However, whilst evidently portraying the traditions in which the hijras take part as an aggressive con preying on ‘simple Indians’, Dalrymple nonetheless argues that ‘[t]o give birth to a hermaphrodite is still considered by simple Indians to be one of the most terrible curses that can befall a woman’.\textsuperscript{72} In doing so, he recognises the incredibly difficult circumstances into which many hijras are born, and paves the way for a more sympathetic portrayal of individual hijras; that is to say, whilst he presents strong misgivings about the validity of their group activities and traditions, he does not necessarily extend this to portraying individual hijras as con artists and extortionists by choice, but rather as individuals who are outcasts from their communities, feared by wider society and thus must go to extreme and uncomfortable lengths to earn and survive. Indeed, where hijras are allowed to speak for themselves, this comes through strongly, as in the following episode in which Panna tells her story, framed by Dalrymple’s introduction for the reader:

It seems that Panna was born asexual - with no visible sexual characteristics- into a poor family who lived in a village near Varanasi. When Panna was just twenty days old, the village midwife disclosed that she was neither male nor female, that she was a \textit{hijra}. The news spread like wildfire. Panna’s mother, fearing the consequences, left the village with the baby and went to stay with a cousin fifty kilometres away.

‘In the village, my deformity had become the sole topic of conversation.’ Panna told me. ‘The rest of my family were ostracized. It was said that we were cursed. The following day a relative came to the village and said that my mother had died of shock soon after reaching her cousin’s house.’

‘I was brought back along with the body of my mother. The death did not move the village. Instead they sent a message to Chaman, who used to visit the village every so often. The curse on the village had to be removed.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{City of Djinns}, p.173.
Chaman came with two *chelas* and took me away. I grew up to be the *chela* of Chaman, and Chaman became my guru.'  

Panna tells her story in a relatively clear, straightforward way, but the inclusion of terms such as ‘ostracized’ and ‘cursed’, alongside the events of her mother’s death (which is subtly, and worryingly, questioned - ‘a relative... said that my mother had died of shock’), the villagers’ lack of grief, and Panna being sent away, attest to a tragic set of circumstances and beliefs in which Panna is undoubtedly the victim, both of the beliefs surrounding her sex and of the pressure for her to be relocated. Seen in this light, the relatively undramatic way she presents her story constructs it as one which is a fairly common narrative for hijras, and thus the events are all the more tragic because they are normalised not for being mundane, but as a common tragedy impacting the lives of many children.

By including narratives which illicit pity, such as Panna’s, alongside negative depictions of adult hijras’ public rituals, Dalrymple constructs a multi-layered understanding of hijras which sees their taking part in these rituals as a necessity of their marginal status, rather than a personal failure of the individual. Though we do not know as much about Vimla’s early life as we do about Panna’s, her adult persona clearly attests to this contrast:

As they walked along the streets, the eunuchs clapped their hands and made bawdy jokes, behaving quite differently from the way they did inside their Turkman Gate haveli. Vimla in particular underwent a radical character change. Sweet, shy and doe-eyed at home, she would rush up to complete strangers in the street, grapple with her skirts and shout: ‘Sardarji! You with the beard! Give me money or else I’ll flash!’

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73 *City of Djinns*, pp.178-179, emphasis original.
74 *City of Djinns*, pp.181-182.
Once again, Dalrymple uses the example of an individual hijra to separate traditions, viewed in critical terms, from individuals, who are positively constructed but contextualised in a pitiable and limited situation. Off the back of these examples, Dalrymple is thus able to come to the following reflective conclusion at the end of his time with the hijras:

\[\text{I was always struck by the eunuchs’ lack of bitterness. Through no fault of their own, through deformity or genetic accident, they found themselves marginalized by Indian society, turned into something half-way between a talisman and an object of ridicule.}^{75}\]

These comments effectively summarise the way that Dalrymple represents the hijras through the matrix of Hinduism, depicting them as a meeting of opposites in the two contradictory halves, and portraying his reading of them as sympathetic (it is not their fault) whilst subtly dehumanising them and thus limiting the pity available to them (they are many things, none of which are human).

\textit{Bombay Ice}, a murder mystery novel in which the protagonist, Roz Bengal, tries to find out who is mutilating and drowning hijras, is similarly torn between depicting hijras as violent, dangerous people and having an element of pity and sympathy for the lives they are made to live. However, the novel is markedly darker in its depictions of the hijras, due in part to the sensationalism and gore of the genre and the specific narrative. It is also, crucially, due to the fact that many of the hijras are dead before the narrative begins and the others live outside of the city; as a result, comments on the hijras and their traditions come largely from the cisgendered public and Roz’ own ideas about them. This leads to a strong element of social profiling rather than a sympathetic rendering of specific hijra figures or an opportunity for them to tell their own story. Again, the connotations attached to

\[\textit{City of Djinns}, p.183.\]
hijras’ traditions vary depending on the depicted source, demonstrating the ambivalence and variation surrounding the hijras’ relationships with the sacred.

Forbes lightly peppers *Bombay Ice* with references to the relationships between hijras, the sacred and the myths discussed earlier in this chapter: Sami (the main murdered hijra whose death is the focus of Roz’ enquiry) is found murdered on the beach on the night of the Ramlila, marking Ram’s return and thus the moment at which he is said to have blessed the hijras; Ash, a university professor who helps Roz in her search, tries to tell her about Arjuna’s time as a eunuch, but he is cut off because she sees it as ‘the kind of Timeless Wisdom that can overtake the most prosaic Indian when asked for a straight answer’; and in the grand finale, in which the surviving hijras expose Sami’s murderer on his own film set, a prominent statue of Ardhanarishvara looks over the proceedings.\(^76\)

There is a great deal of potential in the significant placement of these inclusions, but none are followed through either to affect the narrative or to provide a meaningful social commentary. Instead, the way in which their connections with the otherworldly are simply hinted at or briefly noted provides a tantalisingly foggy element of mystery and intrigue surrounding the hijras, suited to the genre of the murder mystery novel.

Bahuchara Mata appears somewhat more frequently than Ram, Arjuna and Ardhanarishvara with their brief references, but is used in a fundamentally similar way, supplying a figure of mythology which appears on the surface level of the narrative without ultimately affecting it. For example, when Roz goes to visit the hijra community she sees shrines and pictures of the goddess, but they are noted briefly in an overview of the respective rooms and not particularly elevated in importance above the other items mentioned.\(^77\) The goddess’ importance is raised somewhat when she appears in reference to the nirvan operation, in which a hijra who has been born biogenetically male has the penis and scrotum removed. Two hijras, Bina and Sunila, attest to her importance in the context of the operation, with Bina arguing that the nirvan is the

\(^{76}\) *Bombay Ice*, p.83, p.384.

\(^{77}\) *Bombay Ice*, p.102, p.289.
...only way to have true hijra identity and gain power. Like this we are true servants of the Mother [Goddess]. If you go to perform a dance, people are asking if you are pukka hijra. Then you can show them it is so. Otherwise some are mocking you as a fake, just an impotent man, empty vessel, like all men who go with their own sex and are the passive partners in sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{78}

Sunila is more specific about Bahuchara Mata's use in the ceremony, saying firstly that '[t]he midwife had a line to Mata, the Mother Goddess, and as such could afford to set restrictions', and secondly that the operatee is told to begin 'chanting Mata Mata Mata to put herself into a trance' before the cutting.\textsuperscript{79}

Bahuchara Mata is evidently depicted as central in the nirvan ceremony, and the nirvan itself is constructed as being of high importance to the hijras, but in the wider context of the novel these are ultimately fleeting references to a belief within the community which does not evolve into a specific discussion of how the Mother helps them or what exactly being a ‘true servant’ entails, other than to put it in opposition with homosexuality. Thus, Forbes uses a number of mythological references as a symbolic backdrop to the hijras, framing them through these stories but in ways which are either inconsequential to the narrative itself, or which show a very limited scope of respect, with Bahuchara Mata being important to the hijras themselves but the hijras in this narrative not being seen as important in wider social terms. Bina argues that this connection makes them real hijras; the wider public reception of the group shows that this may be so, but that being a hijra, real or not, is not held in high esteem, and so ultimately the fact does little to change their status. References to the hijras’ mythological origins do not ultimately function, in this representation, as positive connotations which improve the social position depicted for hijras.

\textsuperscript{78}Bombay Ice, pp.105-106.
\textsuperscript{79}Bombay Ice, p.206, emphasis original.
In a similar vein to Dalrymple’s representation, the links to hijras’ powers and sacred connections become much more violent and negative when they enter the public arena. In contrast to the depictions of placid, helpful hijras at home surrounded by their shrines, they are seen as much more sexualised, criminal and dangerous in their public roles as prostitutes, extortionists and in other criminal activities. Some of the most alarmed responses come specifically from pregnant women and new mothers, who are depicted as being particularly fearful of the hijras and of being targeted by them. Two such episodes shed light on the ways that the novel not only depicts the hijras as more aggressive in public, but also shows less sympathy towards the reasons behind their actions than was the case in *City of Djinns*; the reason for this lack of differentiation, I believe, is in the fact that these are representations of conversations with cisgendered women, a mother and a mother-to-be, rather than with hijras themselves (in contrast to Dalrymple’s travelogue), and so these representations channel a sensationalised version of Forbes’ idea of public understandings of the hijras. The first episode involves a pregnant friend of the protagonist:

Suddenly she wound her window down and gave a twenty-rupee note to one of the crowd. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘it’s all I have today.’ The woman who took the money had a five o’clock shadow and lips painted the colour of hybrid dahlias.

I was surprised by Shoma’s about-face. ‘What was special about that one?’

‘She’s a hijra. If you are rude to them, they curse you and threaten to show their deformed genitals. It’s very bad luck.’ She gazed out the window and cast the next words over her shoulder reluctantly, unwanted baggage inherited from a distant relative. ‘They might turn your sons into hijra.’  

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80 *Bombay Ice*, pp.78-79.
The second episode is an argument between the protagonist and her sister shortly after the birth of the latter’s son:

‘the hijra have put a chalk mark on our door.’

‘A chalk mark?’ I asked, thinking that Miranda sounded like a different person. Gone was the sweetness, replaced by someone fiercer and less reasonable.

‘It’s what the hijra do when a male child has been born in their territory.’ She turned away and rested her hand heavily on a table. ‘They mark on your door with chalk and then they come back on his naming day and they do horrible, lewd performances and they look at his genitals and threaten you if you don’t give them money.’

‘They wouldn’t do that, Miranda. What could they threaten you with? And how would they know where you live?’

‘They know these things.’ Her voice had begun to rise.81

In the first case, Shoma believes in the hijras’ cursing abilities, and in the idea that it is a curse to be a hijra (hence her fear for her unborn child); in the second, Miranda does not mention supernatural abilities, but is afraid of the hijras because of their violence, lewd actions and extortion, depicting them as racketeers. Through both supernatural and non-supernatural interpretations of the hijras’ abilities, therefore, Forbes demonstrates public rejection of the hijras, stepping aside from the question of who believes and why and issuing a blanket fear of the hijras’ involvement with children.82

This public persona, tied in with the other negative aspects the hijras are involved in in the novel (including prostitution, forgery, blackmail, international...
smuggling and murder-suicides) creates an overwhelmingly negative set of connotations around the hijras, and specifically uses their sacred connections as an extra strand of this representation rather than as a counter-argument. In some senses, *Bombay Ice* operates as a fictional correlate to Dalrymple’s travelogue insofar as it creates a wholly negative public persona for the hijras whilst reserving a level of sympathy for them as individuals caught up in this oppressive system and bound to do this negative work because of their scant economic, familial and social options. Yet *Bombay Ice* also extends Dalrymple’s negativity through the sensationalism of the genre and the extremity of the criminal connections. Thus far, then, we have seen *Delhi* utilise mythology to laugh at, and sideline, the hijras, *City of Djinns* take this a step further by rendering them as aggressive and manipulative rather than just mocking them, and *Bombay Ice* extend it further again by taking the public response from embarrassment through to outright terror.

Whilst the hijras’ links to Hindu mythology have not dominated any of the three texts discussed thus far, these associations have nonetheless proved valuable for the authors’ constructions of their hijra characters. The three texts have varied in the level of sympathy they give to individual hijras caught up in this system: *Delhi* does not dwell at length on Bhagmati’s hardships in these sections, and so passes little comment in this regard; *City of Djinns* clearly differentiates between the hijras’ negatively-inscribed traditional role and their pitiable and personable private selves; *Bombay Ice* gives little agency to individual hijras, using mythological references to create a sense of mystery around the already-silenced murder victims and giving only cisgendered reactions to hijras’ begging and badhai work. The texts’ uses of mythological references have proved most fruitful in setting hijras within their wider social context, at times taking pity on them for the lives they are made to live, but consistently agreeing that these lives are ones of sexual, physical and economic aggression. Ultimately, the image of hijras produced in these three texts is that they are a necessary part of the social landscape but that they are nonetheless negative figures; despite a level of sympathy elicited from their being poor, marginal and vulnerable, their response, as shown through the figures of Bhagmati, Vimla and Sami in particular, is to take advantage of those
who are in similar situations to force a niche for themselves, and given that the blunt instrument of this extortion is most often presented as their badhai work, the texts ultimately render the spiritual traditions of the hijras as manipulative rather than a religious duty.

Over time, the sacred image of the hijras is further eroded as fictional accounts retain the negative attachments seen previously and combine this with decreasing the importance given to the mythological references. Moving chronologically into the second grouping of texts, it is seen that the authors make no attempt to balance the hijras’ ability to curse with their ability to bless, but instead read down the hijras’ sacred positioning and only use Hindu mythology when it is useful to depict hijras as deviant, threatening or otherwise abnormal. This undergoes a third shift moving forwards again, as the most recent texts reject mythological legitimacy, often through characters within the hijra community or, specifically, who identify as hijra but do not see themselves as part of a hijra community or set of hijra traditions per se.

The second group contains Hari Kunzru’s 2002 Bildungsroman The Impressionist and Ian McDonald’s 2004 sci-fi novel River of Gods. Hari Kunzru’s 2002 novel The Impressionist gives almost no space to hijras’ Hindu origins. This is in large part due to the setting of this section of the novel in a semi-independent princely state during the British Raj, leading it to rely more heavily on traditions of court eunuchs and the British introduction of more strictly binary gender codes, which shall be explored at length in chapters two and three of this thesis respectively. In City of Djinns, we saw a distinction being made between ‘simple’, ‘poor’ Indians and ‘middle-class’ Indians, with the former believing in the hijras’ powers even as they are afraid of them, and the latter being more influenced by shame and social pressure than belief. I argued that this represented an attempt by Dalrymple to undermine the hijras’ social value linked to mythological traditions, by associating belief in their powers with lack of education and vice versa. Kunzru makes a somewhat similar distinction but uses both age and class as axes to distinguish responses to the hijras.
The first, brief, reference to badhai work involves a wealthy Brahmin family. Kunzru tells us that ‘although rumours of the bride’s adventures [infidelity] had already reached as far as the hijras who came to mock the wedding guests, Amar Nath and his family were too lofty to listen to the prattle of eunuchs or servants’. In contrast to the middle-class figures in *City of Djinns* and *Bombay Ice*, who may or may not have believed in the hijras’ powers but could still be cowed into shame by them, in *The Impressionist* the characters pay no attention at all, dismissing the hijras’ ‘prattle’ outright.

However, on a textual level Kunzru is not arguing that the hijras are in fact unimportant or ridiculous, as the reader already knows that the baby is unlikely to be the husband’s, and so the hijras have gotten accurate information from their own sources. As such, the passage operates more as a comment on the hijras’ social reception than as a rejection of the hijras themselves. It depicts a situation in which as widespread belief in their abilities wanes, the shame and disgust they inspire is not strong enough in itself to guarantee them an income, and so they begin to hold less social currency. Amar Nath’s family, who once would have been bound by their upper-caste status to respect the hijras (if not on religious grounds, then through the threat of being publicly shamed, as seen in earlier accounts) are able to lower them in their estimations to the level of servants and dismiss both as unimportant.

The second reference to the hijras’ badhai work, a little later in the novel, is told from the perspective of Pran, the baby in question in the first section. Now aged fifteen, Pran has been kicked out of the house following the death of Amar Nath, the man who believed he was Pran’s father but who was revealed not to be on his death bed, as revenge for Pran’s attempted rape of a child servant. Following his abandonment, he is kidnapped, drugged and sold to the hijras, recording his first observations of them as follows:

Pran has seen hijras. They are frightening women-men who dance outside weddings, banging drums and mocking the guests as they go in and out.

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When a child is born they appear, as if by magic, heralding the infant with lewd mimes and filthy parodic songs. To make them go away again you must give them money, otherwise they will curse your household. They are outcasts, as ancient as the hills, a human dirty joke which has been told and retold since the hero Arjun was cursed to spend a year as a hermaphrodite conjurer. Arjun the great warrior, going from village to village in his skirts: *Now then, ladies and gents, if someone has a bangle they could lend...*  

Elements of Pran’s privileged upbringing show themselves in the dismissive language used, describing the hijras as ‘a human dirty joke’, and putting the imperative ‘to make them go away’ up front, before the idea of avoiding their curses which comes through later in the sentence. However, unlike Amar Nath’s short, outright rejection of the hijras, Pran is evidently still afraid of them and believes in their abilities to some extent, describing them as ‘frightening’ and claiming that ‘they will curse your household’.  

Once again, there is a distinction being made between some people who believe in the hijras’ powers and some who do not; where Dalrymple assigned belief in the hijras to ‘simple’ and ‘poor’ Indians and disbelief to more educated, wealthy and higher class people, Kunzru separates the two between a child and an adult, underlined by the fact that as supposed family, they have identical social backgrounds. This has the same fundamental effect insofar as it repeats the idea that belief is a product of ignorance, but takes it a step further by equating the hijras with a ‘bogey man’-like figure, who is only frightening to children and has no influence in adult (effectively, ‘true’) society. Amar Nath’s outright rejection of them even when their information was correct makes this divide all the more stark. Moving through the texts chronologically, then, charts the waning perception of the hijras’ influence and the relegation of even their negative power to get their way through fear and threats (as opposed to the previously positive power through blessings) to a child’s nightmare.  

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84 *The Impressionist*, p.72, emphasis original.
Pran, however, has more than enough reason to be afraid of the hijras, not for any supernatural powers they may have but because these are people who have bought a kidnapped, drug-added child and intend to have him abused, including sexually, as part of a political scheme. Whilst both the supernatural and the worldly levels of Pran’s experience with the hijras are saturated by fear, there is an evident distinction being made between the former, which is simply a child’s imaginings, and the second, which is truly horrifying. The novel thus maintains, even extends, the representation of hijras as something to be feared, but simultaneously dismisses their place within a religious framework, locating the source of the fear in the distinctly physical world.

If *The Impressionist* can be said to lower its estimation of the importance of Hindu traditions for the hijras, reading them through other socio-political constructs and keeping Hindu traditions to be utilised as a framing device demonstrating their marginality and potential for aggression, then *River of Gods* goes a substantial step further in disassociating its third-gender characters from these traditions almost entirely. Ian McDonald’s 2004 novel depicts a dystopic rendering of the Indian subcontinent a hundred years after independence. India has undergone a further partition into three distinct countries, Awadh, Bharat (who are at war with each other) and the States of Bengal, with the majority of the narrative set in Bharat. Technological development, particularly in the area of artificial intelligence, has developed at an astounding rate, ultimately beyond the control of its creators; one of the novel’s major preoccupations is the tension between human and artificial intelligences and the potential threat represented by A.I.s whose capacities, physical and intellectual, are thousands of times those of humans. Into this nervous and fractured backdrop, McDonald inserts hybrid beings who began as humans but have undergone major technological intervention and, crucially, are rendered sexually (and in social terms, gender) neutral in the process.

The term ‘hijra’ appears numerous times in the novel, but the community itself appears to have died out.85 In their place, ‘nutes’ are persons who have

85When used, ‘hijra’ is presented as an insult for a person who is inefficient or bumbling, and lacking in masculinity. See *River of Gods*, p.33, p.265, p.339 and p.392.
undergone extreme bodily enhancement and technologisation to turn their bodies asexual, whilst hormonal responses can be triggered through a micro-dermal keypad. Having had the procedure is referred to as having ‘Stepped Away’, with the implication being that they have stepped out of the gender binary and, with it, the social position it grants the individual. The guru-chela relationship is maintained in part, but whilst the guru is still the one responsible for overseeing the chela’s conversion into a nute, this role is now as a broker of the necessary surgery and as an assistant during convalescence, rather than a spiritual leader.

Rather than taking Bahuchara Mata as the patron goddess of the nutes, as has been usual thus far, *River of Gods* uses Ardhanarishvara as the community’s focal god. Crucially, this distinction does not hold out the promise of special powers for the nutes, whose abilities are wholly derived from their technologized elements. Ardhanarishvara is given the title ‘God of divided things’ foregrounding readings of the nutes as partial (‘divided’, not dual) and other-than-human (‘things’), and as the ‘Lord of dilemmas’, further marking his followers as problematically divided rather than transcendent.86

This representation of Ardhanarishvara is entirely at odds with their conceptualisation as the archetype of unity and wholeness, as previously discussed, and represents a complete departure from the mythology from which the reference is drawn. Given that the nutes already represent an almost entirely distinct group from the hijras, links such as this and the retention of the guru-chela kinship structure (in a stripped-down, capitalist form) are all the more poignant for the links they draw between them, highlighting the specific ways that the author is drawing on a reading of hijras and re-appropriating them for sensationalised and marginalising purposes.

Despite being the central god connected with the nutes, references to Ardhanarishvara are largely concerned with sexualisation, commercialisation and extravagance, rather than spirituality, nature or enlightenment. In the first reference, Tal, the main nute character, is surprised to find ytself invited to an ultra-glamorous celebrity party to celebrate the arrival in town of a nute

supermodel. The party is held in an Ardhanarishvara temple, in which ‘startlingly pornographic statue[s]’ and ‘alien sex statues’ are so common that ‘the cascade of erotic sculpture’ is said to ‘tumble from every pillar and buttress’. At the entrance,

The ruined arcade is dominated by the image of Ardhanarishvara; half male, half female. A single full breast, an erect penis sliced down the middle, a mono testicle, a curl of labiums, a hint of a slit. The torso has a man’s broadness of shoulder, a woman’s fullness of hip, the hands sensitively held in ritual mudras but the features are generic, androgynous. The third eye of Siva is closed on the forehead.

The description sexualises the god by focusing on the body and dissecting it in the process of its segmented description, including a marked focus on the genitals, forming a gateway to the hypersexuality of the party both literally and in narrative terms. Within the party space, the focus is on vacuous celebrity and displays of extravagance, alongside a heavy emphasis on sexuality culminating in Tal being photographed by paparazzi kissing a nute he meets there before going home with yt for drunken sex. The setting of such a party inside the ruined Ardhanarishvara temple operates as a physical manifestation of the re-appropriation and complete distortion of the God themselves, registering the fall of their cosmic, sacred connections and with it, their non-binary followers, into a position as figures of hypersexuality and artifice, figures devoid of any internal power but exciting and exotic to look at (and with which to populate a narrative).

The second reference to Ardhanarisvara is brief but serves to underline this point nonetheless, coming as Tal returns to yt’s Guru’s town for a check-up and encounters new nute fashions. Always keen to be ahead of the trends, Tal ‘prays to Ardhanarisvara god of niutes to let yt be the first to bring the noo [sic] look back to

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87 The pronoun McDonald employs for nute characters is ‘yt’.
89 River of Gods, pp.59-60.
The flippant wish-prayer turns the hijras’ sacred connection on its head in translating it to the nutes, and in the process underscores the movement of the community away from any claim to a sacred position. The mythology hijras use to explain their powers claims that they have the ability to make whatever they say come true, hence why they can both bless and curse. In McDonald’s retelling, instead of wishing for a baby’s long life or a couple’s fertility, the nute character wishes to be popular and fashionable, showing an unmistakable move away from a sacred social function and towards a capitalist understanding of success.

Moving further into the novel, however, a second theme emerges surrounding the nutes’ relationship with Hinduism, one which will be developed and explored in subsequent novels and represents an alarming change. Already, it has been seen that the level of respect that a hijra status draws from Hindu citizens has diminished; then, it became more common for authors to depict hijras and other third-gendered citizens themselves moving away from these traditions and taking on other affinities and occupations. Now, non-binary citizens are increasingly portrayed as contrary to Hindu ideals, and thus as specifically outside of Hinduism rather than respected within it. A new figure, that of the Hindu karsevak, appears in subsequent texts and pits their version of Hindutva against the perceived threat of sexual and social disorder represented by alternative gender identities. It could be argued that this links into a globalising discourse of ‘LGBT’ activism and a division of the non-binary community into hijra-identified and trans-identified individuals, with many issues arising in this splitting process. Concurrently, political approaches to non-binary individuals have been influenced by the regarding, by some groups, of this LGBT framework as a Western imposition which represents a neo-colonial attempt to alter Hindu social morals. The end result is a construction, from some quarters, of non-binary people as outside of Hindu values and, subsequently, of Indian society at the same time that a growing voice from the trans-identified community frames itself as fighting establishment discrimination and thus, on another level, also as outside of the political mainstream. These ideas are explored in chapter four, but are necessary at this stage to understand the positioning of the figure of the Hindu karsevak first in

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90 River of Gods, p.275.
direct conflict, and later in a very complex relationship, with the non-binary individual.

The government is already threatened by an uprising of Hindu nationalists before it is discovered that a senior minister, Shaheen Badoor Khan, has been meeting Tal in a club known as a place for nutes and gendereds (as binary-gendered people are referred to in the novel) with a sexual interest in them. A riot breaks out, and Tal, attempting to flee, finds himself being recognised and chased by a mob:

We are closing. We are fast. We are faster than you, unnatural, perverted thing. You are bloated with unnaturalness and vice. We will stamp on you, slug. We will hear you burst beneath our boots... Yt can see the elevator bank. Let there be one. Ardhanarisvara, Lord of the divided things, let there be one, and let it work.91

On a surface level, the excerpt positions Tal in clear opposition to the rioters, which concurs with the wider narrative. Rather than having a revered place within Hinduism, Tal represents something against which it is their moral and religious duty to defend. However, a closer analysis reveals a more complex relationship between the two. Whilst on the surface the karsevaks present their cause as one of religious morality, their campaign ultimately aims to overthrow the government and replace it with their own leader and is thus a very worldly political endeavour. Not only is it a reflection on contemporary politico-religious movements, but the specific language employed by the rioters attests to another political connection; twice, in just a few short sentences, Tal is described as ‘unnatural’ and ‘bloated with unnaturalness’, echoing the language of the British Raj’s criminalisation of hijras under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, entitled ‘Unnatural Offences’. The duplication points to the idea that this may very well not be coincidental, and when it is put into dialogue with Tal’s language (calling on a recognised Hindu

deity for protection, which is ultimately granted by the arrival of the elevator) it would appear that Tal’s appeal to the sacred and the pre-imperial has won out over the misguided political pawns who think they represent true religion, but are in reality the ones who regurgitate later impositions. In this way, McDonald recognises the increasingly contentious nature of the relationship between gender and religion in India, and whilst little light is ultimately shed on the placement of hijras within that framework, it usefully questions what happens when Hindu nationalist claims to be the bearers of true Hinduism lead to the exclusion of some of its oldest, but most vulnerable and marginal, groups.

Yet it cannot be claimed that McDonald’s novel is therefore ultimately hopeful for non-binary individuals; though there is a complex questioning of motives in Tal’s chase, and yt does escape at that time, yt ultimately has to go into hiding abroad and thus the nationalists win in removing yt from their society. Additionally, many nutes are killed by the rioters when the aforementioned club is set on fire:

The attack was thorough and effective... The ones who fled out the front ran into the full wrath of the Shivaji. The bodies are strewn up the alley. One wears a car tyre around its neck, burned down to the steel wires. The body is intact, the head a charred skull. One has been run through with a Siva trident. One has been disembowelled and the gap filled with burning plastic trash. The police stamp out the flames and drag the thing away, trying to handle it as little as possible. They fear the polluting touch of the hijra, the un-sex.

Again, this section operates on two levels, but on this occasion, both are negative. Instead of representing the viewpoints of the karsevaks and a nute, this passage represents the actions of the karsevaks and the viewpoint of the police, and

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92 Tal’s exile is discussed in more depth in chapter four, which considers the difficulties authors have with writing in futures for their non-binary characters; here, my commentary is limited to the specifically Hindu dimensions.

93 River of Gods, pp.338.
without the agency of the nute perspective what we see is two kinds of rejection. The karsevaks have taken direct, violent action which unashamedly evokes their religious backing, indeed even uses it as the main reason for their attack, being described as the ‘wrath of the Shivaji’ and using his symbol to carry out their murders. In this sense, the nutes are entirely stripped of any protection or reverence said, by Nanda and others, to be due to them for their connection to Shiva and instead are seen as his opponents. The second level of rejection is less violent but just as damaging to the idea of the hijras’ powers, as they are seen as inherently polluting even when dead, and entirely dehumanised as ‘the thing’ and ‘it’, rather than ‘yt’. In this representation, to be non-binary gendered is to be nonhuman not in the sense of transcending it to the sacred, but of being lower than it, almost demonic in the ability to curse from beyond death. The fact that it is the police who believe these things is a long way from Dalrymple’s representation of ‘poor, simple’ Indians and their beliefs in the hijras’ powers, showing a deeply ingrained social prejudice against non-binary gendered people at the core of the establishment rather than the periphery. The relationship between hijras and the establishment, both physical and ideological, will be engaged with substantially in chapter four.

Ultimately, River of Gods continues many of the shifts charted thus far in its relegation of the importance of Hindu-based traditions to the margins of the third-gender individuals’ lives, and in the scorn which is shown from an increasingly unbelieving public. However, the novel substantially extends these ideas. Whilst the nutes themselves retain an element of private religious belief shown in Tal’s appeals to Ardhanarishvara, they have abandoned their public religious functions as hijras, and their social reception crosses over the line from public disdain to actively showing cisgendered figures positioning non-binary individuals as contrary to Hinduism and thus targets for eradication.

The fraught relationship between hijras and Hinduism in its present-day political iteration continues to be a factor in the final three texts for analysis, leading ultimately to a rejection of Hinduism being represented as coming from some hijra characters themselves rather than aimed against them from others.

94 Serena Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.20.
Alongside this, a less violent, more general but socially poignant movement away from a Hindu-centred understanding of hijra identity is put forwards in the introduction of Muslim-identified hijras, replicating in literary form many of the ideas put forward in Gayatri Reddy’s study of South-Indian hijras.\textsuperscript{95} Not only does the prevalence of these figures in the later texts speak to a diversity of identities within hijra communities, but it also enables a critique of aspects of their traditional, Hindu-centred associations from the mouths of hijra characters themselves. Whilst this serves the positive function of representing a matrix of identity building factors, thereby allowing greater insight into the plural issues at stake for hijras in their negotiation of the social landscape, it also has the potential, when it is fictional hijras speaking these critiques, to naturalise more problematic factors which ultimately condemn the hijra community; with this in mind, it is poignant that each of the main hijra characters in the texts to follow, all of which are either Muslim or religiously diverse, ultimately leave the organised hijra community in pursuit of other forms of community belonging. Rather than branching out beyond a narrow reading of hijras as exclusively Hindu, then, it appears that the texts to follow struggle to replace these origin stories with anything more sustainable, and ultimately question whether or not hijras, stripped of their social sanction from Hindu associations, can survive as an identity category.

Craig Thompson’s 2012 graphic novel *Habibi* features heavily in chapter two as not only does it include eunuch characters, but it is explicit, helped by the graphic mode, in distinguishing this group from the hijras. Critics have been widely divided on this work, even within their own accounts. On the one hand, it has been heralded as a work of beauty and breath-taking scope which relentlessly tackles social issues such as the rich-poor divide, privatisation of natural resources, racism, sexual violence and the destruction of traditional social structures at the hands of enforced modernity; on the other hand, the text has itself been accused of ‘racist and sexist imagery’, ‘a kitchen sink approach’ full of ‘racial, sexual and ethnic stereotypes’ relying on ‘sentimental melodrama and cliché’, and poignantly, that its

\textsuperscript{95} Reddy, *With Respect to Sex.*
depiction of ‘cross-dressing eunuchs shows a fairly startling lack of understanding of transgendered issues [sic].’

The narrative focuses on the stories of Dodola (a young girl sold into marriage by her impoverished parents, then kidnapped into slavery) and Zam (a small child whom she saves from the slave traders and takes with her when she makes her escape). The two characters live together in an abandoned boat in the desert for nine years, him providing water, her providing food by prostituting herself to passing caravans, until she is kidnapped by palace henchmen and delivered to the Sultan to join his harem. As Zam starves in the desert without Dodola, he makes his way to a neighbouring village where, impoverished and disgusted with himself for his burgeoning sexual desires for Dodola, he joins a local hijra troupe and undergoes genital removal. Chamera (as Zam is then known) begins working as a badhai hijra but, following the rape of another member of the troupe, is prevailed upon to offer himself for prostitution. He is kidnapped and taken to the palace as a eunuch slave. When the pair are finally reunited their relationship shifts from parent and child to potential lovers. Unable to impregnate Dodola, Zam contemplates suicide, but ultimately returns to become a family through the purchase/adoption of a slave girl.

Zam’s kidnap makes clear that he does not choose to join the eunuchs, but his decision to join the hijras is more ambiguous. Zam is starving and is offered food and shelter by a hijra, so the decision to stay with the group is one of need; however, Zam is also suffering from his desire for Dodola and his self-hatred at this sexualisation of a woman who has been like a mother to him, and chooses to become a hijra by having his genitals removed as a remedy for this confusion. As far as Zam is concerned, then, the hijra community represents a complex mix of real-world problems and spiritual needs, a representation which is extended in the community itself and in their public reception.

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97 Because of the temporary nature of Zam’s time as Chamera and his fierce rejection of the hijra community after the event, I maintain masculine pronouns throughout when referring to this character.
98 *Habibi*, p.581.
99 *Habibi*, pp.600-601.
Some of the hijras are driven by spiritual purpose, whilst others are clearly represented as financially motivated; this is most clearly seen in the two leaders of the hijra group, one of whom takes Zam in from the street, feeds him and talks him through his problems whilst explaining the spiritual cleansing they underwent in becoming a hijra, whilst the other is angry that Zam is not earning for them and is the one who pimps Zam out in the incident in which he is kidnapped. Rather than pin itself to either accepting or rejecting the hijras’ religious backing, *Habibi* uses individual figures to show the simultaneity of religious and economic motivations for membership. The result is a complex rendering of a divided community which, though it provides shelter for the legitimately spiritually-motivated, is ultimately powerless to protect its members and prone to abuse them itself.

In this example, which is the text’s first use of hijras, three prominent representations of hijras are wrapped up together in what is ultimately an effective, if damaging, initial positioning of the group. The hijras’ powers are recognised insofar as they are said to be ‘bad luck’ and their work’s validity accepted and established in the reference to ‘new infant tax’. At precisely the same

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*Habibi*, p.190.
time, referencing their work as a tax detracts from its sacred validity even as it assures its social validity. Lastly, the reference to them as ‘vile women’ not only positions them explicitly negatively, through the term ‘vile’, but rejects their social niche in describing them as women rather than recognising their particular position in the gender system. The three representations are technically contradictory but come together nonetheless to produce a cognitively dissonant matrix of negative understandings coming from different angles. The framing of the hijras is thus one which renders them as representatives of all that is other, whether or not it makes sense as a whole. They become, as will be a key theme throughout this thesis, symbols of deviance broadly and generically, and of contradiction and excess in the bargain.

In its introduction to the hijras, Habibi evidently follows the trend of the previous texts in constructing a negative image of them despite inclusion of what are otherwise positive associations. What Habibi goes on to do from this point, along with the final two texts for discussion, is something different; the text erodes the social value of hijras’ relationships with the sacred via a character placed within the hijra community, rather than solely attacking it via the mockery or disgust of the general public. In this instance, this is achieved through Zam’s rejection of Bahuchara Mata, and thus the foundation of this hijra group’s claim that he can find spiritual enlightenment by sacrificing himself to her.

Zam’s decision to undergo the nirvan operation (rather than to continue just living with the hijras) stems from the psychic trauma triggered by his sexual urges for Dodola. Thompson depicts a dream Zam has in which Dodola becomes merged with Bahuchara Mata, and both are demonic:
In merging the two, Thompson firstly depicts Zam's decision to dedicate himself to the hijras not as a sacred yearning to sacrifice himself to the Goddess but as a worldly yearning to rectify his relationship with Dodola. Secondly, he depicts Bahuchara Mata as a predatory, demonic figure demanding his genitals as punishment for his desires. In both these ways, the sacred connection between hijras and Bahuchara Mata is undermined and the alternative reading pointed to in the introduction to this chapter is foregrounded; those who sacrifice their fertility to the Goddess are marked as having previously been deviants who must make amends for their sins. The hijras' sacrificed genitals become not a symbol of their spiritual dedication, but a scarlet letter, as it were.

Towards the conclusion of the narrative, however, Zam comes to recognise that the attempt has been futile and that he has been blasphemous towards the true God, who for him is Allah. Zam stands atop a dam and contemplates suicide, leading in to a text-heavy section of the graphic novel entitled 'The Orphan’s Prayer', which includes the following excerpt:

I searched for Dodola in my own femininity. I claimed I wanted to be closer to God, but again in my blasphemy - I meant Dodola. / I cut off what made us different. I wanted both halves to meet within me. Bahuchara Mata, another false God. / I lived as a boy, then a girl, then a eunuch, but never as a man... If Paradise lies beneath the feet of the mothers – those tender feet of Dodola – then it’s hell that waits beneath mine.102

Both Dodola and Bahuchara Mata are announced to be 'false God[s]' and both they and the operation are renounced. Whilst it is entirely possible to say that Zam’s experience is not representative of true hijra spirituality because he came to the operation for the wrong reasons in the first place, as is made clear by the text, and so his renunciation of the community and its Goddess does little more than prove that he was never a true hijra in the first place, thus leaving the majority of the hijra community and their beliefs alone, this would ultimately be the sort of literal, anthropological reading this thesis explicitly aims to avoid. Instead, it is recognised that Zam as a literary figure does operate as a representation of a hijra, particularly when his choice to join is contrasted with the force involved in his becoming a eunuch, and that he is the figure who is explored in the most depth, as opposed to the other hijras who provide fleeting examples of two sides, spiritual and economic, of the community. Reading Zam as a representation, then, it is clear that Thompson uses the community’s traditions as a dramatic, graphic rendering of Zam’s inner turmoil and his castration as a narrative obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of the couple’s ultimate reconciliation. As such, rather than directly

102 Habibi, p.600.
attack the hijras' claim to sacred validity by presenting their stories as a joke or curse, Thompson goes to a deeper level and uses *Habibi* to posit a rift within the community in which some hijras use their socially recognised role for purely economic, rather than spiritual, gains (as in the example of one of the leaders) or for personal rather than religious reasons (as in Zam's case). This snowballs into a full rejection of the spiritual validity of Bahuchara Mata in renouncing her as a false God and the sacrifice made to her as blasphemous.

Instead of finding salvation through spirituality, Thompson’s narrative ultimately posits money as the answer. Trying to fix his problems through spirituality via the hijras only makes things worse for Zam, as the operation he undergoes means he is unable to impregnate Dodola when they become a couple, leaving him feeling like an inadequate partner and questioning the whole purpose of their being together. Zam rectifies this problem by getting a job, through which he is able to provide for Dodola who can then stay in the building they squat in, taking up her supposedly rightful place as a homemaker by decorating and furnishing the space as best she can, and completing the heteronormative family unit by literally buying a child in a slave market who they can take on as their daughter. In this rendering, heteronormative capitalism is the answer, in juxtaposition to the hijras who are, in contrast, archaic, ineffectual and ultimately only a recourse of the desperate and not a solution. Whilst the reliance on a heteronormative, capitalist model is ripe for critique, Thompson is by no means the only author in this corpus to move towards it, particularly in the later accounts, as is evidenced by the next text.

Jeet Thayil’s 2012 novel *Narcopolis* gives perhaps the least space of all to hijras' Hindu origins, though in its place it fills out the main hijra character’s background with a number of other factors. Dimple is involved in different religions and a number of economic activities, never doing badhai work. She is initially raised publicly Hindu, but her mother secretly worships the Christian God at home; after her father's death, her mother gives her to a priest (Hindu or Christian we are not told) who sells her to the hijras, from which point she grows up in a hijra brothel before taking a Muslim lover and moving to work in his opium den. *Narcopolis*, published mid-decriminalisation, is a core component of the
discussion undertaken in chapter four of this thesis; however, at this stage, it is useful as a demonstration of the transition I have argued has taken place between the early texts, both academic and literary, which focus their understanding of the hijras through Hindu mythology even as they undermine it and foreground its negative aspects, and the later texts, which gradually diminish the gravity they ascribe to these traditions before beginning to replace them with other factors, such as other religions or other axes of identity entirely. Dimple describes her nirvan operation as follows, which forms a useful contrast with, for example, Bina and Sunila’s descriptions in *Bombay Ice*:

> It took him a while to work up to it, to ask the questions she’d been asked many times: How did they do it? And: how much did it hurt? Her reply was casually made, as if she were talking about a haircut or a school outing. It affected Lee more than if she’d wept or cursed. When you’re cut young you become a woman quicker, she told him, and since she had not yet been ten, they did both in one go. With older boys, they removed only the testicles. Gelding. They used the English word. In her case: gelding and docking.

> ‘I was nine or I might have been eight,’ Dimple said. ‘It was about a year after I came to Bombay, to the hijra’s brothel. A woman was called, a famous daima, Shantibai. There was singing and dancing and whisky. The daima told me to chant the goddess’s name and she gave me a red sari. She made me drink whisky. I hated the taste but I drank it. They gave me opium. Then four of them held me down. They used a piece of split bamboo on my penis and testicles and held me down. The bamboo was so tight I felt nothing, until afterwards, when they poured hot oil on my wound. That was when I felt the pain, and more, something strange, I was sure the pain would set me free. It burned when they poured the oil, but it was a good thing, it meant the bleeding would stop.’

> ‘They not take you to doctor?’
‘I could have asked for a doctor, but nobody respects the doctor nirvan. You get anaesthesia and medicine. You’re not risking your life.’

There is evidently still community value in the nirvan operation, underlined by Dimple’s final remarks, and spiritual value for Dimple herself, who felt ‘sure the pain would set [her] free’. However, there are now no explicit references to spiritual powers being gained from the operation, but instead it appears to be social sanction which is achieved. Dimple only ever engages in sex work with the hijras, not badhai, and so the bodily effects of the operation are also key, more so than the spiritual. Bahuchara Mata features in name only; Dimple is told to chant her name, but not told why or given any understanding of the link between Bahuchara Mata and the nirvan, nor does she feature anywhere else in the text. Whilst this ultimately renders Bahuchara Mata a null part of Dimple’s experience, and there is no connection with the other gods at all, Narcopolis stops just short of writing the link to Hinduism out altogether by having the dai ma do the operation and give this command, showing that the older generations and those central to the hijras’ most important events still retain the links and traditions. Thus, ultimately, Thayil shows us a community in a state of transition between the old ways and the new, showing glimpses of traditions which it would appear will inevitably die out, including them as a way of chronicling their disappearance rather than as engagement with them. This theme becomes much more overt in the final text for consideration in this chapter, Arundhati Roy’s 2017 novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (hereafter Ministry).

The main character in Ministry is a hijra called Anjum who joins the community as a child and leaves the community home at the age of forty-six. At this point she sets up home on her own in a nearby graveyard, motivated by a combination of the trauma she suffers in a Hindutva massacre in Gujarat (the primary catalyst), her belief that one of the other members of the household is creating powerful hexes ranging from making her child ill to causing 9/11, and a

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103 Narcopolis, pp.66-67.
desire to return to the Duniya to help the poor. Anjum gradually attracts a group of outcasts and misfits including, but certainly not limited to, other hijras, to form a new, mixed community in the graveyard with her at its centre.

*Ministry* side-lines hijra traditions on explicit and implicit levels. On a whole-text level, in a similar way to the other texts discussed, the novel doesn’t dwell at length on the importance of traditions drawn from Hinduism for the group, offering brief references rather than sustained engagement. On the narrative level, Anjum’s decision to move away from the hijra community and the fact that the focus of the novel is on her new group, most of whom are not hijras, serves to utilise hijra communities as an archaic, scene-setting device, with the majority of the novel explicitly moving away from and thinking beyond this structure to open out Anjum’s experience of the world to people beyond other hijras. This is not to say that the hijra community living in the Khwabgah are entirely dismissed, but rather that Anjum is not dependent on them for a sense of, or for a very real, community, which she is able to build both physically (in constructing the huts for the graveyard’s occupants) and emotionally (as the central figure of support for those who seek her) outside of the hijra gharana. Anjum is able to maintain the valuable social and other benefits of community living without having also to take on the traditional and spiritual associations of hijras living together in a group of separated, sacred beings, nor does she have to maintain this community for the purposes of badhai work, again commonly seen as hijras’ traditional, and only, occupation; Anjum does not exclusively do badhai when she lives with the hijras, also being a sex worker, and does not do it at all after her move. Thus, both in what it does and does not include, on a whole-text level Hindu mythology is recognised as having validity for ascribing individuals who simultaneously identify as hijra but is neither a central nor an essential part of the hijra experience being represented.

On a specific, explicit level, the hijras who are represented similarly dilute the importance of Hinduism within the group, not removing it altogether but not holding it up as the all-encompassing correct way to be a hijra. Anjum, for instance, is not Hindu but Muslim, and she is not alone. The religious variation within the

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104 In this usage, ‘Duniya’ refers to the world of ordinary people outside of the hijra community.
community and its perceived impact on hijra traditions is best encapsulated in a discussion of the nirvan ceremony:

There was no reason to be ashamed of anything, Ustad Kulsoom Bi told her, because Hijras were chosen people, beloved of the Almighty. The word Hijra, she said, meant a Body in which a Holy Soul lives. In the next hour Anjum learned that the Holy Souls were a diverse lot and that the world of the Khwabgah was just as complicated, if not more so, than the Duniya. The Hindus, Bulbul and Gudiya, had both been through the formal (extremely painful) religious castration ceremony in Bombay before they came to the Khwabgah. Bombay Silk and Heera would have liked to do the same, but they were Muslim and believed that Islam forbade them from altering their God-given gender, so they managed, somehow, within those confines. Baby, like Razia, was a man who wanted to remain a man but be a woman in every other way. As for Ustad Kulsoom Bi, she said she disagreed with Bombay Silk and Heera’s interpretation of Islam. She and Nimmo Gorakhpuri- who belonged to different generations- had had surgery.. She told Anjum she should think it over and decide what she wanted to do. Anjum took three whole minutes to make up her mind [in favour of surgery].

The fact that the nirvan is only taken up by the Hindu hijras and is referred to as the 'formal... religious castration ceremony', shifts the emphasis from it being a hijra tradition (stemming from Hinduism) to it being a Hindu tradition (relevant to hijras). Thus, without removing the tradition or even devaluing it for the Hindu hijras, the novel does not recognise it as a fundamental part of hijra experience, but specifically as a Hindu-hijra one. The two different decisions taken by hijras who identify as Muslim show that there can be diversity of interpretation even within a religious tradition, and the inclusion of individuals who do not undergo any surgery testifies against the idea that it is an essential part of being recognised as a

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105 Ministry, pp.27-28, emphasis original.
true hijra. In this way, the passage recognises and appropriately places the nirvan ceremony within a much wider understanding of genital modification and its relevance to hijras, rather than as the sole route through which hijras are validated.

However, whilst the examples above emphasise putting Hindu hijra traditions in appropriate conversation with other, non-Hindu ones, there are moments in the text at which hijras themselves do specifically disparage these traditions. The two hijras who do so—Ustad Kulsoom Bi and Nimmo Gorakhpuri—are themselves Muslim, and so in one sense their derision can be seen as an extension of the above in that they have their own take on hijra traditions and do not feel the necessity to abide by or view as sacred those which stem from Hinduism just because they are hijras. However, this reading is complicated by the fact that Ustad Kulsoom Bi is the leader of the main hijra group in the novel (the group which Anjum leaves to set up home in the graveyard), and thus her opinion carries a level of gravity which is not the case for others; similarly, Nimmo’s comments become a theme which stays with Anjum throughout the novel as she attempts to find happiness in her body and its social ramifications, extending the incident far beyond its brief reference.

The first example specifically draws on the mythology outlined earlier, featuring a retelling of the story of Ram. However, whilst earlier references to this story have sometimes included negative aspects, including its use in Delhi as a joke at the expense of hijras, this example draws specifically on the story not being widely known, rather than being known and reinterpreted:

Once Gudiya tried to tell her that Hijras had a special place of love and respect in Hindu mythology. She told Kulsoom Bi the story of how, when Lord Ram and his wife, Sita, and his younger brother Laxman were banished for fourteen years from their kingdom, the citizenry, who loved their king, followed them, vowing to go wherever their king went. When they reached the outskirts of Ayodhya where the forest began, Ram turned to his people and said, 'I want all you men and women to go home and wait
for me until I return.' Unable to disobey their king, the men and women returned home. Only the Hijras waited faithfully for him at the edge of the forest for the whole fourteen years, because he had forgotten to mention them.

'So we are remembered as the forgotten ones?' Ustad Kulsoom Bi said. 'Wah! Wah!'  

On a surface level, the extract continues the idea of pushing to the margins hijras' Hindu origin stories, by placing it as something that even the leader of the group was unaware of. Evidently, for Ustad Kulsoom Bi and by extension for this group of hijras, the incident in the Ramayana is not something that 'defines a personally experienced gender identity'.

The latter part of the quotation takes this reading yet further by entering into a complicated relationship with the concept of being forgotten; rather than the Ramayana story simply being irrelevant or unvalued for this group, Kulsoom Bi's reading of it as demonstrative of the fact that the hijras are 'remembered as the forgotten ones' speaks strongly to their liminality, their being both 'remembered' and 'forgotten' simultaneously, and thus as figures of the present absent. The 'present absent', in these terms, refers to figures who are represented only to act as a void in the narrative; they are physically included, but pushed to the periphery so as to act as a dumping ground for the needs of other characters, vessels of otherness and figures of marginality in its broadest, most malleable terms, rather than fleshed-out figures in and of themselves. In this extract, they are very specifically physically located; they sit in one, set place for a superhuman amount of time. Yet in the same breath, they are absent. The superhuman nature of their waiting renders them non-human, in that they can be inactive for a physically impossible duration without starving or succumbing to illness; metaphorically, they are absent in that they are not included in Ram's speech, despite being part of the crowd. Being 'remembered as the forgotten ones' is not a source of prestige or

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106 Ministry, p.51.
107 Serena Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.13.
power for the hijras, but instead a dry commentary on the precarity of their social position.

The second example is, though brief in itself, the longest explanation given in the novel of badhai work, and is framed in decidedly negative terms:

[T]hey descended on ordinary people’s celebrations- weddings, births, house-warming ceremonies- dancing, singing in their wild, grating voices, offering their blessings and threatening to embarrass the hosts (by exposing their mutilated privates) and ruin the occasion with curses and a display of unthinkable obscenity unless they were paid a fee. (This is what Razia meant when she said badtameezi, and what Nimmo Gorakhpuri referred to when she said 'We’re jackals who feed off other people's happiness, we’re Happiness Hunters.' ...)

In discussions of badhai in texts covered earlier, there have been numerous references to the negativity, fear and potential for curses which the general public often attribute to it; this, however, is the first instance we have seen of hijras themselves disparaging their work. Although the terms 'blessings' and 'curses' are used, they are not contextualised by any reference to Bahuchara Mata or any of the mythology which seeks to explain the source of the hijras' powers, and thus the potential link to the sacred contained within the extract is overwhelmed by the negative, worldly associations of extortion and aggression it contains. On page twenty-two, where the term 'badtameezi' first appears, it is not explained; the passage is a summary of Razia’s mental instability and her obsession with government schemes, and the quote simply reads 'as per the scheme, they would all live together in a housing colony and be given government pensions and would no longer need to earn their living doing what she described as badtameezi- bad behaviour- any more'. Given the wider associations of hijras working as prostitutes, and the subtle references to this being the case in Anjum and her community’s case (though it is never explicitly discussed, 'clients' are referred to

108 Ministry, p.51; on p.22, 'badtameezi' is translated as 'bad behaviour'. 
numerous times, and as she ages it is said that her 'clients' no longer have a sexual interest in her, but that they visit her as friends or through pity) it is possible to assume that prostitution is the bad behaviour being referred to until it is contextualised on page twenty-four. In this way, by reversing the associations of which of the hijras' activities are considered deviant, Roy puts further emphasis on the shame and aggression lurking under the surface of their ostensibly sacred roles.

In some ways, the novel appears to chart the development and deepening of a divide within hijra communities between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern; from this perspective, the negative treatment of traditions is expressed by those who identify with the latter, and for whom these traditions hold no real sacred value and thus are simply shameful and onerous, though necessary. This act makes a major contribution to the sense of the gravity and impact of this division into what are then set up as not just distinct but opposing camps of gender identity. Yet the co-existence of the two throughout the novel, and the new models for community and tradition put forward in the narrative, attest instead to the emergence of new identities without the inherent loss of pre-existing ones. The complex interdependency of 'hijra' and 'trans' identities has never been more politically salient than in the present day, with the power to extend or curtail their rights. For this reason, I leave the discussion of emerging non-binary identities to its more appropriate context, namely chapter four and its discussion of postcolonial representations of gendered otherness in India.

A further issue raised by the novel and pertaining to the post-2000s political situation in India does, however, warrant some more detailed elaboration here, pertaining as it does to the rise of Hindutva ideologies in India and their expanding political power. Earlier, in the discussion of River of Gods, Tal managed to escape from a group of karsevaks who wanted yts life for yts perceived gendered and sexual trespasses. Nutes, to the mob, represent impurity and otherness and have no place in their heteronormative social model. Anjum, however, is clearly identified as a hijra when she is stopped by a mob in Gujarat during the 2002 riots. This identity distorts her relationship with the mob, as it
brings with it traditional associations connected with the hijras’ place in Hinduism to which Tal has no recourse:

Don't kill her brother, killing Hijras brings bad luck.
Bad luck!
Nothing scared those murderers more than the prospect of bad luck. After all, it was to ward off bad luck that the fingers that gripped the slashing swords and flashing daggers were studded with lucky stones embedded in thick gold rings. It was to ward off bad luck that the wrists wielding iron rods that bludgeoned people to death were festooned with red puja threads lovingly tied by adoring mothers. Having taken all these precautions, what would be the point of wilfully courting bad luck?

So they stood over her and made her chant their slogans... They left her alive. Un-killed. Un-hurt. Neither folded nor unfolded. She alone. So that *they* might be blessed with good fortune.

Butcher's Luck.
That was all she was. And the longer she lived, the more good luck she brought them.

She tried to un-know that little detail as she rattled through her private fort. But she failed. She knew very well that she knew very well that she knew very well.109

It is highly unusual, in the corpus of hijra literature being explored in this thesis, for a hijra character to make it to the end of the narrative. In most they die (including *Narcopolis, Bombay Ice* and potentially *Delhi*); those who make it out alive are forced into exile (*River of Gods*) or return to their cisgendered identity (*The Impressionist* and *Habibi*) and so do not end the narratives as hijras. Roy’s characterisation of Anjum is in complete contrast to this generic expectation, and this aspect comes to dominate Anjum’s strand of the narrative throughout the novel, during which she ‘never forgot that she was only Butchers’ Luck. For the rest of her life, even when it appeared otherwise, her relationship with the Rest-of-Her-

Life remained precarious and reckless’, leading ultimately to her leaving the community to set up home in the graveyard in which, as she answers the municipal authorities who argue that she is ‘strictly prohibited from living in the graveyard’, she ‘wasn’t living... she was dying in it’. Anjum feels stripped of her identity and reduced to a talisman, a symbolic hijra and not an individual, by Hindu fanatics; in opposition to the early Western academic view that hijras gain their identity by joining the (purportedly Hinduism-centred) hijra community, Anjum can only begin to regain her sense of self by relinquishing her association with the organised hijra community. A reversal of the long-standing view that identity, for Indian citizens, is drawn from community rather than individualism comes through in the distinction between hijra-as-symbol and hijra-as-person, arguing in favour of individualism alongside a general casting of many of the hijra communities’ traditions as either irrelevant or outright negative to complete a triangle of rebuttal of traditionalism. It could be argued that this is partly a progression through the texts chronologically and partly a reflection of Roy’s position as an activist first and author second. Whilst a detailed analysis of the contemporary political landscape must wait until the final chapter, the tensions presented in Ministry between hijras and Hinduism explodes the myth of their being synonymous.

This in turn opens up the conceptual space to think about hijras in other socio-political and religious settings, including Islam, which has become increasingly prominent in the final three texts in particular. Whilst the connection in these texts has been via individual Muslim-identified hijras, the more common connection, both politically and in literary terms, has been through a reading of hijras alongside eunuchs, a group which became prominent in India during the Mughal empire. At times read synonymously, and at times as specifically contrary to one another, the relationship between hijras and eunuchs has been influential in the moulding of particular ideas of each, and in the next chapter I turn to a more detailed consideration of the impact of this dynamic.

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110 Ministry, pp.66-67.
Conclusion

The exploration of Hindu cosmology and mythology in the early sections of this chapter demonstrated that hijras are positioned as supernatural beings who undergo sacrifice to take on sacred powers, and that these powers grant them a place in wider society. By appealing to a number of mythological references which demonstrate the cosmic benefits of being multiply or non-binary gendered, hijras can claim cultural space for themselves within a Hindu worldview which understands that transcendence of the gender binary can be a powerful, productive act of completion. In the specific references to mythological characters crossing gender boundaries, and depictions of the hijras explicitly in mythology, hijras can demonstrate a cultural archetype which sees them as part of the fabric of society; though they follow a different path from heteronormative members, all roles are crucial to complete society and keep it functioning as a whole.

Where these depictions contain negative elements, such as portraying the figures who become hijras as having been deviant beforehand, or them having the ability to curse, the negative elements are superseded by the act of renunciation and commitment to the social good embodied in their becoming hijras. Similarly, sacrifice is a central aspect of the majority of these stories; as such, the focus is shifted from the incompleteness of these figures themselves to the benefit they bring more widely, marking them as to be revered all the more for their selflessness. This idea was evident in the reading of Shiva’s loss of his lingam not as personal infertility but as the gifting of universal fertility.

Once consideration turned to the later, fictional literature, however, it was evident that these texts do not centralise mythological accounts in constructing their hijra characters. Instead, mythology is used as a backdrop to hijra constructions, framing them in negative terms as pitiable, terrifying or socially marginal. A shift in usage was charted in considering the texts chronologically. Three stages can be seen: first, mythology was used to construct the hijras as living deviant, anti-social lives, but as being individually pitiable for having no choice but to live these lives; second, their anti-sociality was naturalised such that the element of pity was lost and the deviance surrounding the hijras, as well as the fear they inspire in others, was foregrounded; third, hijras were depicted as actively
seeking to break away from these limited readings which reduce them to social symbols and disavow their individuality. The three stages clearly mark a shift in the hijras’ social position. However, though there are clear differences between the three stages, they each contribute to a project of characterising the hijras as being on the margins of society and of using mythological references to explain this alterity, rather than it being used to grant them a positive, esteemed position. Evidently, the rewriting of hijra associations for narrative purposes is not occurring simply through the omission of earlier origin stories. In many cases, it is happening precisely through an appeal to these stories, but radically reworking their conclusions to fit in with a more marginal image of the hijras which the authors need to construct for the purposes of their narrative.

All eight of the novels which feature in this thesis have been introduced in this chapter, yet it has been shown that none reads the hijras exclusively through these origin stories. Instead, the texts build these stories together with a wealth of other references, constructing their hijra characters through layers of historical and ideological associations which, I shall argue, are rendered negative and then layered together to produce hyperbolic figures who become embodiments of exotic otherness. In the following chapters, I therefore return to texts as appropriate to the historical references utilised, analysing these images in isolation and then proceeding to demonstrate how, in conjunction, the result is overburdened figures of deviance who are fruitful for the narrative but unsustainable as individual figures.
Chapter Two:

Slavery, Sexuality and Subjectivity: Literary Representations of Social Liminality Through Hijras and Eunuchs.

The central project of this thesis is to explore the positioning of a third gender in India within a wider social, gendered system. Individual gender identities do not operate in a vacuum, but as a complementary, if fundamentally unequal, system, and thus an understanding of the value of otherness is a necessary component for understanding the whole. In the previous chapter, we saw how mythological material relating to hijras impacts on their public perceptions in two different settings, by examining the original constructions and then exploring the way that these ideas are picked up and reworked by later authors. This examination showed that the same fundamental stories can be adapted to produce very different constructions of hijras. In this chapter I apply the same methodology, looking back at the historical material and contrasting it with much later uses in order to understand the processes of construction underlying literary representations.

The historical material in question is not explicitly concerned with hijras themselves, as it was in the first chapter, but rather with eunuchs; the literary analysis to follow considers how understandings of eunuchs contribute to constructions of literary hijras. This material becomes crucial in both this chapter and chapter three. Whilst eunuchs are no doubt the more prominent figures of gendered otherness associated with the Mughal period, due in no small part to their political prominence as opposed to the marginality of the hijras, evidently hijras and eunuchs coexisted. Following on from the Mughal empire, the British administration in India amalgamated hijras and eunuchs into one understanding under the latter title and criminalised both under the same laws. Anxiety surrounding the political prominence of the eunuchs no doubt contributed to the fixation of Western authors in particular on alternative gender expression when writing about India. As such, both when amalgamated with eunuchs and when viewed separately, the Mughal period has had a major impact on depictions of hijras and the ideological framework which inflects these representations.
Here, we see literary authors both amalgamating the groups to produce particular effects and, in contrast, distinguishing between them to funnel particular associations of otherness towards the hijras in highlighted contradistinction. The selective weaving of these categories is therefore crucial to the analysis at hand in the later stages of this chapter. By analysing the ways that hijras are represented in contradistinction to eunuchs, the specific associations with which each are loaded becomes clear. Simultaneously, considering the two together will contribute substantially to a broader picture of the conceptual uses to which thirdness is put as a narrative device and organisational category.

Before such an analysis can be undertaken, however, it is pertinent at this point to provide a historical background to the eunuchs. This both provides a context within which to understand better the re-imaginings and repurposing going on in the literature; it also makes clear where associations which the authors of literature attach to the hijras have actually been selectively drawn from eunuch history and added to hijra connotations, contributing to a project of constructing hijras in hyperbolic ways.

In the Mughal courts (1526-1857), the third-sexed body was valuable because anxieties surrounding lineage, honour and modesty could be contained by the ‘safe zone’ of the eunuch. Through gendered and sexed categories, imperial politics and political preoccupations manifested here as sexual-social restrictions, with the eunuch body being constructed as a neutral middle-ground. Thirdness is not just important to these individuals themselves; it is crucial for wider society, to manage gendered interactions in ways which facilitated political collaboration whilst guarding propriety. Yet whilst this guarantees the eunuchs a role as facilitators of important dialogues within royal spaces, and as guardians of sexual propriety (fundamental to the question of succession), it also depicts this role as being largely depersonalised, centred more on the eunuchs being a conceptual buffer than their bringing valuable individual skills to these interactions.

The feminine, in this imagining, is constructed as the penetrable; sexually so, but also as the weak point in the honour built up around the royal presence, and
the purity of the royal household. Pelsaert, a Dutch eye-witness whose account is detailed in R. Nath’s *Private Lives of the Mughals of India*, remarked that:

> two or three eunuchs or more, who are merely purchased Bengali slaves, but are usually faithful to their master, are appointed for each wife, to ensure that she is seen by no man except her husband; and, if a eunuch fails in this duty, he, with everyone else to blame for the stranger’s presence, is in danger of losing his life.\(^1\)

Notwithstanding the Western influence in this account, which attempts to depict eunuchs as ‘merely’ bought menials, their conceptual value for negotiating the gendered spaces of the harem is prominent. Such was the fear of polluting the women of the harem, and the bloodline coming from them, that the most serious punishments could be meted out to those who allowed a man even to look upon the women. In this environment, the space of the harem becomes forbidden to men; the very term harem ‘originates from the Arabic *haram*, denoting ‘parts of a house which men cannot visit’. Women operated on both symbolic and physical levels as vessels of royal honour, and had to be guarded from the outside world to ensure the maintenance of distinctions between the royal (honourable) and the common (dishonourable, polluting), to avoid the contamination of the image of royalty and of the reality of royal lineage. In relation, masculine presences were perceived as penetrating; again, as potential sexual violators of the women and of the royal household, but also of the exclusivity of the court. Thus, masculine presence in the harem was a constant threat to both the body of the ladies and the symbolic capital of the palace. Yet simultaneously, the women of the royal household played important political roles. ‘The political protocols of the time allocated defined roles to women’ and ‘women had stakes in [the harem’s] political arrangements and a role in court rituals’ as well as wider ventures enabled by their


generous salaries.\textsuperscript{113} This involvement led to there being, as Karuna Sharma argues, ‘a political nexus in the harem between men and women built around the fact that they depended on each other to survive and flourish in the competitive environment in which they lived’, simultaneous to there being limitations placed on their physical interactions.\textsuperscript{114} The value of eunuchs lay in their neutrality in this dynamic, not only in terms of their own actions but as barriers between the two, a neutral zone or human wall separating the penetrable women from the penetrating men whilst facilitating their political collaboration.\textsuperscript{115}

Eunuchs are by necessity viewed as a third gender in such an analysis, specifically operating as a distinct, separate zone between the other two genders, essential for facilitating certain interactions, and barring others, between them. It is precisely in their reading as ‘not men’ that the eunuchs have a position to occupy, and thus otherness is essential for their socio-economic role. In chapter one we saw how this was also true of the hijras, in their social rendering as the arbiters of powers of sexuality and fertility specifically derided from their not being a part of the reproductive order. Whatever other distinctions were made between eunuchs and hijras- and problems caused by their being used as coterminous in later accounts- both groups derived their status from their position as third gendered.

As Hambly argues, ‘[e]unuchs had been sold in slave markets across the region prior to Mughal invasion and are mentioned in accounts referring to the Delhi sultanate.’ Such was the value of eunuch slaves that even before the invasion of the Mughals certain regions, most notably Bengal, are said to have offered them in lieu of revenue payments. Hambly dates this practice to the fourteenth century but argues that it became increasingly problematic under the Mughals, that Akbar attempted to abolish it out of concern for the welfare of his own palace slaves, and that it was eventually abolished under emperor Jahangir.\textsuperscript{116}

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{113} Sharma, 'A Visit to the Mughal Harem’, p.163, p.161.
\item\textsuperscript{114} Sharma, 'A Visit to the Mughal Harem’, p.161.
\item\textsuperscript{115} For a fuller elaboration of these ideas, see R. Nath, \textit{Private Lives of the Mughals of India}.
\end{itemize}
In the Mughal era, eunuchs were valuable commodities on the slave market, sought after to work in the zenanas of the rich because, it was believed, they had the strength and fortitude of men but their presence in purdah spaces did not dishonour their women inhabitants. Their asexual status and their inability to reproduce, and thus to foster a lineage, was presumed to make them honourable guardians for the women of the harem, and to make them loyal servants in so far as, being unable to pass down their power through their own line, they were unlikely to attempt a coup and more likely to attempt to carve out a favourable position for themselves within their masters’ courts. Lastly, their price on the markets was also strengthened by prohibitions against castration within the Mughal courts; the Qur’an forbids both the taking of Muslim slaves and the castration of one’s own servants, so eunuchs had to be procured from outside communities, and castrated before sale if they were not already, further increasing their market value. Thus, eunuchs were prized both by slave traders, as valuable commodities, and by potential buyers, as particularly useful slaves who were difficult to procure and as status symbols.

Whilst many eunuch slaves worked as menial servants and had little, if any, personal or political power within their working spaces, this was certainly not the case for all. Jessica Hinchy’s illuminating study of the ‘eunuch slaves known as khwajasarais (literally, lord-superintendents of the house)’ in eighteenth and nineteenth century Awadh attests to the significance and status of these individuals, and similar accounts of khwajasarais included in court chronicles from across the Mughal empire demonstrate that this tradition was not limited to Awadh (otherwise known as Oudh, now largely a part of Uttar Pradesh with a small proportion having become a part of Nepal). The khwajasarai enjoyed a great deal of prestige and frequently held strong military standing, commanding their own troops and taking an active role in campaigns across the Mughal

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119 Hambly, ‘Trade in Eunuchs’.
territories. As Hinchy explains, ‘[k]hwajasarais had a legal status as slaves, but were politically significant courtiers, government officials, military commanders, intelligencers, landholders and managers of elite households as well.’¹²¹ Roles such as these brought them into new relationships with others; rather than the slave being the static subject at the bottom of the hierarchy, acting as a passive recipient of orders, khwajasarais by necessity needed to negotiate relationships with others to fulfil these positions. One of the primary ways through which this was undertaken was through the establishment of teacher-disciple structures, with eunuch slaves taking on both of these positions in different contexts.¹²² Hinchy explains the various strands of the complicated relationships taking place in these structures as follows:

First, relationships between khwajasarais and their masters were envisaged not merely as relationships of enslavement, but also of discipleship: khwajasarais were their masters’ disciples. Second, the khwajasarai community itself was structured internally by discipleship lineages between khwajasarai teachers (gurus, pirs or murshids) and disciples (chelas or murids). Khwajasarai discipleship lineages were knowledge traditions in which the skills and cultural competence required of khwajasarais were passed down from generation to generation. Senior khwajasarais were responsible for the disciplining and upbringing of their disciples. Lineages of generations of khwajasarai gurus and chelas were recognised within Awadh society. Third, khwajasarais formed networks and household establishments of non-eunuch dependants, servants and employees who were conceptualised as disciples. Khwajasarais’ disciples included both slaves and non-slaves, meaning khwajasarai slaves could be the dominant partner in relationships with free men and women. By amassing a large network of disciples, and through the “conspicuous

consumption of followers”, khwajasarais sought to expand their political influence. 123

Thus, rather than being static figures doomed to occupy a position without power or agency, the eunuchs of the royal courts were inherently involved in political and social relationships with those around them, and some had room for movement and the exercise of their prerogatives within these spaces. The existence of a hierarchy amongst slaves gives the lie to the assertion that eunuchs were only ever menial workers; even more importantly, power was distributed throughout these hierarchies, and the claiming of a eunuch identity did give some level of prestige and power to those lower down. Rather than a two-dimensional understanding of royal Mughal spaces, divided amongst the elites and those who served them, we are coming much closer to an understanding of the complex networks which operated within and around these highly volatile, politically and socially central spaces. Ultimately, however, eunuchs’ positions within these spaces are predicated on two key, linked ideas: first, that they are asexual, which leads both to a level of political trust insofar as they are assumed not to be attempting to consolidate power for their own lineages, and an ability to move within physical spaces barred to those perceived as men or women respectively; second, that they are slaves, and that whilst this is a broader category than is often historically recognised, containing within it the potential for power and opportunities to learn and develop within structured relationships, that they are nonetheless owned, and as such are neither citizens nor free to act unimpeded. Taken together, these two attributes position them (as a conceptual category or presumption, at least) as useful figures for the negotiation of spaces, as a boundary between the binary genders and as a trustworthy political ally.

These themes are taken up in the literature at hand, but in radically different forms. The asexuality of the eunuchs marks them as figures who are deeply invested in sexual and gendered politics. These ideas are read as being

central concerns deeply embedded in the category of thirdness. However, the fixation with eunuchs being figures of sexual negotiation is transfigured such that they themselves become deeply sexualised figures, presented ultimately as hypersexual, keeping these themes at the forefront of their characterisation but in ways which are unrecognisable from their historical roles. Questions of sex and propriety circle around the third-sexed body, but rather than being a neutral zone this constant association deeply invests them with symbolic deviance and overt sexualisation.

The concept of personal development being a potential component of slave identity, embedded within the teacher-disciple structure and the political opportunities held out by the identity, meanwhile, undergoes a potentially even more radical transfiguration; in all three of the novels to be analysed here, this development is shown as one which moves the deviant individual closer to socially acceptable heteronormativity. In two of the texts, characters literally use the non-binary zone of the third-gender to step out from, reconsider and then re-join society and its sexual and gendered expectations. This trope contributes strongly to the wider conclusions I draw in this thesis, in which literary hijras operate as narrative devices rather than developed characters in their own right. In this instance, the hijra identity is used only to assert the predominance of heteronormative masculinity, and the value of other forms of being is actively disavowed in the process.

In this chapter, I analyse three literary texts set within the period of Islamic imperialism in India that include representations of hijras and eunuchs. I question why although each approaches the subject of hijras in distinct ways, the persistent image of the hijras and eunuchs across texts is one of sexual deviants whose personal growth is tied up in their bodily degradation and their social marginalisation. The texts in question are: Craig Thompson’s graphic novel *Habibi*, which uses its basis in imagery to depict infantilised, ambiguously-gendered comedic eunuchs and masculinised, evil schemers (both hijras and eunuchs) respectively; Hari Kunzru’s novel *The Impressionist*, which uses its multi-layered narrative to depict a sexually aggressive protagonist being broken down and born anew by being the subject of physical and sexual abuse as a eunuch; and
Khushwant Singh’s fictionalised historical memoir *Delhi: A Novel* which links together the present sexual licentiousness and past sexual aggression of hijra characters to perform a trans-historical reading of the sexually deviant hijras.\textsuperscript{124}

*Habibi* clearly distinguishes between hijras and eunuchs as discreet categories, both graphically (by depicting them visually very differently) and as separate parts of the narrative, with Zam first joining the hijras and then being kidnapped to become a eunuch in a very different role and geographical space. Beginning with *Habibi* therefore allows the analysis to reflect on the different associations being attached to each, as a way of grounding this analysis before proceeding further. However, in utilising both of these communities as part of Zam’s developmental narrative, there is a level of amalgamation of the two as structural categories, beginning the work of exploring how authors selectively amalgamate and distinguish the two communities for narrative effects.

Thompson’s graphic novel is particularly key to this chapter’s argument in that, along with Kunzru, Thompson uses the trope of hijra identity to take his protagonist on a journey of self-exploration. Both authors break down the sexually deviant young male through moral and sexual degradation as a hijra, in the process developing them from essentially independent but immature, sexually problematic identities to ones which recognise the impact of social relationships on the self and the need to navigate social norms and regulations to thrive. Through the graphic novel form, Thompson is able to take this further by contrasting representations of hijra and eunuch characters. Here, I argue that the multiple negative associations attached to these figures help to develop the idea of their having been conceived of separately in the historical context of Islamic imperialism, and to consider in more depth what elements are attached to each group respectively. The fact that Zam inhabits these identities separately but does so as part of one overall project of personal development brings out both the connections and the distinctions between the two which are fundamental to my analysis. The dialogue between hijra and eunuch presented here is developmental to a project of understanding both how hijras are conceptualised through being read as ‘third’, in terms of

gender and social space, and how they are pinpointed as a discreet category, deepening the overall understanding of how ‘hijra’ operates in multiple, dynamic ways.

The analysis of Habibi prepares the ground for moving on to explore The Impressionist and Delhi, which both amalgamate the two identities. The Impressionist refers to its third-gender characters as hijras throughout and depicts them wearing saris and other markers more commonly associated with hijras than eunuchs. Yet it puts them in the middle of Mughal courtly spaces, and whilst the most politically prominent character is identified both as ‘the chief hijra’, a reworking of the more common title ‘chief eunuch’ (as used in Habibi) and as the ‘Khwaja Sara’. Given, in particular, that this narrative uses a terrifying, hyperbolic rendering of the hijras, in which they buy children for the purpose of sexually abusing them to effect political change in their favour, this amalgamation- which allows the narrative to pile on associations of deviance stemming from both sources- contributes strongly to an analysis which identifies thirdness as a narrative marker facilitating extreme otherness. Similarly, in Delhi, the categories feed in to each other, with the main hijra character referring to herself as a slave to cement her relationship with her cisgendered lover; in this instance, the use of this connective identity is for the purposes of manipulating him to have her needs taken care of, rather than a reciprocal dynamic or a genuine reflection of subservience to him. Considering this usage through the concept of eunuch slavery deepens the argument substantially, showing both its historical reference point and the distortions this reference has undergone in order to depict Bhagmati as an extortionist, a negative hijra association seen elsewhere in the literature.

Hari Kunzru’s novel The Impressionist follows the life of a young boy disinherited at age fifteen as he works through his own moral (sexual and racial) ideologies, makes his way from India to Britain and eventually finds personal fulfilment through the rejection of Western civilisation in the ‘heart of darkness’. Crucially, for the analysis presented in this chapter, Pran follows a path which is anything but linear, being multiply reinvented through the imposition of identities, the creation of new ones and the theft of existing ones for himself. Pran is both forced forwards by the Bildungsroman form and is constantly in the process of
stripping down his sense of self in an attempt to uncover some truth to his being, going through a snowballing lack of surety in the fixity of the categories by which he attempts to make these definitions. By the end of the novel, it can equally be said that he returns to his racial roots (rejecting white civilisation entirely in being embraced by an African tribe) and that racial categories fall away altogether, as ‘Englishness’ and ‘Whiteness’ are exposed as meaningless to him, and thus he is able to embrace Blackness where before it always, by necessity, held the position of the rejected Other in the binary logic of racial civility he held so dear.

In order to begin this project of reinvention and interrogation, Pran must first be broken down to rid him of his privilege and his surety in his social position. This is started by his being disinherited and achieved through his time as a hijra. The novel is particularly useful in demonstrating the link made between the process of self-actualisation and the taking on of a hijra identity, with Pran deconstructing his self-entitled, sexually aggressive worldview through the experience of sexual and physical abuse and imprisonment as Rukhsana. Taken together with Habibi, The Impressionist sets aggressive, individualistic hypermasculinity against a socially integrated normative masculinity, and achieves this transition through the hijra label as a temporary, developmental identity.

The final text to be analysed is Khushwant Singh’s Delhi: A Novel. There are two elements of Singh’s novel which raise questions about the sexuality of hijras and their relationships with non-hijra citizens. The first, in the narrative present, is the character Bhagmati whose depiction makes clear the argument being developed regarding authors selectively amalgamating and distinguishing hijras and eunuchs at key points in their narratives. Bhagmati often refers to herself as the narrator’s ‘slave’, terminology which is drawn from eunuchs’ histories and is worthy of unpacking for its transmutation to this context. Simultaneously, she is depicted as being hypersexualised, a prostitute who behaves ‘like a lusty harlot’ and has a voracious sexual appetite; this attribution is in clear contrast to eunuch asexuality, underlined within the novel by it being predicated on her born hermaphroditism rather than castration.\(^\text{125}\) The second element occurs in one of

\(^{125}\text{Delhi}, p.2.\)
the historical flashbacks which the novel frequently uses, this particular episode being set in the context of the transition from Mughal to British rule during the Indian mutiny of 1857. Here, Singh amalgamates the categories of hijra and eunuch by casting what appears to be a eunuch character (based on the environment and their role in it) but uses the terminology 'hijda' [sic] to label them. This section depicts a graphic episode of a British woman seeking safety in a state official's home, only to be deceived by his eunuch/hijra caretaker and gang-raped by the official, his friends and the eunuch. This passage also assists with an exploration of the connections made between hijras and non-hijras, extending the former analysis' discussion of sexuality and slavery, through the violence of the interaction between the hijra caretaker and Alice Aldwell. I return to this passage in the following chapter to consider more closely the roles played by eunuchs in the underground functioning of courtly spaces, a trope which the British took so seriously as to bar eunuchs from political roles.

These texts' depictions of hijras and eunuchs reveal multiple commonalities and are often strategically used to think through ideas of honour, power, individuality and the finding of a place for oneself in the world. Ultimately though, this project is doomed to fail as characters/individuals are reduced to (re)negotiating a position for themselves within the boundaries laid out for them, both as slaves and as free individuals, rather than simply overcoming slavery to attain freedom. Zam finds 'freedom' through reintegration into heteronormativity. Pran finds release from social marginality only by rejecting civilization entirely. Bhagmati clings to her right to a non-heteronormative relationship and is punished in flames. Notwithstanding the final example's allusion to sati, none of the characters are allowed to maintain their otherness in positive terms. Instead, they are emotionally, economically and sexually degraded before being disposed of to maintain wider normative social boundaries.

The frequent use of hijra characters to cement tragic and repressive endings is particularly narrow in focus given the wealth of mythological and historical material available surrounding third gender identities. Rather than utilising this material to depict more transformative experiences, which assert the personal and social potential of being outside of rigid structures such as binary
gendering, the texts consistently use the non-binary status of hijras and eunuchs as a space of negative otherness. This appears to be drawn from a desire to create exoticised, eroticised, sensationalised narratives which appeal to a readership. Whilst there is a certain marketplace appeal to these stories which may not have been the case for more grounded readings of hijras, the public image of the hijras becomes collateral damage in the repetition of these negative associations.

Viewing the literary material in light of the historical records will enable analysis of the gaps left and distortions made by the fiction writers in their attempt to render a trans-historical reading of hijra anti-social deviance and social marginality. Historians including John F. Richards, Jessica Hinchy and Ishwari Prasad have argued that eunuchs were common and often prominent, politically powerful members of royal households, a claim which is evidenced by their positions as documented in the court chronicles. They were necessary to coordinate gendered space, facilitating interactions both personal and political between the men and women of the court whilst maintaining the women’s purdah. Whilst eunuchs were often (but not exclusively) legally slaves, these political roles and intimate functions meant that they were able to form networks with others, and so their slavery did not mean social death as it may have done in a different environment. It is clear that a eunuch identity contains a great deal of positive, transformative potential, both for historical individuals who took on this identity and for literary use, allowing a unique understanding of social identity building.

Yet whilst slavery, interrelationships and the roles attributed to eunuchs are all in evidence across the literary texts discussed here, the complexities of the situation are not, nor are the many positive interpretations. Relationships are envisaged almost exclusively between eunuchs rather than involving wider state


officialdom or the general public and are often used for socially deviant or sexually aggressive purposes in the development of underhand conspiracies, rather than being developmental or socially valuable; this is at odds with the networks of kinship, symbolic slavery and discipleship discussed in the historical texts.

Similarly, where asexuality and resultant loyalty to the ruler’s lineage is foregrounded consistently by academics, the literary texts analysed here all render the hijras as hypersexual, and often sexually deviant or aggressive. I argue that this is not due to lack of knowledge of hijras’ previous associations, but that it is an active distortion of their perceived sexual otherness; otherness becomes generalised and hyperbolised so that it does not mean the absence of sexuality, but all of sexuality outside of socially normative boundaries, and thus is capable of taking on sexual violence and deviance.

What these renderings achieve, I now consider through a detailed examination of the literary material with complementary insights drawn from the historical academic literature. In the process, I explore the way that eunuchs are used to contribute to the construction of a negative image of the hijras as deviant, anti-social and hypersexual. Eunuchs are used in two contradictory ways for this project: by being directly opposed to the hijras, where the eunuchs have the more preferable association in a binary, such as political prominence instead of marginality, or responsibility at points at which the hijras are cast as irresponsible; and by being amalgamated with the hijras, where it is the negative associations of each which are being foregrounded and brought together, such as the association of eunuchs being slaves being merged with the image of hijras as extortionists, to represent hijra characters as manipulative and shrewd in their extortionate activities. Ultimately, the variability of these methods shows not only that an understanding of eunuchs is essential to unpacking the way that literary hijras are constructed, but that the authors are committed to constructing these characters negatively for narrative purposes, even where it involves drastically distorting the connections between them.
Love, Lust and Lack: Interrogating Masculinity Through Third-Gender Identities in *Habibi*

As noted earlier, the many narrative strands woven into Craig Thompson’s 2011 graphic novel *Habibi* have led to mixed reviews, being seen on the one hand as an unsuccessful attempt to layer sensationalism in unsustainable ways, and on the other as a far-reaching exploration of societal issues. It is striking that the central character weaving his way through this narrative is an adolescent, male protagonist whose sexuality is couched in negative terms, who is taken through a process of deconstructing and reforming himself in the pursuit of a viable adult masculinity, specifically through taking on temporary identities as a hijra and as a eunuch slave.

In the literature covered in this chapter, eunuchs become literal slaves through two means: sale and kidnap. The two are not, however, mutually exclusive, with kidnap often preceding a slave’s appearance at market. Whilst both Zam in *Habibi* and Pran in *The Impressionist* are paid for, they are also both kidnapped and brought to work in the palace against their will, and neither receives any of the money given for them. In *Habibi* slave markets are featured twice (that in which Dodola and Zam are for sale, and that in which they buy their adopted daughter at the end of the narrative). One apparent eunuch appears in the first:
The environment of the slave market is shown through a sexualised and racialized lens, with the preceding page foregrounding naked women on display and the subsequent frames depicting the ‘several hues’ of black available, immediately marking female and black bodies as commodities, as against the predominantly Arab male buyers. The specific buyer in this instance goes on to identify the ‘variety of black’ he is looking for as being ‘a man to look after my women’; between this statement and the subsequent reaction to the slave’s naked body, Thompson leaves ambiguous what it is the men are actually seeing that is ‘perfect’. Given the marked history of the hypersexualisation of black men in

129 Habibi, p.64.
Western literature, it could be that the slave is well-endowed and ‘perfect’ for the job of sexually ‘looking after’ the women; equally, it could be that the buyer is having it proven that the slave is a eunuch, and thus is perfect to guard his women. The scene operates on the levels of hypersexualisation and of asexuality simultaneously, framing eunuchs from the outset through this ambivalence. In this instance, it does so through the tropes of black male hypersexuality and of black bodies as commodities, linking the eunuchs with histories of enslavement and oppression more familiar to Western readers, embedding them within understood slave economies as ‘a variety of black’. Crucially, this reading of eunuchs as both hyper- and asexual frames the narrative to use them to explore sexuality and its social codes. Into this setting, the hijras are set against the eunuchs but there are key cross-over in their framing.

Important attributes have already been seen to be attached to a third-gender space as a broad category; what Habibi also does more deliberately than the other texts discussed in this chapter is to differentiate clearly between hijras and eunuchs. Whilst both take on roles of negotiating the wider social system and the individual characters’ positions within it, this is represented in distinct ways. Hijras are associated with sacrifice and the breaking down of the self to a zero point, whilst eunuchs are associated with rebuilding the self by negotiating complex relationships with others, often from a subservient position. Moving forwards into chapter three, we will see how the two identities were conceptually and legally merged during British rule in India, and the impact that this has had on the ways that some authors conceptualise both eunuchs and hijras, using attributes brought together from both.

Habibi makes clear distinctions between ‘eunuchs’ and ‘hijras’, the former being limited to the palace and most, if not all, being slaves. In the novel, they perform roles similar to Zam’s, looking after the women of the harem and guarding the space from male interlopers. They are masculinised in appearance, and often depicted in infantilised or crude ways at odds with the delicate and intricate

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130 The imperial ideological project of constructing colonised subjects as sexually deviant and hypersexual, to evidence their supposed under-civilisation as a necessary component of justifying colonial expansion and control, is explored in chapter three.
images of other characters. However, their gender performance is further complicated by their being given floral, feminine names; thus, they are depicted as a complex but ultimately childish combination of genders rather than as fully developed, gendered, adults or as a self-standing third gender.

The hijra community, on the other hand, are seen only outside of the palace walls and there are much clearer differentiations between group members. The ‘House of hijras’ is home to them all, but there is a split in the community between badhai and sex-worker hijras, especially in the minds of the former, who see themselves as the true hijras, dedicated to their asexual worship of Bahuchara Mata. In Thompson’s depictions of the hijras, it is notable that masculine appearance is bound up with inauthenticity and malice, whereas it was the standard amongst the depictions of palace eunuchs; as seen in the panels below, it is the most masculine-looking and most prominently balding hijra who pimps out

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131 Habibi, p.91.  
132 Habibi, p.215.  
133 Habibi, p.288.
the sex-worker hijras, who insists Zam earns his keep rather than taking him in out of sympathy, and who ultimately pushes him to engage in prostitution, leading to his kidnap. Feminised hijras, in contrast, are depicted either as positive influences or as pitiable victims.

134 Habibi, p.333.
Thompson shows a very clear distinction between the concepts of hijra and eunuch which are important here, depicting the two groups through different frames of reference. Hijras appear as a more diverse community brought together by circumstance and tradition but pulling themselves apart as a group through the pressures of survival and conflicting views of the centrality of tradition, a community in the constant process of defining and continuing themselves whilst working around given symbols. Eunuchs, however, are represented in a uniform rendering which sees them as the property of and for the use of the state, almost indistinguishable in their physical depictions, menials designed to serve, but in their personalities and actions displaying marked tendencies towards non-conformity, in-group loyalty, and in some cases obscene sexuality. Already, we see that the two groups are considered as separate, but both are problematized. We shall see in due course the uses to which this separation is put; I begin by analysing the role of hijras in Zam's narrative before moving on to consider his time with the eunuchs.

135 Habibi, p.371.
Zam is attracted to Dodola, and although he does not commit any sexually aggressive acts he is undergoing psychological trauma, equating his own lust with that of the man he witnesses raping Dodola.\textsuperscript{136} Zam wants to cleanse his mind of these sexually impure thoughts by simplifying his body, which the hijras tell him can happen through castration.\textsuperscript{137} Yet following the operation, Zam is seduced by Ghaniyah, one of the prostitute hijras, and is terrified that the operation has been unsuccessful, and that something ‘is still there’.

Whilst Zam has joined the hijras precisely because of their association with asexuality, it is only to learn that the body is but an outward symbol of his internal

\textsuperscript{137} Habibi, p.328.  
\textsuperscript{138} Habibi, p.360.
journey, and that he must still work to pursue the cleansing he desires. Thus, whilst the relationship between hijras and asexuality is maintained, Thompson’s graphic novel depicts it as an active process of personal development and not a cure, or rather, he actively negates the idea that hijra status categorically brings asexuality, associating it instead with those who wish to work against their sexual urges, and thus, at heart, do still possess them. Whilst this is by no means the most overt link made between hijras and sexual excess, the community’s image is undermined by the focus being shifted from their present sexual ascetism to a notion of their past sexual aberrations, in presenting the community as a place for those who are sexually troubled to turn.

Following Ghaniya’s rape, Zam is called upon to offer himself for prostitution for the good of the hijra group. He explicitly recalls Dodola having had to prostitute herself to feed them in the desert and agrees to this as an act of personal degradation, in an attempt to understand Dodola’s sacrifice, and to be prey to the lusts of men as a counterpoint to his own lust. In narrative terms, the event goes wrong and Zam is abducted to work as a palace eunuch; in personal terms, this forms the next stage of Zam’s development, rewarding him for his sacrifice by bringing him to the same space as Dodola and taking him from the hijra stage of self-sacrifice to the eunuch stage of social negotiation.

This is the first time that we have encountered the two identities being used to make this distinction, yet it follows a pattern which has been seen thus far. Without abandoning the historical records, the author is using the fictionality of their work to reverse the associations of hijras and eunuchs, morphing them into recognisable but negative forms of their original readings. Hijras are associated with sacrifice, embodied in the nirvan ceremony and attested to in stories such as their sacrificing fourteen years to wait for Ram’s return. Eunuchs, on the other hand, have been argued to be key figures in managing political matters and the segregation of gendered space, positioning them at the centre of social negotiations. The stages of Zam’s development map on to these associations, but he is not raised to a sacred or politically prominent position through taking on these identities. Zam is only able to (and only attempting to) manage his own potential sexual deviance and find a way out of these categories, with
heteronormative masculinity being the ultimate aim, rather than transformative thirdness.

Following Zam’s abduction into the Sultan’s palace, the eunuchs have been separated into those who are ugly and work in the Sultan’s harem, and those who are pretty, who work in the palace of tears, the space for ‘the sick, the skinny, the old’ women who previously resided in the harem;\(^{139}\) this is said to be the way the sultan prefers it, tying in to the guarding of the women’s (and by association his own) honour and the exclusivity of the harem. In the palace of tears, where Zam works, the women are said to be incredibly lonely and open to sexual company; the eunuch who introduces Zam to the work openly admits that he has sex with them and at one point produces a bag of dildos and invites Zam to come and join him and a few of the ladies.\(^ {140}\) This is known and frowned upon by their superiors, but nonetheless allowed to continue.\(^ {141}\) There appears to be recognition of the idea that sexual needs must be fulfilled, and that the rhetoric surrounding the harem does not have to be true so long as it is publicly maintained; the eunuchs can be sexually active and the women involved with men other than the sultan, so long as knowledge of it is kept within the confines of the palace of tears. The essential element, Thompson appears to suggest, is honourable public perception and the maintenance of social order, regardless of the physicality of individual events. As such, the historical concept of the presence of eunuchs publicly attesting to the court’s propriety is maintained. Yet simultaneously, the idea that they themselves are, stemming from their gendered difference, sexually deviant is introduced. We see here one example of an author working within the historical record but in ways which depart from its conclusions, in order to construct a particular image of eunuchs as wayward.

Zam declines the offer and the chief dwarf contrasts Zam’s own behaviour with that of the sexually licentious eunuchs, offering him a promotion to the main harem. In this way, Zam actively has to work to control his sexual impulses and is rewarded for doing so. Thompson uses the asexuality of the two groups as a narrative device for his main character but simultaneously sets them up as

\(^{139}\) Habibi, p.384.  
\(^{140}\) Habibi, p.388.  
\(^{141}\) Habibi, p.393.
potentially hypersexual. Here, we see contradictory, multiple readings hard at work for the novel’s purposes. The novel does not ascribe to the idea that all those in this position actively work to maintain an asexual existence. In the house of hijras there are those who work as prostitutes and who seduce others, taking their sexuality beyond economic necessity; within the harem there are those who seek out opportunities for sexual contact with the fallen women, themselves becoming symbols of deviant sexuality because of its prohibition and its alternative means of realisation. Ultimately, Zam attempts to develop a normative masculinity later in the narrative by becoming Dodola’s partner, demonstrating that his time as a hijra was an attempt to rid himself of sexual excess but not of sexuality in its entirety. Rather, his time as a hijra and eunuch is a trial Zam must pass to achieve his goal.

Interestingly, Thompson seems to be negotiating and working through hypersexuality and sexual deviance via hijra and eunuch characters. Habibi does not lead Zam to a point of asexuality, but instead utilises his character to explore numerous manifestations of sexuality and its personal, social and economic implications. The narrative’s ending, with the male-female couple and their daughter setting off for their new life together, asserts heteronormative sexuality as the aspirational category; the use of non-binary identities is a necessary device to get from deviance to normativity, but they are not positive or permanent outcomes. The fact that both categories are used to facilitate this transition is demonstrative of the fact that hijras and eunuchs are both being read as symbolic of a third or outside space in relation to binary relationships and society at large, one which supports but ultimately upholds the primacy of normativity.

In his time as a hijra and a eunuch Zam encounters and overcomes both the bodily/material basis of his difficulties and the psychological/affective elements. He makes a physical commitment to ending his lust for Dodola, and encounters a series of sexual trials, both in the hijra group and in the harem, which test his ability to constrain his sexual urges. Having passed these tests, the narrative negotiates a position for Zam in which he is able to become a heteronormative, patriarchal adult, providing for his wife and daughter. It is key that by separating himself from his physical, sexual urges, Zam is able to develop on a personal level to a point at which he can sustain a heteronormative relationship with Dodola.
Non-binary gendered communities (both hijras and eunuchs) therefore provide the backdrop for an exploration of gender, status and sexuality which allows the protagonist to achieve heteronormativity. This use positions hijras and eunuchs as conceptual representatives of gendered and sexual otherness, terrain through which these concepts can be negotiated and Zam can undergo trials rather than fully developed individuals themselves. Being temporarily other-gendered helps Zam to work through what it means to inhabit a masculine persona in the world. In this process of maturation, Zam discards his sexuality in order to recover a normative masculinity, recognising his social role as father and husband as the integral elements of proper masculinity, rather than viewing his relationship with Dodola in purely sexual terms.

In addition to using both the categories of hijra and eunuch, then, Habibi draws on both the association of these figures being asexual and, simultaneously, of their being associated with hypersexuality through being read as sexually different and exotic. Thompson does appear to argue that sexual constraint is key to social functioning; the asexuality attached to hijras is therefore seen as a positive for a text deeply concerned with masculinity's potential for sexual violence. Yet this insight is ultimately used to fortify rather than reject the patriarchy of the gender hierarchy, providing a conclusion which lauds a controlled, presentable form of masculinity rather than exploring the transformative potential of living outside of the binary. Simultaneously, it is Zam who uses these categories to achieve sexual control, whilst the hijras and eunuchs themselves are cast as tempting him with sexual impropriety. Rather than acting as buffers of sexual propriety who keep binary-gendered citizens in order, hijras and eunuchs as characters are sexual dangers who must be denied. Asexual potential is embedded in the category of third-gender as a conceptual, narrative device, whilst third-gender characters are sexual deviants. Once again, we see an author selectively amalgamating concepts drawn from historical associations with investments in depicting hijras and eunuchs negatively, in order to construct a sensational narrative of danger and ultimate redemption (for the protagonist, not for the third-gendered characters themselves).
Ultimately, hijras and eunuchs are conceptual characters, providing opportunities to raise issues of sexuality, power and freedom for the benefit of the protagonists and the narrative as a whole. In essence, the categories of hijra and eunuch offer space for consideration of gendered social parameters - what it means to be a man or woman in the world - ultimately rendering the third gender a conceptual category necessary for social organisation. In terms of how the third gender is made to mean and how that impacts upon those who identify with it, this is a crucial point which brings us closer to understanding the way three genders coordinate in social space, explaining the necessity but also the marginalisation (indeed, the necessary marginalisation) of an occupied third-gender category.

The Break Down of Privilege: Sexual Violence as Reform in *The Impressionist*

Slavery and sexualisation are once again prominent themes in *The Impressionist*, and once again the taking of a young man as a slave and their taking on of a hijra/eunuch identity are constructed as a reformatory, temporary stage during which the protagonist is deconstructed and reformulated in a more socially cohesive way. In relation to *Habibi* it was seen that although hijras and eunuchs are depicted separately, they are used as part of one process of reforming the individual. In *The Impressionist* the two are more explicitly amalgamated, with the characters referred to as hijras, but working in environments linked to eunuchs and the most politically prominent having the dual titles of ‘Khwaja Sara’ and ‘Chief Hijra’.

The two names given to this figure indicate a clear amalgamation of eunuchs and hijras, given that the most senior eunuch was given the title of Khwaja Sara (or in its more common spelling, Khwaja Sarai), translated as Chief Eunuch in colonial records. The fact that it is this figure who orchestrates the plot is key in its own right as a representation of hijra/eunuchs as a combined category connoting underhand deviance and willingness to endanger children and facilitate sexual violence to get their way. These representations will form a major part of the
analysis undertaken in chapter three. The term hijra/eunuch, then, both literally
denotes characters whose depictions are drawn from associations of both
communities and becomes an important analytical category in its own right. The
construction of characters who can be referred to as hijra/eunuchs makes clear the
work being done by the authors to pile on negative associations from a variety of
historical sources to produce historically inaccurate, but narratively useful,
characters who represent hyperbolic deviance and make possible plotlines of
endangering children (a negative association attached to hijras) for politically
underhand purposes (drawn from eunuchs). In both *Habibi* and *The Impressionist*
the protagonists are initially presented negatively as hyper-masculine and unable
to construct functional relationships with others around them, particularly
women, either because they are sexually aggressive and entitled (Pran) or because
they have witnessed sexual violence and are afraid of their own masculine
sexuality as a result (Zam). Through their experiences as hijras/eunuchs, both are
subsequently better able to integrate into heteronormative society and take up
relationships with women, as well as other markers of normative masculinity such
as remunerative employment.

The early chapters of *The Impressionist* entitled ‘Pran Nath’ and ‘Rukhsana’
(Pran’s feminised name given to him when he is kidnapped for service in the
castle) are key to this analysis due to the presence of hijra and eunuch characters
and the ways in which Pran is remodelled through these identities.\(^{142}\) As outlined
earlier, we are introduced to Pran just as he attempts to rape a servant girl. Spoilt
and self-entitled, Pran thinks ‘[h]e could grab her, and pull her down on the
bolsters. There would be a fuss, of course, but his father could smooth it over. She
is only a servant, after all.’\(^{143}\) The girl’s mother stops the attack before disclosing to
Pran’s dying ‘father’ Pran’s real, English, paternity. This proves cataclysmic for
Pran, who is disinherit and finds himself alone. Pran is directed to a house where
he can get some food, but is instead drugged, feminised and sold to the palace. He
is referred to as a hijra but is never actually castrated; his non-castration is

\(^{142}\) Although Pran is referred to as a hijra and given a feminine name (Rukhsana) for part of the narrative, I have used
masculine pronouns throughout in recognition of the fact that this is an enforced, not a self-supported, identity.
\(^{143}\) Kunzru, *The Impressionist*, p.21.
essential as he has been brought in specifically as part of a plot to catch a British Major in compromising photos with a young boy.

At the start of the narrative Pran is depicted as being both hypersexual and, in the most literal sense of the term, anti-social. Pran explicitly reasons with himself that the girl is consumable because of her low status, that ‘there would be a fuss... [but] she’s only a servant after all’, demonstrating his sense of absolute superiority because of his class/caste via his dehumanisation of those he deems his inferiors; likewise, his ability to overlook the violence and immorality of the act of rape and skip forwards to consider only, and in passing, the ‘fuss’ that would follow signifies his absolute narcissism.

Whilst Pran by no means ends the novel as a figure of social normativity, the project of The Impressionist is to explore the constraints of socially-enforced categories such as race, gender and class and ultimately to reject them. To do this, Pran moves, and is moved, between a vast array of identities which are each ultimately found to be hypocritical and impossible to live up to, leading to a rejection of civilisation altogether. Such a project would be inconceivable from Pran’s starting position, in which, blinded by his privilege, he has no understanding of or imperative to investigate the wider social ramifications of such a model. In order to initiate Pran’s journey of self-development, then, Kunzru begins by dismantling his protagonist’s sexual, social and class-based extremity and privilege. Stripping Pran of his hereditary claim to privilege by eschewing his paternity and the physical benefits that come with it begins this process; it is his time as a hijra, and with it a slave and sexual object, which completes his breakdown. Pushing Pran to the bottom of the social ladder acts as an antidote to his inflated position earlier on and, crucially, marks him as socially other, which I argue is integral to his self-conscious, critical position in relation to social categories, which is fundamental to the rest of the narrative.

Pran’s initiation as a hijra is entirely dependent upon the sexualisation of his body; he would not even have been let into the house if he had not responded to the housekeeper’s immediate demand that he ‘turn around...show me what you’ve got’ by ‘display[ing] an inch or two of bruised buttock’, eliciting the response ‘Not
bad. You’d better come in’ with no further explanation. He is drugged with ‘special lassi’ that makes him hallucinate and sleep, and feminised by force, being ‘immediately slapped’ when he winces and shrinks back from the make-up stick. His preparation for being sold to the palace is not seen to require formal training, but a combination of preparing his body and disorientating his mind to prepare him mentally for his position as a hijra slave. Pran’s personality is also not needed for this endeavour; instead, what is needed is to eradicate it and reduce him to a malleable sexual object.

In this narrative, then, on a surface level Pran is a sexual object rather than a sexual actor, drugged and threatened to force him to take part in the plot, but is nonetheless highly sexualised and even chosen explicitly for his sexual potential, once again making sexuality central to the reading of hijra in this text. It is evident that Pran’s body operates as the means through which his objectification is achieved, but I argue that in this and other texts the objectification of hijra characters works on a more fundamental social level. If the body was the sole, essential marker of a hijra, then the fact that Pran is never castrated would have serious ramifications for the readers’ acceptance of this label. Pran may be objectified through his body, but it is his personal freedom and his constructed identity which are claimed in this process. It is, I argue, the disembodied content of gender which is primarily at stake here. To be a hijra is, for Pran, the absence of gendered and sexual agency; slavery and eunuchry work together to perform this dismantling of the subject into the neutral object.

Pran’s kidnap and concurrent forced hijra identity, alongside the tasks he is made to perform and the abuse he undergoes during this time, are a counter-point to his own sexual aggression and selfishness earlier in the narrative, intricately tied to the process of breaking down and reassembling his personal and social identity. On a basic level, he is forced into the same position as his intended victim, as a menial servant doing domestic work who is seen by the superiors of the household as being sexually available without the need for consent. Pran’s reconditioning goes much further, however, than simply showing him the error of

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144 The Impressionist, pp.55-56.  
145 The Impressionist, p.58, pp.59-60.
his ways or reversing the hierarchy of power in which he is inculcated; Kunzru
depicts the process as a breakdown of Pran’s entire identity, in which the character
is reconceived as a blank canvas, a zero-point from which to rebuild, throughout
the ‘Rukhsana’ chapter and in explicit passages such as the following:

‘You can’t make me stay,’ whispers Pran hoarsely. ‘I want to leave. I was
brought here against my will.’

This seems to be a mistake. In a rustle of silk the Khwaja-sara [sic] sweeps
to his feet, brandishing the curved knife. ‘Will?’ he spits, spraying red betel-
juice into Pran’s face. ‘Will?’ Your will is of no consequence.’

‘Please—’

‘You don’t have the right to beg! You are nothing, do you understand me?
Nothing!’

The hijra makes a couple of waist-level passes with the knife. For such an
ancient creature, he is surprisingly deft. Pran starts to feel faint.

‘Now,’ lisps the Khwaja-sara threateningly, ‘who are you?’

‘I am Pran Nath—’ begins Pran, but is brought short by a slap to the face.

‘No!’ spits the Khwaja-sara. ‘Try again. Who are you?’

‘—’ Another slap.

‘No! Again!’

This goes on until Pran (who has tried answering please, stop hitting me and
even Rukhsana) mutters, ‘Nothing.’

‘Good. Now who am I?’

‘You are the Khwaja-sara.’

‘The impertinence!’ Another slap.

‘I don’t know! I don’t know!’
'Good. Well done.'

Pran is confused. It is like being tutored, only in reverse. For the Khwaja-sara, less seems to be more, knowledge-wise.

'Remember you know nothing. You are nothing...'

The specific pathway through which Pran’s identity is broken down narrates an Althusserian view of social identity-building in reverse. In this iteration, Pran is denied a socially-defined and specific place through the rejection of his name, then denied a discrete position as an ‘I’ altogether. Attempting to take on a new identity does not work either, as ‘Rukhsana’ is rejected as an answer; without the correlative social acceptance, the character cannot simply adopt a new persona to wield a position for himself. Without recourse to these interpellations, he is left as ‘nothing’, not simply nameless but nothing without being interpellated into a social position. Althusser argues that ‘ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing’. Whilst this may be true for real-world subjects, in Pran’s incarnation as a literary product his attempts to self-interpellate, to offer a name or fixed status for himself to his interlocutor as a way of constituting himself as a viable subject are met with violent rejection until he has no choice but to accept that he is not, in fact, a subject.

In the last two, accepted, responses, a reversed Butlerian view of social identity is also apparent; if he is not recognised as something specific by those around him, then he is to all intents and purposes nothing in himself, and if he cannot have recourse to the social matrix that defines individuals in social space, then he cannot ‘know’ the other individual either. Ultimately, the passage argues, to be denied a social position by those around you - to be perceived as being

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146 The Impressionist, pp.80-81, emphasis original.
of no consequence is no different from being and knowing nothing. It is not by claiming, but by being granted, a position within social space that one comes to be a social subject, and with it a viable individual. By being cast as non-binary gendered, Pran loses his claim to an identifiable individual subject position, and by being cast as a slave he loses his claim to a definable position within the capitalist social framework of citizenship; therefore, it is through the conceptual category of hijra-slave that Pran’s narratively necessary deconstruction is achieved.

The fact that this interaction is forced by a hijra character is fundamental to the way that Kunzru is using the hijras to explore the construction of gendered, social subjects. Not only is Kunzru himself using the category of hijra as a conceptual space depicted as being outside of sociality and, ultimately, subjectivity, but by depicting a hijra as the one to insist upon this process, Kunzru deflects attention from this authorial use of the category and naturalises it onto the hijras themselves. By presenting the Khwaja-Sara as being deeply invested in Pran ridding himself of his socially-condoned identity, the dialogue acts as an initiation into what it means to be a hijra, which is, the passage argues, to be nothing. Positioning hijras as understanding themselves as outside of subjectivity, and even celebrating the fact through the excitement the Khwaja-Sara feels when Rukhsana arrives at the correct answer, Kunzru marks out a hijra identity as a wilfully-chosen space of anti-sociality.

The hijra category is again being used as an empty symbol reducible to a narrative device, rather than as the basis for a fleshed-out character. This was seen in chapter one in relation to the use of Hindu mythology in Ministry and will be seen again in later chapters. At this juncture, it is crucial that Pran/Rukhsana becomes a symbol in a space which merges hijras and eunuchs, a move which demonstrates that it is thirdness as a conceptual space which the authors are harnessing for their narratives, as outlined in my introduction. In this reading, any figures outside of the gender binary become simplistic symbols of thirdness, whose value lies in the use of this conceptual space for the benefits of the gender binary. Pran benefits from the third space of his Rukhsana identity as part of the wider developmental narrative discussed here; the Chief Hijra attempts to benefit from it by associating Major Privett-Clampe with it, a move which would mark him as
similarly other, and thus undermine his political position drawn from his publicly-accepted masculinity. Whilst Pran/Rukhsana is helpless at this stage of the narrative, we shall see in chapter four the emancipatory potential, but also the social complications, of hijra characters rejecting their reduction to symbols.

Seen from this perspective, a key recognition regarding the use of the hijra category becomes clear. Thus far, I have analysed the specific associations attached to hijras by the authors surveyed and argued that the negativity attached to them contributes to a project of using hijras as figures of otherness. In its usage here, the end result is the same but instead of attaching highly specific associations to the hijras, they are rendered as empty categories who represent otherness through nothingness. This is a more structural use of the hijra category, in which being outside of the gender binary and the preconceptions that come with the labels of masculine and feminine is taken to mean that the hijra label is a space outside of fixed meaning. From this space, the immature, sexually deviant character can reflect on gendered society and their own position within it, before leaving behind the hijra identity to reinsert themselves into society a reformed, more responsible and mature (heteronormative) adult. This developmental pathway was evident in relation to Zam’s narrative, but the use of thirdness as nothingness is made even clearer here, with the amalgamated hijra/eunuch character standing in for gender alterity as a conceptual, empty, third space.

At the end of his time as Rukhsana, Pran is entirely disconnected from his surroundings and recognises that those around him are disconnected from him also. Here, the manipulation of the categories of hijra and eunuch is evident. In historical records, eunuch identities made the individuals concerned part of complex networks of individuals and political relationships; hijra identities came with a key role in rituals of fertility and a sacred function within wider society, rather than emptying the individual of social connections. I have argued that the authors of literature distort this reading to one in which being outside of normativity means being disconnected from society, from subjectivity and ultimately, from a developed identity as an individual, replacing it with inhabitation of an empty category read only as non-social. Pran is symptomatic of
this reading, as he has in effect dropped out of human civilisation, retaining his position as a living being only on an animal level:

Pran watches with a strange sense of disconnection. This is nothing to do with him. Fatehpur has breathed him in, and now it is exhaling. He takes a single, dream-like pace backwards. No reaction. No one will notice. No one will care. He turns, takes another, then another. Slowly, steadily he begins to walk away through the forest... The tigers have also had enough. They are leaving too. Together they walk on, heading towards the border with British India.\textsuperscript{150}

As a whole, \textit{The Impressionist} is a novel deeply concerned with the contradictions and hypocrisies built in to human beings’ conceptions of themselves, and goes to great lengths to critique and deconstruct these conceptualisations, offering numerous abortive attempts to piece together a socially suitable and sustainable self, which (the novel appears to argue) is a contradiction in terms; that which is socially desirable is not, ultimately, sustainable. A core element in this process and realisation is the occupation of a hijra persona, and the concurrent social treatment the protagonist encounters. On a personal level, it strips him of his subjectivity and forces him to think consciously and work constantly to reformulate his identity. On a social level, it positions him at a point of marginalisation which could easily be called objectification, preparing him to face the reality of the wider world when he leaves the palace gates. To achieve this, the characterisation of hijra must be made to mean hypersexualised, objectified and reduced to meaning as a body rather than a persona. From this basis, Kunzru is able to work through the building blocks of social personhood, facilitating the novel’s wider project.

The extent to which this reading of the hijras as a socially neutral, outsider zone has been achieved through the amalgamation of hijra and eunuch categories

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{The Impressionist}, p.175.
has been remarkable, given the wealth of historical and cultural material available to both. It has been evident that this reading has not been the product of eliding this material, but rather a reconstruction of it to produce a radically different figure from the hijra or eunuch in isolation. By bringing together the two categories, Kunzru is able to construct a generalised figure of thirdness capable of taking on the role of a disembodied space for reflection and social character building; the associations attached to the two categories are then brought in to put this reflective figure into the particular environments necessary to facilitate their development. It is key that the associations drawn from the two categories are unanimously negative. The hijra category allows for a narrative of a young boy being kidnapped, whilst the use of eunuch figures offers a political space and plot into which Pran can be drawn. Ultimately, Kunzru selectively uses the amalgamated figure of a eunuch/hijra as the basis for his generalised, developing character and the discreet associations of each to use this character for narrative purposes. Movement between these categories and between bringing them together and distinguishing them is thus fundamental to *The Impressionist*, contributing strongly to my wider argument that authors use non-binary characters to enable pre-formulated narratives of exotic deviance rather than leading from the non-binary character’s potential outwards towards a more emancipatory understanding of identity.

**Meeting the Other: Negotiating Hijra and Cisgender Interactions in *Delhi: A Novel*.**

Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel* (1990) weaves historical episodes in Delhi’s past into a first-person narrative of life in modern Delhi. *Delhi* hypersexualises its hijra characters, extending this theme to include sexual violence, prostitution and a highly sexualised relationship between a hijra and a cisgendered citizen. Attempts to represent the body of a hijra lead to a reading of
the body, and by extension hijras themselves, as both disturbing and hypnotic, and
for cisgendered citizens a compulsion towards the unnatural.

In the narrative present, Bhagmati (a hijra prostitute) and the protagonist
have a complex relationship which moves between paid transaction, love, lust,
companionship and a teacher-student dynamic, often occupying multiple forms of
identification at once. The negotiation of this complex dynamic is, in part,
conducted through the terminology they use to refer to one another, which in
Bhagmati's case is focused in her frequent references to herself as the protagonist's
slave. She is socially and economically dependent upon prostitution because of the
body into which she was born, and by extension she is dependent upon her clients
and their use of her body to survive. Whilst Bhagmati does earn from these
activities, the money is passed on to her pimp in return for food, shelter and
relative security, and so ultimately Bhagmati is cast as having very few economic
or social options as a result of her gender and sex identities. Unable to break out of
this framework of poverty and marginality, she must work within its terms to
better her position. It is at this point that Singh draws on the historical material, in
which eunuchs could negotiate a better socio-political position for themselves by
being slaves to well-connected masters and fulfilling important roles within their
households. However, it becomes clear that this historical reference is, like others,
skewed in its literary use to connect it with negative associations of hijras, namely
that they are manipulative extortionists. The result is a character who uses the
terminology 'slave' to bind herself to someone she sees can be of benefit to her and
extract what she wants from him.

In Bhagmati's usage, 'slave' is a negotiating tactic which both cements and
marks her commitment to her partner and the intensity of the bond between them.
By positioning herself as his slave, Bhagmati refutes the idea that the protagonist is
simply another generic client and carves out a distinct relationship between them.
Numerous times, Bhagmati refers to herself as the protagonist's slave to show the
unique nature of their relationship, such as the following two extracts in which she
is openly admitting that she still has sex with other men (for money) but positions
their own connection as something different:
“How do you know all these embassies?”

“How do you know all these embassies?”

“Your slave has had the privilege of serving many foreign gentlemen.” She looked sideways at me to watch my reaction.

“They must give you a lot of money.”

“They probably do. But after the pimps and the embassy chauffeurs have taken their share, a couple of rupees is all that falls into your maidservant’s apron.151

‘Huzoor, your maidservant had an engagement at the Misri [Egyptian] embassy. I thought I would leave some money with your honour and also offer my humble services. I see I have angered your honour. I must extract a pardon before I rid myself of your sight’

She sat down at my feet and began to press my legs. ‘Your slave had only to turn her face the other side and you were unfaithful to her!’ Her hands stroked the insides of my thighs... ‘[I] roughly hauled her up into my lap.152

Bhagmati draws on the power eunuchs are said to have had access to from the structured relationships they maintained with their masters. As Hinchy and Eaton argue, ‘[t]here was a spectrum of dependency in master-khwajasarai relations... slavery in South Asia was not a “fixed status, but... a particular origin, a particular career, and a particular relationship to a ruler or politically important master.” Enslavement was a “process” and master-slave relations could change over time.153 This link between the two participants is then distorted through the

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151 Delhi, p.37.
152 Delhi, p.46.
coding of hijras as manipulative extortionists; the two ultimately come together to create a character who is conscious of the power of claiming this link to their partner, but uses it for their own highly specific ends rather than as part of a broader political project.\textsuperscript{154} In this recasting, the master-slave link is reworked through an explicitly sexualised lens, further downgrading its prestige, leaving it ultimately the manipulative response of a prostitute who is trying to maintain her relationship with the protagonist despite it becoming clear that she will not be monogamous.

Bhagmati is also shown to use the term ‘slave’ for non-sexual purposes based on material gain. On her first meeting with the protagonist Bhagmati is clearly in desperate need, unconscious on the roadside. The protagonist takes her to his home, telling her:

‘You can sleep here until you feel better,’ I said as soon as we were safely indoors.

‘Your slave has had enough sleep,’ she replied. ‘If huzoor can show me where to wash, your maidservant will be most grateful.’\textsuperscript{155}

Embedded within this seemingly simple exchange is a complex characterisation of Bhagmati as simultaneously hyper-deferential, using three terms underscoring her subordination and his superiority in less than two lines, and extremely manipulative; the end result is that Bhagmati gets her shower, some clothes to wear, and then (by using the exact same linguistic trickery of making a statement and wrapping it in deference, including the term slave, to disguise the fact that it is not a question) a trip out and a hearty meal.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{154} Hinchy, ‘The Sexual Politics of Imperial Expansion’, p.416.
\textsuperscript{155} Delhi, p.34.
\textsuperscript{156} Delhi, p.37.
This sort of deference is also depicted as being out of sync with Bhagmati’s general demeanour. From the very first page Singh depicts her by saying ‘[h]er clothes are loud, her voice louder; her speech bawdy and her manners worse’, whilst elsewhere in the novel, the protagonist describes her as ‘the coarsest whore in Delhi’. As such, its manipulative nature is enhanced by the idea that it is a charade designed to endear her to the protagonist. Evidently, Bhagmati is aware of the power of the term ‘slave’ as a mechanism to bind the narrator to herself for her own needs. Bhagmati’s case is illuminating because it shows the use of ‘slave’ in a metaphorical sense in literature retellings. Revolving around the concept of slavery is a space open to individuals to find their own route to success; rather than being a statement of firm definition which holds one person in permanent subservience to another, slavery in this literature is posited as a point around which to organise, negotiate and manipulate one’s social standing for personal and social benefits. However, where it meets with hijra representations the result is a character who uses these connections for material gain and to facilitate their hypersexuality rather than for politically valuable activities.

In light of the argument made in chapter one - that hijras’ sacred traditions are reworked in the literature at hand to cast them as extortionists and manipulators who make demands of binary-gendered citizens- Singh can be seen to be merging the two identities, hijra and eunuch, in innovative but negative ways. In this light, Bhagmati draws on historical traditions associated with third-gender identities (though they are outside of a strictly hijra identity) and uses them for her own material and personal gain. The complexity of this narrative device shows both serious engagement on Singh’s part with the historical material, in that he recognises the relationship-forming potential of slavery rather than its more common association with a static position as an owned object. The fact that this idea is then so drastically reworked to underscore the image of hijras as extortionists becomes all the more poignant as a result, demonstrating a wilful commitment to constructing and using an image of the hijras (as anti-social, aggressive and manipulative) in the face of historical evidence to the contrary and the fact that this evidence is drawn from a different tradition in the first place.

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157 Delhi, p.1, p.28.
Of course, given the circumstances in which she was found, Bhagmati’s characterisation as manipulative can be read as desperation rather than a purely negative depiction. Yet in terms of hijra/eunuch representations, this itself adds an extra dimension by triangulating three tropes commonly associated with them: firstly, the use of slavery as a constructive social network (for eunuchs); secondly, the inevitability of a life of poverty and prostitution (for hijras); and finally, the tendency of hijras to carve a living for themselves within this framework through a public persona as extortionists who demand what they need from those who have it. Bhagmati is, in this sense, the archetypal literary hijra/eunuch, whose actions may be understandable in real-world social terms but who is nonetheless constructed to be a hyperbolically marginal, manipulative and ultimately unpleasant figure as a fictional character.

This is consistent with hijra representations throughout Delhi: A Novel, in which Singh has evidently brought a wealth of historical research to bear on the text but has filtered hijra characters through the concerns and social positioning of the context of writing. The complexities of relationships between non-binary and cisgendered individuals, dynamics which involved, for eunuchs, the negotiation of relationships through systems of slavery, discipleship and political status, and for hijras, the negotiation of social space and spiritual power through their unique position as non-fertile people who were fundamental to fertility rituals, are transformed in this text. Bhagmati attaches herself to a comparatively better-off, cisgendered figure using the terminology of slavery, but with a brashness and focus on self-preservation which reduces the field of power she negotiates down to an upper-hand in lover’s tiffs and attempts to eke out the things she needs from those around her. In the process, the text evidently draws upon associations taken from eunuch histories, merging them with the hijra character to distort their meaning and contribute to reiterating the anti-sociality of hijras. Hijras are, fundamentally, constructed using historical categories of recognition, but overwhelmed with negative inflections, rendering them an ahistorical community with innate particularities separating them from, and crucially lowering them in relation to, the normative populous.
Conclusion

The preceding analyses have examined literature which contextualises hijra and eunuch characters, and themes of hijra and eunuch identity, to Islamic imperialism in India. Approaching the material from this perspective has allowed the analyses to pinpoint where contemporary writers of fiction have diverged from the available historical material, serving the purpose of showing where they were influenced by other factors and poignantly, where later understanding of non-binary gendering inflected their characterisations of hijras and eunuchs. In short, this has not been an exercise in saying the author got their history wrong here - that would amount to nothing more than saying this fiction is fictional - but rather, an exercise in saying here is the point at which the author is working with this material (hijra and eunuch characters) in original ways. Why here, and to what purpose?

This has been an avenue well worth exploring. It has highlighted the focal tropes of slavery, hypersexualisation and the use of third-gender identities as a means of negotiating multiply-gendered social spaces, providing both divisions and connections between those of other genders. It has shown more fully the distinctions, in social, political and communitarian terms, between ‘hijra’ and ‘eunuch’, a valuable recognition to take in to the following analysis of the British imperial period (chapter three). Finally, it has demonstrated the manipulation of historical categories, including the high-ranking positions available to eunuchs in situ and their understanding as guardians of sexuality, where these ideas have been utilised in their fundamentals but associated with negativity, malice and deviance in their contemporary retellings. In sum, I argue, these representations amount to an ahistoricisation of the hijra and eunuch labels in that they naturalise present-day social constructions of third-gendered people into historical situations, projecting an image of these characters as having always been figures of social marginality and otherness; this naturalisation is all the more profound in that, rather than avoiding historical labels such as slave or Chief Eunuch, they work contemporary ideas about hijras and eunuchs into these labels, gaining apparent
validity from their historical attentiveness and making the fictionalisation all the more convincing in so doing.

In the specifics of these representations, we have seen that eunuchs’ historical positions as major political figures and as integral components of royal spaces have had their meanings reversed. Historians argue that the eunuchs were ‘held in high esteem by their master… the women paid them still greater regard, for the whole management of the mahal [was] in their hands, and they could give or refuse whatever [was] wanted’; in the literature the hint of the possibility of abusing their power embodied in this position is blown up to full proportions, with eunuchs depicted as negative, shadowy, violent and underhand characters involved in plots and deceits, as well as serving their self-interest against the political grain, an investment which will follow through into the next chapter. Through this device, the contradiction between their past social centrality and their current social marginalisation is erased, positioning them instead and by extension, overwhelming their gender category with these connotations - as inherently marginal, being on the fringes of respectability even whilst their situations were central.

Similarly, the position of eunuchs as guardians of sexual morality, and of hijras as transcendent, asexual beings with powers related to fertility, have both undergone transformations in contemporary literature. The central association between third-gender figures and social sexuality is maintained, even foregrounded; by ‘social sexuality’, I refer to the wider negotiation of sexuality in society at large, including the division of gendered spaces and behaviours, above and beyond third-gender people as individual sexual actors. This analysis has shown that in contemporary literature third-gendered people’s position in social sexuality is commonly reformulated as hypersexualisation and sexual aggression, acting as an outlet for sexual excess and deviance beyond the bounds of heteronormativity. In addition, sexuality (and in particular, normative, socially viable masculinity) is explored through the hijras as a developmental trope,

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prioritising the wider social potential of the existence of a third gender beyond the individuality of hijras themselves.

We have seen this represented through hypersexualised characters such as Bhagmati and, in his early characterisation, Pran, for whom sexual excess is naturalised, as well as self-awareness of sexual excess in a character’s persona (in Thompson’s depiction of Zam). The commonality of these depictions speaks to the consistent reiteration of hijras as figures of sexual excess across textual forms and even, as we saw in relation to Dalrymple’s travelogue, in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary. They are repeatedly associated with deviant sexuality, through rape, sexual violence, sexual conduct with proscribed partners and secretive sexual activities which cannot be publicly known. Whether as sexual subjects or actors, the eunuchs are consistently associated with deviant sexuality; so consistently, I argue, that they are hypersexualised in these narratives, sexuality often being the most graphic and foregrounded element of their characterisation.

An unexpected trope which has been evident in this analysis is the use of this depiction of hijras and eunuchs as hypersexualised to form narratives of characters’ sexual, social and emotional development. In the relevant academic literature, a hijra identity is connected with assumed permanence, due in large part to the emphasis placed on the permanent removal of the genitals. However, in literary contexts, hijra identities are often used as temporary, developmental categories which allow the individual in question and the text more widely to explore issues of sexual, social integration and the formation of a socially viable form of masculinity. This has been most evident through the sexually aggressive protagonist Pran and the sexually self-loathing protagonist Zam, who join the hijras through force and desperation respectively.

In addition, these identities are commonly amalgamated with a position as a slave, with the characters leaving behind both their slave and their hijra identities at the same time when they move forwards into their new life. This specific combination, I feel, relates to a narrative device of breaking down the character’s social identity in its entirety in order to rebuild it from scratch. The specific combination of a loss of freedom (through slavery) and a loss of adult identity
(through the removal of the individual from the heteronormative social framework) renders the individual null, providing the blank canvas from which to re-envision their socially-viable personhood.

Thus, third gender identity is, as I maintain throughout this thesis, theorised by literary authors as a means of questioning masculinity, femininity and sexuality more widely. In historical context, eunuchs were recognised as aiding wider, gendered social relations by acting as a neutral zone between men and women allowing for the maintenance of honour; thus, as guardians of the women of the harem, they preserved the necessary social boundaries between the inner world of women and the outer world of men. In these instances, we see the literary reimagining of this dynamic folded into one individual. The hijra role carries the burden of taking an individual from a sexually aggressive, hyper-masculine persona which is not conducive to the wider needs of social boundaries to one which is more nuanced and, crucially, more heteronormative, allowing them to form consensual relationships with women (in Pran’s case) and even to produce families and take on caregiver roles (in Zam’s case). As was the case historically, hijra/eunuch identities are recognised as a buffer zone between sexual and gendered honour and potential dishonour; the collapse of this potential into the individual, for literary purposes, serves to further de-individualise hijras as characters, presenting a character whose development is facilitated through them rather than a fully-independent hijra character in their own right. Hijras are, fundamentally, envisaged by cisgendered writers as a social function rather than as social individuals.

Finally, the texts discussed in this chapter have demonstrated the use value of selectively distinguishing and merging eunuchs and hijras. *Habibi*, in particular, recognises the two as separate communities and associates particular connotations with the hijras (such as a spiritual element to their community) which it does not associate with eunuchs (who are, in contradistinction to hijras, slaves and formal workers rather than a chosen community). This is in-keeping with my reading of the historical context, in which there were clear distinctions between the eunuchs of the Mughal courts and the public hijras, who drew their
ancestry from a very different source and approached the community for reasons other than financial necessity.

A corresponding split can be seen in this usage between ‘hijras’ on the one hand, and ‘eunuchs’ on the other, with a matrix of connotations distributed between them: where hijras were indigenous, traditional, community-focused, free and other-worldly, eunuchs were a phenomenon associated with Islamic imperialism, an imposition of outside value structures, isolated by slavery and ‘social death’, and part of the world of commodities and state service. Eunuchs were valuable objects, rarities even, hyper-objectified but stripped of their subjectivity in the process. Whilst similar comments could be applied to the hijras, their objectification was at the least a sacred one, in which they were not true citizen-subjects because of their transcendence of this condition, rather than their position below it.

Whilst this is replicated in the literature in some parts, it has also been seen that the continuous inflection of both of these historical categories with connotations drawn from later ideas about third-gendered people has warped the literary representation of both into negative forms, and often (in pursuit of a hyperbolic rendering of hijras bringing various forms of negativity together) led to their being amalgamated as conceptual categories. This recognition, of purposeful merging to create hyperbolic, hybrid figures, is valuable as we proceed with this analysis, as the two are amalgamated by the British and negative connotations attached to both groups come together to be used in their criminalisation. A subsequent overloading of connotations leaves these figures as too-much-and-not-enough a part of society all at once, figures who it is recognised have had unique and valuable positions in society but who represent deviance and otherness nonetheless. As a result, they begin to take a position as ghosts haunting the social margins, a symbol of all that is not mainstream, even where this becomes contradictory (such as in their dual status as symbols of hypersexuality and as being outside of the reproductive order). The complexities of this overloading can more fruitfully be explored by examining the representation of hijras/eunuchs during British colonialism in India, and as such I move to consider this period now.
Chapter Three:

Empires of the Mind: The Impact of Colonial Ideologies on Hijra Visibility

In the previous chapter, I examined in detail the consequences of introducing the concept of eunuchs to hijra literary representations. Depictions of hijras were heightened both as amalgamated, hyperbolic distortions of the two when combined and by pinpointing specific connotations of the hijras when they appear side by side. This chapter builds on the former by considering the results of amalgamating hijras and eunuchs in an even more extreme and startling way. The British administration in India amalgamated hijras and eunuchs into one understanding, using the label eunuch in all cases and criminalising both communities under incredibly restrictive laws with long-lasting consequences. This chapter will then naturally lead on to the final chapter, in which attempts to decriminalise the hijras and secure their socio-political rights, and the questions of futurity and change that accompany these campaigns, take centre stage.

The British administration in India used ideologies around race, gender and sexuality to underpin a project of social ordering. Partly, the project of structuring society through traits which were seen to be symptomatic of under-civilisation, including gender and sexuality, acted as the catalyst for the development of an overseas empire; it also partly acted as the moral justification for such an empire where it already existed, or where economic and political reasons were at the forefront. To find a compromise between the variety of civilisations encountered and a desire to justify imperial conquest, the foremost ideology developed was the concept of the family of man. Conceptualising humanity as one family, but one which had higher and lower, more and less developed members, worked to provide a purportedly humanitarian framework for colonial interventions whilst assuring the white European of his place at the top of the hierarchy.

159 The concept of the family of man is not only seen as integral to colonial ideologies in itself, but underpins other prominent theories vital to the empire's ideological project, including the 'white man's burden' (given to him because of his patriarchal position in the family) and the 'civilising mission' (a variation on the former). For further elaboration on these ideas, see: Thomas R. Metcalf, 'The Creation of Difference' in Ideologies of the Raj, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995); E. M. Collingham, 'The Sahib as an Instrument of Rule', Imperial Bodies. (London: Polity Press, 2001).
Simultaneously, it served to depict other races as lower, which was then inscribed with the language of degeneracy and played out through connections with gender and sexuality. Colonised peoples were imagined as having inappropriate, even depraved, understandings of gender which caused them to treat women in barbaric ways and led to breakdowns of family life, ultimately affecting reproduction and thus the labouring populous in due course; this was cited as one of the reasons these countries were said not to have progressed to the level of British society.\textsuperscript{160} The civilising mission intervened to restructure gender and sexual practices as a means of purportedly helping these societies to progress. Through the concept of the family of man, British intervention was likened to the strict but developmental role of the father, in the process justifying colonial rule (as the head of the family) and colonial practices (as appropriate discipline), in the name of bettering those who were subjected. The depiction of the European male as a father figure operated both through the metaphor of age and development, with colonialism drawing ‘a new parallel between primitivism and childhood’, and through gendered implications; not only was the British man imagined as the father of the global family, but colonialism itself ‘produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity’.\textsuperscript{161}

Formalising recognisable, European forms of heteronormativity was thus seen as the key to social ordering and, by extension, civilising colonised populations. At the same time, intervening to produce these structures acted as a demonstration of the supposed fact that these cultures were not currently civilised. The act of intervention therefore justified the empire’s continuation, keeping these civilisations as a constant work in progress and thereby neatly holding out the promise of empire as a discreet, limited civilising mission whilst indefinitely extending its remit.

In this chapter, I firstly explore the ideological terrain in which formal criminalisation of those deemed uncivilised operated. I then turn to consider


specific interventions made during British rule in India directly impacting on the amalgamated category of eunuch (which included hijras under its remit). The first intervention was enacted during crown rule, in the period overlapping and immediately following the Mughal empire in India. Eunuchs had been seen as a political threat owing to their proximity to Mughal rulers and their ability to formulate loyal networks (as examined in chapter two); British officials tackled this perceived threat by reimagining these eunuchs as sexual deviants and underhand political schemers who would violate official systems for personal gain and, thereby, examples of the failure of masculinity (and thus fitness to rule) embodied within the Mughal state, and consequentially debarring them of these positions. Measures were enacted under this ideology to limit eunuchs’ political roles, moving them to the political periphery in a way which correlated with their understood social and gendered marginality.

Having established their political supremacy as the victors of the First War of Independence (1857-1858, commonly referred to in the West as the Indian mutiny), the British administration in India embarked on a much more thorough regulatory exercise to enforce their understandings of social order on Indian society. The Indian Penal Code, introduced in 1860, contained within it a section criminalising ‘carnal intercourse contrary to the order of nature’. This effectively banned all sexual activity other than penile-vaginal sex between a man and a woman but was largely utilised against homosexual partners and partnerships in which one or both participants were ‘eunuchs’. The moral overtones of the law speak volumes of the heteronormalizing project that was being undertaken. Given the parameters of the law, which was constructed as a non-bailable, cognizable offence, its remit as a monitoring device for heteronormative social ordering becomes ever clearer.\textsuperscript{162}

Following the introduction of the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Tribes Act was established in 1871. Whilst the act’s effects on nomadic and low-caste tribes

\textsuperscript{162} A non-bailable offence is fairly self-explanatory in that the person held under the law can be incarcerated until such time as they are proven innocent and is not eligible for bail; a cognizable offence is one under which a person can be detained for suspicion that the offence was at risk of being committed, rather than having already been committed. In conjunction, therefore, a person who is publicly read as homosexual or as hijra can be detained without evidence of an offence having been committed until such time as it is formally proven, with their read identity being held as sufficient for suspicion and incarceration.
have been largely recognised and some attempts have been made to rectify the structural damage it caused with the introduction of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (from 1935, extended after the repeal of the CTA in 1952), the effect on hijras has been vastly under-recognised. Categorising hijras as inherent criminals eroded their sacred social status, whilst the functional elements of the act (including making it illegal for them to appear in public in feminine clothing, have children in their care, or pass on their belongings in a will or as a gift) set up major barriers to their traditional work and their ability to maintain community households.

The combined effect of these interventions was to position hijras as a threat to the social order, as sexual and political deviants and as a danger to the general public (particularly children). In the latter part of the chapter, I explore the ways that these associations manifest in literary representations. Often, the result is a hyperbolic, extremely negative image of the hijras which weaves together numerous associations to depict them as even more aggressive and dangerous. For example, there are numerous instances of hijras being at the centre of political plots; the plots themselves are enacted through threatening or actively abusing children, depicting the hijras as child abusers who care more for their own position than those they hurt in the process. In this and other ways, literary hijras become what hijras were conceptualised as in British ideologies, namely, representatives of social otherness incompatible with normative civilisation.

The final aspect of hijra representations which I analyse was not an association made by the British themselves, but rather an effect of their interventions. Consistently, hijras are depicted as fiercely guarding their communities’ secrets and wilfully closing themselves off from the outside world. I read this stereotype as an attempt to naturalise the social marginality which the hijras were forced into. Having been criminalised and banned from appearing in public, hijras may well have become somewhat guarded as a means of individual and community protection. Ignoring the structural framework which forced them to do this and instead positioning hijras as wanting to be closed off from wider society has the effect of reiterating the idea that they are inherently anti-social. This in turn works as a damaging but useful association for the purposes of authors who are invested in depicting them as negatively-inscribed characters,
clearing the way to attach tendencies towards violence, deviance and hypersexuality to these figures.

**Containing Otherness: British Imperial Ideologies of Sexuality and Civilisation**

In order to understand the nature of British intervention in India it is necessary to examine the ideological terrain in which it operated. Here, I explore British ideological shifts, changing attitudes towards and definitions of low class subjects (rather than, and as opposed to, citizens), increased medical and academic attention to concepts of sexuality, and the fascination which gathered pace in the nineteenth century with racial eugenics and the assertion of an existing ‘family of man’, which nonetheless prioritised the white ‘father’ over his colonised ‘children’, in order to expose their implications for the context at hand.

Freud is unique in this ensemble in that his writings are themselves contextual with the British Empire; indeed, Freud makes something of a midnight’s child in this instance, having been born on the eve of the First War of Independence leading to control of British India passing from the company to the crown. Psychoanalytic theory emphasised layered consciousness and focused on

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163 Freud was born in May 1856, and so it is simply not possible that his work was being read and utilised in the construction of such documents as the Indian Penal Code, the ideological framework of which will be examined shortly. However, by ‘midnight’s child’ I refer to Salman Rushdie’s 1981 novel *Midnight’s Children* in which those children born within an hour of India’s independence have an intimate connection to their nation and its development, particularly the main character of Saleem Sinai for whom partition can literally be seen in his bodily features. It is my contention that one can read in Freudian psychoanalysis concerns specific to the historical and political context, most predominantly the idea that human variation, including in matters of sexuality and sexual deviance, is both inherent and (to a certain, contextualised degree) natural, but that its control and regulation is fundamental to a normative, productive and socially-viable self and society. This is the underpinning rhetoric which justifies colonial intervention in the name of redeeming the fallen heathens of the non-West, an ideology which will be interrogated in chapter three. As will be seen, the imperial context both relied upon and provided a useful testing ground for such concepts, often at the expense of indigenous populations who found themselves labelled as degenerate and colonialism as being for their own betterment. Freud’s work thereby acts as a roadmap of sorts to understanding colonial ideologies, which can then be fruitfully re-examined using theory which looks back to, rather than being embedded within, this ideological backdrop. Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1998), p.4; Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Vintage Books, 2008).
the boundaries of (in)visibility and development. These divisions can be seen to underpin imperial ideological systems, as questions of the difference between the ‘development’ of various classes and peoples met with the compulsion towards order and structure in attempts to justify class and racially-decided rules both at home and overseas. In short, psychoanalysis was to enable its upper-class audience to recognise the humanity of their imperial subjects so long as it was suitable and enabling to the civilising mission but could stop short of having to address them on this level due to their position as childishly, internally under-developed and thus simply not intellectually capable to the same level as their European masters. Sickness and race were, in the application of psychoanalysis, inching closer to interchangeability.

Freud argued that there were numerous stages to healthy psychosexual development, taking an infant from basic immaturity and instilling in them the appropriate repression of antisocial urges. ‘As each child grows and enters first the family then society’, Rivkin and Ryan explain,

he or she [sic] learns to repress those instinctual drives and the conscious desires they instigate and mould aggressive and sexual impulses as well as an initially grandiose sense of self to the demands of life with others. Repression is essential to civilization, the conversion of animal instinct into civil behaviour, but such repression creates what might be called a second self, a stranger within, a place where all that cannot for one reason or another be expressed or realized in civil life takes up residence.164

This interpretation of Freud foregrounds the link I am making to colonial ideologies, in its emphasis on repression’s necessity for appropriate civil existence, as opposed to personal development per se. In Freud’s argument it is, theoretically, possible to exist without such repression, but not to be constituted as a viable civil subject; in similar fashion, the British saw in Indian society an unpressed,

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inappropriately structured population mass, and saw marginalising (repressing) those members seen to be deviant as the key to raising the standard of the whole. In political terms, this justified the harsh measures imposed upon some groups as an appropriate development of India as a larger concept. Freud effectively accepted that deviant impulses were common to all; it was their potential display, their lack of repression, which threatened public development and security. This idea is at the heart of the assertion made by the British administration that India, along with other colonies, was a place of savagery and that by targeted interventions against those deemed to represent particularly strong savagery, the populous as a whole would not fall prey to these influences and would instead develop towards a Western model of civilisation.

Often, Freud argued, these repressed incidents would re-emerge through dreams and (of particular value to this analysis) fetishes. Freud argued that the fetishistic or otherwise repressed adult was inadequately developed, rendering them in essence sexually immature on a fundamental psychological level. Crucially, Freud’s understanding of fetish and perversity, as detailed in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, is one of excess and not of innate difference. Freud argues that many sexual practices admitted as socially valid, such as kissing and touching, are in fact fetishistic in that they take as their object elements of the body which stand in for the genitals and have no direct role to play in sexual reproduction. In this sense, Freud admits that socially acceptable sexual practices already involve an element of the perverse, but one which is contained both in scope and in social commonality. Practices, or indeed people, come to be labelled as perverse when these practices extend beyond what is considered socially acceptable, overriding or replacing normative sexual aims and objects.\(^{165}\)

Crucially, the necessity for the project of constraining one’s potential fetishes before they become such spread, for Freud, far beyond the ability of the individual to have functional sexual relationships. It was crucial for the normative social functioning of the adult that they work through the psychosexual phases satisfactorily, in order to emerge as a well-rounded adult of social use. In

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producing a scientific, academic theory of difference (in terms of psychological maturity and social functionality) for those affected by these alternative forms of sexual expression, Freud contributed to the legitimisation of sexual hierarchisation, giving it the intellectual backing it needed for its political applications.

Thus at this stage we can take from Freud a number of crucial ideas: the argument that much of socialised sexuality is recognisable as perverse, though at the low end of the scale: that labelled perversity is a position too far along this scale, which needs to be reined in to allow for appropriate mental development and social positioning: and that, by the implication of this discourse appearing in relation to medical intervention, as well as the insistence upon a subject’s sexual development as a key to their social and civil positioning, it is seen as appropriate for formal institutions to decide what constitutes acceptable sexual subjectivity and to intervene into sexual deviance. Those who suffered from these disorders were childlike subjects who needed the aid of the medical establishment to work through their own defects and present themselves to society anew, normalised. In so doing they would simultaneously provide the academy with the information it needed to define its concept of this very normality and to develop its defence against the intrusion of the abnormal.

A unique combination of institutional control and individual responsibility had been born. On an institutional level, deviancy must by necessity, both for the continuance of knowledge and for the improvement of the social populous, be made visible at certain times, to certain audiences and in certain areas, such as the medical journals and conferences at which this work circulated amongst the doctors and professors of the day. Yet individuals were required to work through their problems only in order to neutralise the developmental damage they caused, and thus to render themselves invisible amongst the relatively free, socially acceptable masses. Foucault argues that ‘around and apropos of sex’ [...] ‘there was an expurgation- and a very rigorous one- of the authorized vocabulary. It may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified. Without question, new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements.’ Ultimately, he concludes, ‘[t]his almost certainly
constituted a whole restrictive economy, one that was incorporated into that politics of language and speech’.¹⁶⁶

Ideologies and norms surrounding sex were undergoing radical changes. Ideas of non-normative sex as an issue to be taken to the doctor or psychiatrist’s chair, and the careful social scrutiny and continual practice of upholding allotted norms began to proliferate. Sex was ever on the radar, but a sharp distinction was highlighted between the condoned or, in cases of imprisonment or admittance to a mental institution, enforced bringing out of every detail of sex and sexual pathologies, and the vigilant containment of discourses on sexuality in lower forums at risk of the individual being perceived as ill, pathologically criminal or degenerate. Sex became an arena of medical wellbeing and social control, of population maintenance and state intervention; sex was, as Foucault argues, ‘driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence... in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine and justice’.¹⁶⁷ The free discussion of sex was therefore not only improper, but socially dangerous, complementarily signalling a psychologically undeveloped personality and a disregard for the structures and ideologies of proper, civilised society. Thus, sexual discourse must be contained, in mental hospitals and socially-segregated living areas, but in order to be structured in this way it must first be brought forward and laid bare before the authorities, as the official guardians appropriate to this duty. By incorporating and learning from the results of these examinations, the system of sexual surveillance became self-reliant as ‘an apparatus for producing an ever-greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy’.¹⁶⁸

In the landscape set out by Foucault, we can see the systemic impact of the adoption of theories such as Freud’s. Belief in the need to police and/or repress certain elements of sexual expression set up the state’s control of sexuality by means of (in)visibility laws over the general populous, ensuring their co-operation through deep ideological implications of second-class citizenship, dangerous instability of mind and a separation from the general order which marks individuals out as one of whom others ought to be wary. If the sexual degenerate

¹⁶⁷ Foucault, History of Sexuality, p.33.
¹⁶⁸ Foucault, History of Sexuality, p.23.
was a childish or even bestial being who must be controlled for the greater public good, then their subjectivity was lost at the expense of the normalised subjectivity of others. In this way the public were induced by the state to accept its version of normativity, and to turn on those in its own ranks who displayed other behaviours, coming together as a progressing, modern society by pushing others beyond their borders.

This ideological framework had marked consequences in Britain, but was even more prominent in the empire, which relied on depicting colonised subjects as being in need of Western intervention. A careful balance had to be achieved between constructing the empire as a humanitarian system rather than a purely exploitative one, and marking colonial subjects as lesser than their British rulers to create the necessary hierarchy to justify colonial control. Once again, hierarchy rather than absolute difference proved to be a useful mechanism for constructing this structure. Race, gender and sexuality were brought together in a matrix to construct the colonial subject as lower on the hierarchy of civilisation than the European subject, asserted to be the peak on all axes, through the selective criminalisation of gendered subjects and sexual expression through S377 and the CTA. As outlined earlier, the concept of the family of man sanctioned:

... social hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests. Because the subordination of woman to man and child to adult were deemed natural facts, other forms of social hierarchy could be depicted in familial terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature. The family image came to figure hierarchy within unity as an organic element of historical progress, and thus became indispensable for legitimizing exclusion and hierarchy ...\textsuperscript{169}

The use of the family of man concept allowed British administrators to claim a clear place at the top, but within a paternalistic, benevolent relationship

\textsuperscript{169} McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather}, p.45, emphasis original.
with their subjects, as ‘[i]mperial intervention could thus be figured as a linear, nonrevolutionary progression that naturally contained hierarchy within unity: paternal fathers ruling benignly over immature children’.\(^\text{170}\) This was figured through the axes of gender and sexuality as corollaries of race, as McClintock explains:

In the colonies, black people were figured, among other things, as gender deviants, the embodiments of prehistoric promiscuity and excess, their evolutionary belatedness evidenced by their “feminine” lack of history, reason and proper domestic arrangements. The dialectic between domesticity and empire, however, was beset by contradiction, anomaly and paradox. After 1859 and the advent of social Darwinism, the welter of distinctions of race, class and gender were gathered into a single narrative by the image of the Family of Man. The evolutionary “family” offered an indispensable metaphoric figure by which often contradictory hierarchical distinctions could be shaped into a global genesis narrative.\(^\text{171}\)

In sum, a dual ideology was being espoused which, rather than being contradictory, was purposely and precisely brought together in the cause of justifiable imperial intervention. A rhetoric of social and civilizational developmental mobility gave the asserted front to the civilising mission and made claims to justify imperial rule in the name of humanising those who were ruled, bringing them into the modern world and away from barbarism (taken as coterminous with moving towards Western standards and expectations). Simultaneously, racial eugenics and the espoused power structure of colonial society—specifically cemented by colonial rule and its placement of the European fundamentally above the majority population—locked various subjects into their recognised place, always reserving the top of the hierarchy for the white man and deeming natives to be naturally, unavoidably inferior.

\(^{170}\) McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather}, p. 45.
\(^{171}\) McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather}, p. 44.
These two ideological positions may very well seem contradictory, stressing as they do flexibility and movement on the one hand and the very inappropriateness or indeed the sheer impossibility of such movement on the other. Yet they are in fact integral to one another, as to say that a subject could improve was to invite in the improving (colonising) influence, whilst to announce that colonial subjects had not achieved such a level was to justify the day to day continuation of the Raj, and to usher in additional social reforms in the name of continuing progress, perpetually displacing the proposed finiteness of colonialism.

Mechanisms could then be put in place which would create a modernised, functioning state, but its parameters would by necessity be narrower than its current population mass, weeding out the sick and inferior to safeguard those groups and institutions which could be rectified. By redefining who counted as a (potentially) viable subject, divided along lines of who could or could not hope to reach acceptable levels of personal, social and psychological development, the British Raj set out a project of progress by elimination in the name of overall improvement, not individual development and emancipation. British legal solutions did not aim at the total erasure of certain peoples - a philosophy that would be at odds with the ideologies discussed thus far - but rather the authority to restructure society and its forms.

Much of the opposition to British reforms was owing to perceived colonial intervention into affairs of tradition and religion, overstepping the accepted boundaries of the state. Long before increasing pressures to justify the Empire to politicians and the voting public at home were to become a major issue for the India administration, Hastings committed the Empire’s decision-makers to ‘an avowed policy of non-interference in native customs, establishing the principle of governing Hindus by Hindu law and Muslims by Islamic law’. In 1857, the British were to learn this lesson once again precisely as the crown took control; the events of the First War of Independence, or Indian mutiny, put the fear into the British of antagonising the natives over religious issues. An overtly moralistic approach to Government (one based on Christian morals at the expense of Hindu and Islamic codes of practice) could easily have been construed as unacceptable interference,

and so an alternative route based on the ideas of modernity was taken. Individuals could, through the language of degeneracy, still be easily targeted as being in need of intervention; the British, in their nationalist assurance of their superiority, could adopt the position of the father figure leading India to a developed modernity, rather than the contentious position of leading it away from its traditional roots. Any changes to rites, practices and ultimately the accepted social parameters would need to find alternative justifications in the language of psychoanalysis and liberalism, through which it could target vulnerable populations unlikely to merit resistance from those natives with whom it worked.

By adapting the language of degeneracy and state-initiated cure, the empire avoided two potential pitfalls. It was able to retain the backing of the British public, harnessing racial theory to boost the image of the British overseas precisely as it distanced and alienated the racialised, colonised other. Simultaneously, by coming from a position of modern liberal democracy recognisable as the system operating in Britain, the administration was able to quell many fears from potential native rebellion. These modernised versions of social structuring laws made the promise of eventual self-rule following the civilisation of those in Indian society who were capable of it appear feasible, even inevitable, through the introduction of codes governed by economic, medical and Western philosophical argument. These arguments were imagined to be less likely to stir up native resistance than either intrusions into native traditions, or a form of Government which was clearly distinct from that in use in Britain, the latter giving the appearance that the promise of independence had no real backing, as the British did not think India capable of equal national status or deserving of political maturity.

The civilising mission, in its modern, self-conscious variant, therefore became a matter of cleaning up society rather than intruding on rights; those deeply affected by the changes were, by insinuation, not high enough on the level

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174 The British in India were acutely aware of the ill effects of being seen to tamper with native traditions, drawing on attempted reform of the practice of sati, and this can be argued to have been a major influence on the way later reforms were implemented. See Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture; Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions. Meena Radhakrishna also offers an excellent discussion of the balance the British administration attempted to find between 'reformability' and depicting particular Indians as hereditary criminals, a balance which she argues was found by centralising the caste system to redefine 'hereditary' to mean 'crime as a profession passed on from one generation of criminal caste to another' rather than 'genetically transmitted'. Meena Radhakrishna, Dishonoured By History: 'Criminal Tribes and British Colonial Policy' (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008).
of humanity (read caste, class, or political centrality) to be seen as having rights. These were the savages where the rest of society was, by the promise of the civilising mission and the language of political development, salvageable (though to a perpetually-extended time scale). Official, visible state intervention therefore became not only the most efficient, authoritarian means to biopolitical control (in the Foucauldian use of the term, the control of physical bodies as a means of population control and subjugation of citizens) and the restructuring of the divisions of Indian society to suit the aims of the British, but by an inverse logic the means to reassuring the native politicians that their interests and religious jurisdiction were not in question, and that only the legitimate (ill, criminal or dangerous) subjects of state treatment were to be affected. We see, in the changes made under the colonial administration, a greatly increased emphasis on records and registrations, on official institutions and crucially, on the classification of peoples along lines of pseudo-scientific hierarchism by caste or race. Their subjectivity, thus stripped of its individualism, fell prey to an authoritarian regulation of peoples by category which directly contravened the British insistence on equal recognition through liberal individualism. For those of alternative sexualities, this meant near-irreversible shifts in their social recognition and the writing of a very different role in their homeland. The concretisation of otherness which was to occur would, I shall demonstrate, become a major component in the hijras’ placement in the national social imaginary beyond the end of the empire, and lay the ground for much of the community’s experiences of prejudice and avenues for activism, up to the contemporary moment.

Sexuality and gender were very much on the radar of the British administration’s attempts to reform and civilise the Indian populous, intersecting with race as markers of degeneracy. As Levine argues, claims of sexual deviance were fundamental to marking Indian men in particular as under-civilised, as ‘[t]he list of perils allegedly visited on women by barbarous and savage men was huge. The mistreatment of women came to be seen as definitive of primitive societies,

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and one of the many reasons justifying the need for colonial authority. Anxieties surrounding the supposed sexual proclivity of Indians manifested not only in the attempted containment of the genders through the criminalisation of hijras, but in means such as the introduction of gradated restrictions on prostitution to ensure that white soldiers were not employing the same women as local men and attempts to reform the age of consent in Bengal. Some anxieties manifested less through legal routes (in India, at least) and more through ideological tropes which were instead enforced through monitored social segregation; one of the most prominent of these was the concept of the ‘white woman in danger’. The sexual licentiousness presumed of Indians met with the assumption that white women were more desirable by warrant of their racial superiority, combining to produce fears that white women were constantly under threat of sexual assault from colonised subjects. As Levine explains,

The growing female presence in the Empire created in some instances an inflated alarm about sexual danger. The long-standing prejudices entertained about the sexual looseness of ‘lesser’ peoples fuelled a fear that colonized men would be unable or unwilling to control their sexual appetite for white women. The attack by Indian sepoys on English women and children at Cawnpore in 1857 quickly became in the British press a narrative of rape and sexual abuse as well as disloyalty. Although the evidence for those charges is flimsy, more than a half century later, when Indian soldiers fought alongside the British in the First World War, those convalescing from battle wounds in Britain were barely allowed off the hospital grounds for fear they would seduce British girls. The War Office fought strenuously to ensure that British nurses were not involved in work that necessitated their even touching these men, for fear this would inflame Indian passion.

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178 Laws stemming from the concept of the white woman in danger were not formalised in India but were in other areas of the colonies, including parts of Southern Africa and in Papua New Guinea; Levine, *Sunrise to Sunset*, p.159.
179 Levine, *Sunrise to Sunset*, p.159.
An effort to radically rework the basis of Indian society was at play, moulding it to an idea of what a modern, moralistic society ought to look like. Given the way that racial inferiority was read through sexual/gendered disorder as markers of wider barbarity, it became easier in the process for the British administration to attach wider understandings of deviance and criminality to those it marked out as sexually other; if the behaviour of these people was a marker of their generally animalistic, underdeveloped nature, then there was no reason to believe that this manifested only in sexual transgressions. This can be seen clearly playing out in the political untrustworthiness, threat of violence and general anti-sociality attached to the hijras and eunuchs as corresponding elements of their gendered otherness.

**Criminalisation as Containment: The British Administration and the Hijras**

In order to understand the impact selective modernity, promised to some at the cost of peoples at the social periphery, had on the nature of gender constructions and the representation of alternative sexualities in colonised India, I now introduce three instances of formal intervention into the freedoms of non-binary Indians, namely: the changes in eunuchs’ political powers under the British administration, section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860), hereafter referred to as S.377, and the Criminal Castes and Tribes Act of 1871, hereafter referred to as the CTA. Through close examination of these reforms, we can see the ideologies laid out thus far in action. Through the terms used in the texts of these changes, the nature of the debates surrounding their introduction, and their consequences both politically and on the ground level, the hijras are forced for a rare moment into the spotlight of written history, only to have the nature of their social position, the possibilities allotted to their community, and the intricacies of their personality traits and recognised level of subject-validity negatively redesigned in the Indian social imaginary.
The East India Company were deeply suspicious of eunuchs for a number of political and ideological reasons, regarding them as sexually deviant and thus both unfit for political roles and demonstrative of a lack of fitness to rule on the part of their masters and the wider Mughal state. Tapping into colonial anxieties around sexuality, gender and the role of eunuchs, Shane Gannon expands on this idea by explaining that:

[T]he notion of a “third gender” challenged the sex binarism of the day... Eunuchs were among those categories of person who slipped uncomfortably between the binary. In fact, in Britain during the nineteenth century there was a movement to understanding the dualism of sex in physiological and reproductive terms, a situation that defined the eunuch as outside of the naturalness of sex. Insofar as this change constructed only two sexes, any bodies that could not be placed within this framework, including hermaphrodites and eunuchs, were viewed as abominations and monsters. However, since eunuchs existed formerly on the male side of the sex binary, they represented a particular type of abomination in the European imagination: failure of masculinity.

The slippage between genders perceived in eunuchs led to often contradictory representations of them as, on the one hand, inappropriately aggressive, which was read not as a masculine trait but as ‘failing on a key aspect of Victorian masculinity: the ability to control physical aggression’, and on the other hand, as inappropriately feminised:

They were often associated with harems which, even as guardian-eunuchs, carried the implication of feminine traits. Sometimes they danced and

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dressed like women. They occasionally engaged in fellatio with or were sexually tempting to men. Furthermore, they usually could not keep secrets, lacked aggression, depended on others for financial support, could not fight righteously, should not be injured in battle, and could not rule, all of which marked them as feminine. Eunuchs in the Muslim harems were particularly represented as sexless, effeminate, cruel, and subservient, all attributes the British men of the period defined as unmanly.\footnote{Gannon, ‘Exclusion as Language’, p.19.}

Given the correlation drawn by the British between proper masculinity and validity as rulers, this was a damning indictment on eunuchs as a part of the political apparatus, ‘a scenario that implied the confusion of gender and sexual norms, as well as political “corruption” and “maladministration”’.\footnote{Jessica Hinchy, ‘The Sexual Politics of Imperial Expansion’, p.423.} By the 1840s, *khawajasaras* were cast in colonial discourse as petty tyrants who had usurped... sovereignty, paid no heed to the rule of law and acquired power through violent means, criminal actions and chicanery’ leading to attempts being made to limit the political powers of court eunuchs in semi-independent states, such that they were reduced to household servants rather than advisors or military commanders.\footnote{Jessica Hinchy, ‘The Sexual Politics of Imperial Expansion’, p.425; Ibid, pp.427-428; Jessica Hinchy, ‘Obscenity, Moral Contagion and Masculinity: Hijras in Public Space in Colonial North India’, Asian Studies Review, 38:2, pp.274-294 (p.278).} Whilst these attempts were not always successful on the ground, they clearly demonstrated the British administration’s commitment to removing the eunuchs from political roles. As such, it came as no surprise that following the events of 1857-1858 and the subsequent takeover of the British crown in these areas, eunuchs were granted no political roles and were forced to seek employment elsewhere, suffering a major blow to their social prestige in the process. As Hinchy explains in reference to the context of Awadh:\footnote{As noted earlier, Awadh refers to the more commonly named Oudh in historical records, which has now been divided with some areas being part of modern-day Uttar Pradesh and some areas being part of a Nepali province.}

Although some *khawajasaras* found employment at Matiya Burj [the ruler’s court-in-exile], for the eunuch slaves who remained in Lucknow, the
establishment of colonial rule and the dismantling of the political structures to which khwajasarais were linked had a devastating impact. Khwajasarais in Awadh experienced a loss of political patronage and income; they were transformed into an impoverished and unemployed community in colonial Lucknow.\(^{186}\)

The beginning of the British Raj thus acted as the decisive blow in removing eunuchs from political life. Given their representation within the British ideological landscape, understood through terminologies of gender and propriety, there was no question of their taking on roles in the new administration, prestigious or otherwise. British understandings of eunuchs clearly merge the categories of eunuch and hijra, particularly where the former is said to wear feminine attire, sing and dance, associations more commonly linked with the latter. The amalgamation appears to serve the purpose of portraying eunuchs as inappropriate figures for the supposedly masculine enterprise of politics. It is also key to understanding the way that hijras were treated in two key rulings which followed shortly after, in 1860 and 1871, given that hijras were understood, through negative stereotyping of eunuchs, to be politically and sexually suspicious, and liable to contaminate the binary-gendered social order if given too visible a role in public life.

Once the British crown had taken control of the East India Company’s territories in 1858, the administration embarked on the implementation of a new Indian Penal Code (IPC). The IPC did include a small number of specific prohibitions relating to rape and trafficking for the purposes of prostitution (sections 372-376). However, other sexual crimes were to be punished under one amalgamated title, ‘Unnatural Offences’, detailed in S.377 of the IPC. The remit of this section extended to all activities other than penile-vaginal sex between mixed-sex adults, meaning that it could be applied in (for instance) cases of child sexual abuse, rape using foreign objects, oral sex or anal sex. Most crucially for the analysis being undertaken here, S.377 applied to both consensual and non-

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consensual sexual acts undertaken between same sex partners or partnerships in which one or both participants were not binary-gendered. S.377 therefore criminalised hijras’ sexual activity in whatever form it took. The wording of S.377 was, and remains, as follows:

377. Unnatural offences

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation- Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.  

The double use of the terms ‘unnatural’ and ‘against the order of nature’ as opposed to specific descriptions of the acts being prosecuted serves to keep the section’s remit extremely wide. Not only can it be applied to any act the administration deems unnatural, but these applications can change over time without having to have the law amended. As such, the section has an inbuilt ability to be flexible and be guided by personal opinions on morality rather than having a clear, predetermined application, a useful tool for a system attempting to define and police moral boundaries in the name of civilising the populous, rather than discreet acts per se. Beyond this, the terms are strongly indicative of deviance and depravity, building a second layer of moral judgement against those who were charged under it. Yet simultaneously, the appeal to nature and the natural moves the onus for this judgement away from the prosecutor and on to those being charged, depicting them as not just criminal but unnatural, having crossed a fundamental line of depravity. In all these ways, the terminology being utilised is

\[\text{Indian Penal Code, Section 377, Advocate Khoj}\]
\(<\text{www.advocatekhoj.com/library/bareacts/indianpenalcode/377.php?Title=Indian Penal Code, 1860&STitle=Unnatural offences}>\text{first accessed 8th September 2013.}\]
set up to position the administration as the custodians of social morality and the accused as in need of intervention against their bestial sub-sociality.

The vast majority of S.377’s applications involve acts in which only one participant is consenting, such as rape of a child or rape using an object. In these instances, only the abuser is prosecuted, given that S.377 stipulates that the person being charged must have ‘voluntarily’ taken part in these acts. Whilst technically the law can be applied to a wide variety of mutually consensual activities other than penile-vaginal sex, in practice it has never been known to be used against a man and a woman; the only documented instances of it being used in mutually consensual scenarios are against same sex partners and against male-hijra/trans partners. At its core, these are two fundamentally different applications amounting to the criminalisation of two entirely separate sets of activities. In one, the underlying action being prosecuted is ultimately rape or sexual assault; S.377 functions to account for the variety of ways that this can be enacted and ensure that it can be prosecuted even where unusual methods are used. In the other scenario, consenting adults who pose no risk of harm to one another are prosecuted for non-violent actions because of a core belief that these actions are themselves inherently criminal and immoral. Not only does this evidently further mark alternative sexualities as deviant, but by grouping them with violent, traumatising actions the cumulative effect is all the more staggering as a judgement, marking the hijras’ sexuality as not only different but abhorrent.

Finally, the specific conditions attached to S.377 compound both its almost unhindered use against non-heteronormative people and the moral judgement embedded within it. S.377 is both a cognizable and a non-bailable offence. Cognizable offences are the most serious offences in Indian law, including murder and kidnapping. The police have jurisdiction in these cases to arrest without a warrant and begin the investigation without the permission of a magistrate. Non-bailable offences require the suspect to be held in police custody until the conclusion of the investigation or until the charge is formally dismissed. The combination of the two denotes that those held under S.377 are seen as a danger to

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the public, who must be locked away as soon as physically possible and contained indefinitely. Where this law is applied to consenting adults, it taps in strongly to the ideological framework I set out earlier in this chapter, marking their supposed deviance as a matter of public interest and setting up their containment as necessary in the pursuit of raising the moral and social standards of the wider populous. The inclination towards non-heterosexual sex is thereby cast as criminal in its own right. It is no wonder that, caught in this framework, hijras attest to being picked up when walking on the streets and charged under S.377 because of the assumption, taken from their gender presentation and little else, that they are working as prostitutes and therefore may well have committed and may well be going to commit these acts. The framework constructed here is strongly reminiscent of Foucault’s comments on the creation of the homosexual as a discreet subject, in which he argues that ‘[h]omosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.’

Hijras, as read through S.377, are read not through their acts alone but as a distinct species posing a constant threat of these acts; they are always already in the act of transgression by engaging in the public sphere, and it therefore becomes viable to criminalise them as a category rather than based on proven, isolated offences.

Taken together, it is evident that the intensely moralistic tone of S.377, its claim that these acts break the fundamental boundaries of the natural, and the way in which the subjects of S.377 are constantly suspected and can be confined, work together to construct hijras as a highly negatively-inflected queer subject and their control as a matter of public interest. Thus, S.377 has remarkably strong consequences for both the lived experiences of hijras and their position in wider ideological understandings of gender and social formation.

Eleven years after the introduction of the IPC, the CTA was introduced, legislation which has arguably shifted the landscape of the hijras’ legal, and with it social, positions ever since. The CTA, as it relates to hijras, can be seen as an

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189 PUCL-K, Human Rights Violations Against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore, India’ (Bangalore: PUCL-K, 2003).
190 Foucault, The Will to Knowledge, p.43.
extension and consolidation of the powers granted to the administration through S.377, replicating its ideologies but tightening its grip on the community such that, as Hinchy has argued, '[i]n the long term, the aim of the CTA was the extermination of eunuchs through the prevention of emasculation, which would cause eunuchs to "die out"... The immediate aim, however, was to erase hijras as a socio-cultural category and gender identity.'\textsuperscript{191} I believe these claims to be entirely viable, given the attempt to wipe out hijras’ opportunities for social interaction and earning through their traditional occupations, and the emphasis put on discontinuing their communities not only by criminalising hijras themselves, but by barring them from taking in young people or passing on their assets through gifts and wills. This last point is particularly crucial given the communal living arrangements of many hijra communities, who could be left destitute by the death of a community elder. Far from simply containing the hijras, the CTA certainly appears to be a structural attempt to eradicate them.

A draft version of the CTA was sent to district officials for their consultation in 1870.\textsuperscript{192} The first part of the act proposed the criminalisation of certain castes and arrangements for them to be permanently settled in a Government-organised place, where they would work and be registered with regular roll-calls, needing a special permit to leave and subject to strict penalties if found absent without permission. Though there is indeed much to say about this part of the legislation and the way it concretised the caste system and its connected prejudices and divisions, it would be beyond the scope of this review to do so here. Part two of the document, however, directly concerns the hijra community, and the draft consulted on this occasion sets out (as did the final version adopted in 1871) the Government’s intention to create:

(a) a register of the names and residences of all eunuchs residing in any town or place to which the Local Government specially extends this Part of this Act, who are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating

\textsuperscript{191} Jessica Hinchy, ‘Obscenity, Moral Contagion and Masculinity’, p.276.
\textsuperscript{192} National Archives of India (NAI), Home Department records for Judicial- A Branch, dated 10th September 1870, Numbers 9-20, National Archives of India; replies received from various districts to the draft version of the act sent round for their consultation, various dates through 1870.
children, or of committing offences under section three hundred and seventy-seven of the Indian Penal Code, or of abetting the commission of any of the said offences; and

(b) a register of the property of such of the said eunuchs as, under the provisions hereinafter contained, are required to furnish information as to their property.  

‘Eunuchs’ so registered could then, under the terms of the CTA, be fined and/or imprisoned for ‘appearing in female clothes; or dancing in public, or for hire... [or] keeping [a] boy under sixteen’ and were also prohibited from making a will or a gift.

Most of the replies appearing in the September collection deal exclusively with responding to part one of the draft. Notably, however, those replies which do reference part two do not question its necessity, as is sometimes seen in reference to the first part, due either to its excessive stringency or the unfeasibility of its implementation. For example, the response from West Berar states only that ‘of eunuchs [sic], a strict registration might at once be introduced and sharply enforced. I see nothing but advantage in this measure’; this, in a letter which is otherwise highly critical of the act, suggesting that citizens criminalised under part one would simply change their names to deny association with the affected tribe, and that there are known to be castes which have both honest and criminal members, rendering blanket criminalisation of the whole inappropriate.

In a similar vein, Major Allardyce, replying from Buldana District, references what appears to be local hearsay in stating that:

I have reason to believe that a considerable number of eunuchs [sic] go about in Berar, and that they do go making eunuchs of others. A man

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193 National Archives of India (NAI), Home Department records for Judicial- A Branch, dated 10th September 1870, Number 11.
194 NAI, From the letter of C.W. Stracey, Head Clerk for Commissioner of West Berar, to the 1st Assistant Resident, Hyderabad, No. 1694, dated Akola, the 2nd June 1870, and compiled in the above collection.
does not become a chela of theirs till operated upon, and secretly, I am told, that they lay themselves out for the very basest purposes... With society tolerating such dreadful practices, I deem that any measures that will aid in stamping them out should be adopted regardless of any temporary inconvenience to the people that enlarged powers to the Police may be supposed to result in.\(^{195}\)

Taken together, these two replies (and the silence of the others on the subject of eunuchs) demonstrate a departure from expected legal processes. Hearsay and the assertion that ‘ennuchs’ are socially undesirable are instead held to be sufficient to criminalise the hijras. The argument for the extension of Part two of the CTA therefore rests on the idea that it ought to be so, according to the respondents’ sensibilities and their presumption of higher officials sharing such prejudices; even where evidence may have been forthcoming, such as in Allardyce’s statements, ‘I have reason to believe’ and ‘I am told’, the furnishing of details is apparently felt to be unnecessary, indicating a worryingly strong belief in the recipients’ familiarity with and agreement on the subject of these supposed social evils, without need for circumstantial details.

The only further specific reference to the hijras in these documents is to indicate that current legislation, that is, the IPC in its contemporary form, is felt to be insufficient for dealing with them. This code already included S.377 and criminalised abduction in general (therefore including the abduction and castration of minors rumoured to have been a common practice of the hijra community). The further limitations specifically introduced by this act were therefore the prohibition against hijras having minors in their care, from adopting sons, and from exhibiting themselves dressed in women’s attire in a public place (or one from which they would be seen by the public), as well as rules necessitating their registration with the authorities, and the rules relating to their property. These latter called for the registration of all property owned by

\(^{195}\) NAL, From the letter of Major J. Allardyce, Deputy Commissioner, Buldana District, to the Commissioner, West Berar, No.1301, dated Buldana, the 3rd May 1870.
registered hijras and disabled them from making a gift or a will, forfeiting their right to ensure the passing of their property into the hands of those they chose.

When these aspects are viewed separately, it can be seen that the central targets are not actions which may conventionally be perceived as criminal, those which inflict pain or negatively affect a person against their will; the CTA serves only to limit the public perception of the hijras in their recognised form, and to go as far towards discontinuing the community as is possible without strict detention and/or violence, by making it almost impossible for them to transfer property between themselves to meet intergenerational needs, or to pass on anything but knowledge and skills to younger hijras (skills which themselves would become increasingly unusable, given that they mostly contravened the prohibition against appearing in public). The aims of this act specifically seek to wipe out the group as an identifiable community. Though as individual people those affected are not overtly targeted for extermination, they cannot continue to live as hijras, and thus the eradication of the community can realistically be posited as the goal of this legislation. It is almost ironic that this goal should have been attempted through a methodology of hyper-vigilance, through the constant surveillance and registration of the hijras. By bringing them into the public eye in the short-term, identifying and recording them, the hijras were to be removed from the public eye and from society in the long-term, through their enforced seclusion and the ultimate eradication of their means of continuing their community.

In consequence of this general agreement to the introduction of legislation criminalising the hijras, the forms to be used for their registration were then devised. They appeared in their first format in the ‘Draft rules for the making and keeping up and charge of the registers made under Part II. of Act XXVII. of 1871 relating to eunuchs’ and applied to all areas of the North-Western provinces under British rule.196 The document forms an appeal, seeking ‘the sanction of his Excellency the Governor General in Council’ for the use of these rules and registers, for the purposes of the new Act. To this end, the author notes that:


In regard to the forms it will be observed that No.I., for the register of eunuchs, provides for more than the registration of “names and residences,” which are the only particulars specifically mentioned as registrable in Clause A. of Section 24; but the additional information, which it is proposed to embody in the register, seems necessary, and it is apprehended that there is no objection to the proposal, the clause of the Act quoted probably not having been intended to be exhaustive.

He then goes on to 'beg his Excellency may be moved to accord early sanction to the rules', as without them 'the law cannot be enforced', and the sixty-two boys ‘who are now reported to be in the possession of eunuchs in these Provinces’ cannot ‘be legally removed from their control’. Once again, scant evidence is offered for such a claim, and yet it forms a large part of the call for this legislation to be enforced, suggesting a dangerously cultish quality surrounding the hijras and ultimately being used to rush through documents which it has been admitted are not in keeping with the letter of the law.

The claim that ‘the clause of the Act quoted [was probably] not... intended to be exhaustive’ again highlights the level of subjectivity, constituting a loophole for personal prejudices, built in to the debate around the CTA’s introduction, a debate which is hidden by the wording of the act itself, which is presented as being appropriately limited to known criminals. From the start, officials appear to see no major issues with, nor to be questioned over, their liberal interpretations of these conditions and their use of them as malleable means for quasi-legally monitoring and benefiting from the criminalised communities. Even more worrying than the additions made are the gaps left in the proposed forms, which do not meet the criteria set out by the Act in relation to who is liable to come under surveillance. The forms for the registration of eunuchs in these provinces appear in this document as follows:
Form 1: 'Register of eunuchs in the district of --------- coming under section 24 of Act XXVII. of 1871':

1. Index No.
2. Name
3. Father's name
4. Age
5. When emasculated
6. Place of residence (divided into two boxes, for 'village' and 'pergunnah')
7. District and towns frequented by them
8. Ostensible means of livelihood
9. Remarks

Form 2: 'Register of property possessed by eunuchs borne on the Rolls of Register No. I. under Act XXVII. of 1871, district ------- ':

Index No.

Name

Description of property possessed by eunuchs, movable or immovable.

Where situated

Value

Remarks

Sinister omissions are immediately apparent here; there is no reference in either form to the individual's (suspected or proven) prohibited activities, and as has been seen above, a precedent has already been set in this debate for the use of
hearsay and negative stereotyping, and disregarding hijras’ positive position for many Indian citizens, in the British officials’ decision to criminalise and restrict them. All that would be required would be an officer’s suspicion of their criminality, a suspicion already deeply embedded in the social imaginary and colonial prejudices. The attachment of ‘ostensible’ to the entry for ‘means of livelihood’ also belies a suspicion of the hijras, and an apparent belief that they are more likely to be involved in activities which are now prohibited, than those ‘honest’ occupations they may profess when questioned. The simultaneous lack of substantiation regarding the hijras’ criminal activities, the suspicion carried through the wording of the form, and the emphasis placed on the details of their property above and beyond what is called for in the Act, including its value and movability, come together to indicate a preordained damning of the hijras as a community, not as individuals to be considered on an individual basis, and a fixation with potentially gaining their property above concern for their wellbeing as people.

It is my claim that the CTA was an inhumane act which unfairly curtailed the life choices of thousands of people, exacerbated pre-existing caste divisions to unprecedented proportions, and the legacy of which is still causing social friction and even physical conflicts in present-day India. Though considerably less is known of the effect this legislation had on the hijras, it certainly does not seem alarmist to claim that it has had similarly damaging effects for them. Indeed, this discussion has highlighted the subjective nature of the hijras’ social ostracism, and the inherent backing lent to these prejudices by their enshrinement in law (in that it allowed officials to act out their personal prejudices in their professional conduct).

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Threats from the Margins: Literary Reinterpretations of Hijras Through British Imperial Ideologies

Within the ideological frameworks discussed above, which understood the hijras as (physical, sexual and political) threats, and as representative of deviance and under-civilisation, we can begin to identify the ways in which the literature reworks the image of hijras into literary bogeymen, shadowy threats lurking at the social margins. In their literary representations, hijras are often perceived as political threats who use underhand tactics to influence public events, views I identify as having stemmed from British anxieties about Mughal eunuchs. Hijras, meanwhile, were constructed as being a danger to children, liable to kidnap and castrate them to make them into hijras; in literary usage, this association is merged with their political scheming to produce characters who are liable to use force, particularly against children, to carry out their plans. Moreover, British political, legal and bureaucratic interventions publicly side-lined the hijras such that they had to retreat from social spaces to avoid being prosecuted under S.377 and the CTA, which is naturalised in the literature to reinstating seclusion as a common theme in hijras' traditions and interactions. In literary re-imaginings of these frameworks, the hijras become shadowy, anti-social figures lurking at the social margins. My analysis of Hari Kunzru’s The Impressionist, Craig Thompson’s Habibi and Khushwant Singh’s Delhi: A Novel reveals the engagement of these works with the frameworks that were formed within the context of colonial rule but (as was the case in chapter two) the strategic reformulation of the image of hijras presented in historical texts to facilitate literary sensationalism and stimulating narratives centred on deviance and conspiracies. Arundhati Roy’s 2017 novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is cognisant of these ideas but integrates them with attentiveness to the social environment which the hijras negotiate, producing a more nuanced reading of their marginality as a result.

I begin this analysis by analysing the use of hijras as key actors in underhand political plots, an analysis which is relatively brief given that this work was begun in the previous chapter. There, I examined the developmental role of
these frameworks for the protagonists themselves in their hijra/eunuch identities; here, I am more concerned with the plots themselves and the depictions of the other hijra actors involved, which compound ideologies stemming from British imperialism, in which the hijras are cast as politically ineffective at best and dangerous at worst. I then explore how negative depictions of hijras are heightened by layering stereotypes of their criminality together, through the ways that children are used in these schemes.

*The Impressionist* is one of two texts to explicitly use the figure of the ‘Khwaja Sara’ as the coordinator of an underhand plot, alongside *Habibi*. Whilst Kunzru uses this terminology, he also explicitly refers to those involved as hijras, showing affinity with a British understanding of both communities by making the terminology mutually interchangeable. Major Privett-Clampe is the deciding figure in the upcoming accession to the throne. He could allow the Nawab, the current ruler, to adopt an heir and proclaim this heir a legitimate candidate for the throne; Privett-Clampe could also opt for the Nawab’s younger brother, the wayward Prince Firoz, who has closer connections with the European populace and is seen as a more modern figure, as well as being, through his incompetence, a better candidate as a puppet ruler allowing the British to truly make the state’s decisions. Privett-Clampe is known by the Chief Hijra and others involved in the plot, though not known publicly, to have homosexual inclinations. The plan is that Rukhsana (Pran’s hijra name) will be presented to the governor as having been hired for his pleasure, Privett-Clampe will have sex with him and the picture-wallah will secretly photograph it through a disguised hole in the wall; the photographs will then be used to blackmail the governor into making the preferred decision. Through a series of mishaps, the picture-wallah is not able to take the required photographs, but nevertheless on a series of occasions the governor does rape Pran, who is drugged for the purpose and threatened with death if he does not comply. The governor grows fond of Pran and educates him in British literature. As a plot it is unsuccessful, but Pran gains the fundamentals of British education which serve him well later when he is able to pass as an English schoolboy and gain passage to England.
Earlier, I argued that the hypersexualisation of eunuchs operates in multiple ways, positioning them at opposite ends of the spectrums of victim-perpetrator and licentious-violent whilst consistently associating hijras with deviant sexuality. In relation to the underhand dealings discussed here, hijras are again positioned across the spectrum of association, with Pran being the powerless but integral pawn in the proceedings and the Chief Hijra being the organiser and slave master. Considering the Chief Hijra, it is being implied that when hijras have power it is a negative form, one which is illegitimate and treasonous as opposed to a public, legitimate form of power. In relation to *City of Djinns* it was argued that Dalrymple frames the hijras as being hypersexualised even in opposition to his first-hand experience; here, in a comparable move, Kunzru insists upon the social marginalisation of the hijras by rendering their moments of power unofficial, and reiterates negative stereotyping of the hijras as criminals or sources of fear through their position in this narrative by skewing the historical evidence of their having occupied prominent positions in the royal courts to fit later understandings of the hijras as dangerous and using their connections for personal gain.198

By the time the British Raj began plans for the Criminal Tribes Act (1871), the association between hijras and secret plots had been set. In discussions held before the implementation of the act, officials argued that criminalisation was necessary in order to disrupt the organised rings kidnapping young boys and turning them in to eunuchs, a myth which prevails to this day despite strong opposition from hijras themselves and little, if any, reputable evidence to suggest that these practices occur.199 By having the fifteen-year-old Pran kidnapped and brought into the palace explicitly to be used in this political plot, Kunzru attaches these stereotypes linked to hijras to the eunuchs’ official business in the Mughal era. By attaching this dangerous stereotype to a historical role, Kunzru taints the hijras’ past prominence with these associations and argues subtly for their

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tendency towards these dealings as being trans-historical and thus, in-built rather than context-reactive.

In a similar vein, there are frequent references throughout *Habibi* to the dangers of the harem, including the murder of two heirs to the throne and numerous courtesans. At many stages, eunuchs become key players in these events, instigating or enacting these plots. The character of the Chief Black Eunuch is consistently portrayed as an evil, scheming figure who instigates many of the deaths in the palace. He fears Dodola’s sway over the Sultan, recognising these informal forms of power for the importance they hold and, in particular, being afraid of her potential to bear a son and thereby cement her hold over the palace. He attempts to have her killed, but is thwarted by Hyacinth, another eunuch, and is assumed to be the actor behind the successful murder of Dodola’s son.

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*Habibi*, p.55.
Although the Sultan shows little empathy over the death of his heir, because of his attachment to Dodola it is evident that the Chief Black Eunuch is working against the Sultan’s wishes in setting up these events, instead pursuing his own vision of the political future of the palace. In this aspect it is reminiscent of *The Impressionist*, in which the plot deployed by the Chief Hijra/Khwaja Sara aimed to give him sway over the choice of successor to the throne. Both Chiefs are evidently politically engaged and central actors in the royal courts with a great deal of power over the harem; however, they wield this power in violent, underhand ways and are motivated by personal interest rather than loyalty to the ruler. Once again, the

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201 *Habibi*, p.204.
202 *Habibi*, p.211.
historical construction of eunuchs has been skewed dramatically, maintained in its essentials but made secretive, unofficial and violent, rather than focused on their occupying prominent, prestigious positions in the Mughal state system. It is not the case that the text ignores the eunuchs’ histories; on the contrary, these histories are evidently not only included but extended to include hijras also, but it is a partial engagement which foregrounds the most underhand associations.

In Khushwant Singh’s novel Delhi, the narrative constructed around a hijra ‘caretaker’ is somewhat different in its specifics but fundamentally replicates the tropes seen in both The Impressionist and Habibi. In one of the historical flashback episodes a character named Alice Aldwell, a British woman in Delhi during the Indian uprising of 1857, escapes the capture and execution of the city’s British inhabitants by taking on a Muslim alias and taking refuge in a Muslim associate’s house.\textsuperscript{203} Alice has previously been on friendly terms with Mirza Abdullah, who claims he will protect her and her two daughters if they take on Muslim pseudonyms and hide in his house during the violence. Alice accepts but quickly realises that the plan is not as benevolent as it appeared. She is taken to the Mirza’s house and leaves money with him for safekeeping; the next day he claims he knows nothing of any money and she must leave. Alice says the ‘hijda \textit{[sic]} promised to intercede on our behalf if I did as he told me. I agreed. I did not care what happened to me as long as my girls were safe’, and over four pages there is a detailed account of her being prepared by the hijra and subsequently gang raped in exchange for the safety of her daughters.\textsuperscript{204}

The hijra character is being associated so strongly with sexual deviance (crucially, through the eyes of a British woman) that their presence contributes to sexualising the environment itself:

With half an eye I could see that Mirza Abdullah used this place for his fun and games. The caretaker was a hijda. The room he showed us into had a wall-
to-wall carpet covered with white sheets. Bolsters were scattered about on it. There were large mirrors on the wall and a chandelier hanging from the roof.205

Within this framework, the eunuch is both the facilitator of their master’s underhand dealings (preparing Alice and delivering her to the Mirza and his friends) and individually sexualised. He sexually assaults her before taking her to the Mirza and rapes her after the Mirza and his men have done so, in an extended, extreme act which Alice describes in saying ‘[o]nly the hijda remained. I lay like a corpse while he tore me up like a dog tears carrion. He went on till the cannon announced the beginning of the day of abstinence’.206 In this instance the unnamed hijra character fulfils two functions. First, his sexual aggression once again associates hijras with deviant and excessive sexuality, a trope seen frequently including in Dalrymple’s representation of the hijras’ bawdiness and Singh’s depiction of Bhagmati as a nymphomaniac prostitute, both discussed earlier in this thesis. Second, this hijra character both embodies hypersexuality in his own actions and is the keeper of the hypersexual space. Once again, therefore, the connection is made on both the levels of livelihood and of personal expression, strengthening the reading public’s perception that hijras are inherently figures of sexual deviance with few redeeming features. This mirrors, to a large extent, the way that colonial interference constructed hijras as naturalised, inherent symbols of otherness above and beyond being perpetrators of criminal acts. The hijra does not only participate in these acts, but their very presence in a space frames it as a site of deviance, naturalising the behaviour as an inevitability of the environment when he does attack Alice. The hijra’s position as the gatekeeper of a space of sexual violence thereby distorts more nuanced socio-historical understandings of hijra caretakers as the guardians of modesty and the protectors of the females within the harem in order to depict them as ideologically infectious figures. That is to say, the associations drawn from the presence of a hijra are reversed to guarantee sexual impropriety rather than sexual purity. The hijra remains the point of connection between the male and female occupants of the palace, but their

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205 Delhi, pp.255-256.
206 Delhi, p.258.
role is to arrange violent sexual encounters rather than courtly or household affairs. Here, interestingly, core historical associations are maintained, but expressed through the lens of hijra marginalisation and perceived anti-sociality.

All three texts have constructed eunuchs as politically treasonous. This both utilises imperial ideologies and opens up sensational narratives of a central character trying to escape from a dramatic villain. Whilst these constructs are valuable in literary terms, they come with the cost of stereotyping hijras and eunuchs as these villains. Delving further into these narrative incidents, we see their villainy further marked by a second trait drawn from British ideologies, this time from understandings of hijras (though once again depicted in a combined form): their being a danger to children.

It is evident that the discussions preceding the introduction of the Criminal Tribes Act drew ostensibly on the public rumours that eunuchs kidnapped young boys to castrate them forcibly. The act’s specific ban stated that ‘any eunuch so registered ha[ving] in his charge or keep[ing] in the house in which he resides, or under his control, any boy who has not completed the age of sixteen years’ [is] punishable with two years’ imprisonment and/or [a] fine.’ Eunuchs were clearly considered to be a threat to children. However, whilst this is already a damning indictment of the community in its original form, in which it was rumoured that they kidnapped and castrated young boys, literary hijras are cast as even more depraved through the specific ways that they enact this danger. This idea that hijras and eunuchs were a danger to children appears in many of the texts in my corpus. In some, it is to disavow the idea that they practise kidnap, but even in these instances it is limited to disavowing it for the immediate community at hand, leaving open the idea that it is practised by others. For instance, in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, the leader of the main hijra group argues emphatically that:

the central edict of the Khwabgah was manzoori. Consent. People in the Duniya spread wicked rumours about Hijras kidnapping little boys and castrating them. She did not know and could not say whether these things happened

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207 Nanda, Neither Man Nor Woman, p.10.
elsewhere, but in the Khwabgah, as the Almighty was witness, nothing happened without manzoori.208

On the one hand, in referring to ‘wicked rumours’ spread by non-hijras, and in arguing that consent is fundamental to the Khwabgah and its occupants, Ustad Kulsoom Bi wholeheartedly rejects the idea that this is a common hijra practice; yet at the same time, the specific way in which the alternative is phrased (‘she did not know and could not say whether these things happened elsewhere’) not only leaves open the idea that this practise could be being used, but also replicates the element of rumour and underground criminality through its shadowiness, leaving intact the claim that hijras are part of a sub-social world of potential criminality and violence, even where the facts are not there to support it.

Other texts go much further in disseminating the idea that hijras are dangerous to children. The emotive value of placing children as the hijras’ victims inflames the act of kidnapping and castration. In The Impressionist we see that although Pran is not kidnapped by the hijras themselves, he is kidnapped by a brothel keeper who then sells him to the hijras of the Nawab’s palace for the purposes of sexual abuse. Notwithstanding the element of castration, the danger, both in sexual terms and in the loss of his freedom, is very real for Pran. In addition, because the sale of Pran is fundamentally not to initiate him into a hijra or eunuch community, but simply to use him to sway the Major’s decision-making regarding the successor to the throne, The Impressionist ties together two British ideologies around third-gender groups: that they are political schemers using underhand tactics to sway palace business, and that they are a danger to children, enhancing the negativity surrounding them by indulging both stereotypes to create an overwhelmingly violent narrative in which the hijras will do anything to advance their own ends.

Likewise, in Narcopolis, Dimple is not explicitly kidnapped but sold for sexual purposes after her widowed mother gave her away to a priest:

208 Ministry, p.53, emphasis original.
But then she remembered the sound of bells, death bells, and the woman’s wails. Afterwards, the woman stopped wearing red; she wore only white and she covered her face with her sari. She stopped speaking, even to Dimple, and then she gave her away. This was the clearest memory of all, her mother’s crushed, fearful face as she handed Dimple to the priest... [the priest then] brought me here to 007 [the hijra brothel] and sold me to the tai. I was seven or eight.’

The hijras buy Dimple for the purposes of pimping her out, which still depicts being in their care as being dangerous for a child. I have argued throughout that hijras in literature are drawn from distorted, negatively-inflected versions of their historical representations. This instance is a particularly strong example of this means of constructing hijras. The original association was that they kidnap children in order to make them part of their traditional communities, sanctioned within Hinduism; in this rendering, the negative element is retained (taking children through criminal means) whilst the positive connotations are reversed to become negative (instead of the work being sacred within Hinduism, a religious authority figure - the priest- and the hijras work together to sexually enslave this child).

Whilst the hijras in Habibi are beginning to move away from the practise of kidnapping, they clearly state that this has been their method of recruitment. Nahid, the hijra elder who is most sympathetic to Zam’s case, implores the other elder to ‘let [Zam] choose’ when to be castrated, arguing that ‘we’ve had our fill of kidnapping and forcing the lifestyle’. Whilst on the one hand this chimes with the presentation in Ministry, disavowing kidnap and force as one of these specific hijras’ contemporary practices, it simultaneously goes much further. Habibi leaves open the idea that it may be happening elsewhere and affirms that this is certainly something which has been done by this particular group. In addition, it is an

209 Narcopolis, p.55, p.67.
210 Habibi, p.333.
activity that some members of the group would be willing to continue practising. Zam himself may not be the victim of forcible castration in this narrative, but the threat certainly lingers around the edges; in that sense, Thompson reconstructs in his narrative the ideology underpinning the British Indian administration’s criminalisation of the hijras. Without including any overt references to hijras forcibly castrating their young recruits, Thompson nonetheless introduces the idea as a danger lurking just outside of the narrative space, an act of violence which is emotively marked by its constant potentiality rather than its specific enactment.

*Habibi* uses the image of hijras as figures haunting the social margins, acting as a constant potential threat to children, which Thompson takes forwards in a number of ways. Dodola’s son is murdered by an unnamed assailant, but it is largely understood that this was on the orders of the Chief Black Eunuch. Zam is not violently forced to be castrated, but that is not to say that the narrative asserts his choice as freely made. When he is taken in by the hijras he is physically destitute: homeless, starving and sleeping in manure. It is made clear that he cannot stay with them indefinitely if he does not become a hijra himself. Psychologically, Zam is going through puberty and has become sexually attracted to Dodola, the woman who saved him from slavery and raised him singlehandedly, often by having to prostitute herself to acquire food. Zam witnesses Dodola being raped and has disturbing dreams in which he casts himself in the rapist’s position. The concept of choice is thus undermined by circumstances, both physical and psychological; Zam is in dire need and has little choice but to join the hijras, and later comes to regret his decision to sacrifice his genitalia to the point of contemplating suicide. The hijra group he joins are thus simultaneously cast as having used kidnap and force in the past, and of taking advantage of adolescent vulnerability and poverty to recruit in the present.

In some ways, the novel does mitigate its presentation of the hijras as being a danger to children because of the partial inclusion of choice, limited as it may be, and the hijras’ active movement away from using tactics of kidnapping and force; however, even this partial mitigation is not offered in the case of the eunuchs, who are unequivocally presented as being dangerous. Zam’s first and only appointment for prostitution leads to his being kidnapped by a member of the palace staff and
taken to the palace to work as a eunuch slave in the harems. This space, of the palace, its harems and the eunuch workers who navigate its boundaries, is the more quintessential environment in which the British administration in India encountered eunuchs and the primary source of their political anxieties surrounding the eunuchs’ capacity to enforce change through both official and unofficial networks. It is telling, then, that within this environment Thompson casts the eunuchs explicitly as kidnappers, fitting in with an image of eunuchs as dangerous, particularly to children.

Whilst the novel on some levels does not cast this representation as a unanimous image of third-gendered people, then, it includes enough references in relation to the hijras and a very direct one in relation to the eunuchs to reinforce this claim, being prepared to use it when it suits the needs of the narrative (to get Zam inside the palace, where he will eventually be reunited with Dodola) and moving away from it only when it also suits the narrative (when Zam must make his sacrifice as an affectively powerful commitment to Dodola, so that their ultimate reconciliation is seen as a narrative success). In this way, the text is informed by negative historical ideologies surrounding the hijras and adapts them in literary usage for narrative purposes, to validate exoticism and eroticism in various ways. The text thereby ultimately depicts the hijras as endangering children by failing to adequately protect them, and the eunuchs as actively abusive in kidnapping and enslaving children. As detailed above, the criminalisation of the hijras was one strand of a wider project undertaken by the British administration to contain what was perceived to be the sexual and gendered excess of colonised subjects, and to remodel sexual norms to conform with British ideologies of propriety. This has been seen in revised, sensationalised forms in the texts analysed thus far. A second strand of this project was the construction of Indian people as sexual savages, and a third, extending from this, was the trope of white women in danger. In the next analysis, the sinister deviance of the hijras is hyperbolised by combining the white woman in danger with a threat to children and reading hijras as capable of enacting both.

In literary terms, the trope of the white woman in danger led to a wide array of narratives featuring the rape, sexual assault or threat thereof of white
women at the hands of colonised men, particularly after the Cawnpore massacre. Picking up on social anxieties around these issues, the texts then served to heighten these anxieties by replicating them for public consumption. As was seen earlier in this analysis, Khushwant Singh employs just such a narrative in the ‘1857’ chapter of Delhi: A Novel via the gangrape of a white woman during her attempt to take shelter in the Nawab’s house to save herself and her children from a massacre of Europeans. The hijra caretaker was shown to take a key role in this attack, both as an individual rapist and as the facilitator of the gangrape. By looking more closely at this incident, Singh can be seen to mix the tropes of eunuchs/hijras being a danger to children with the trope of white women being in (sexual) danger. Notably, this is the only reference in the text to little girls being under threat from a hijra, a deviation on the theme of them kidnapping little boys to take in to their community, a tactical amalgamation of the idea of women and children both being at risk.

Indirectly, Alice submits to the attack to keep her girls safe:

The next morning I sent my servant to Mirza Abdullah for the money I had left with him. He came back an hour later and said that Mirza Sahib denied having received anything from me. Furthermore he wanted us to get out of his house by the afternoon. The hijda promised to intercede on our behalf if I did as he told me. I agreed. I did not care what happened to me as long as my girls were safe.

This passage has the effect of maintaining the moral purity of the white woman and deferring deviance to the Indian characters; Alice submits as a mother sacrificing herself for the sake of her children, rather than submitting to the rape to save herself specifically. There is a clear differentiation between the manipulative behaviour of the Mirza and his companions, on the one hand, and the properly

211 For a detailed discussion of these texts and their effects on British ideologies around Indian sexuality, see Nancy L. Paxton, Writing Under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947 (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

212 Delhi, p.255, emphasis original.
maternal behaviour of Alice, on the other. Into this racialised sexual space, the hijra character then takes on a specific role which reiterates the reading of hijras as hypersexual, violent and as custodians of the boundary between the genders, but here depicted in extremely negative terms, as a sexual predator and a figure who is incapable of a normative level of care for children.

The more direct threat to the girls comes from the hijra: ‘He stripped himself and thrust his stinking misshapen middle into my face screaming hoarsely, “Kiss it, kiss it.” That was too much. I pushed him away. He slapped me. “If you breathe a word to the Mirza,” he threatened, “I’ll slit the throats of your girls”’.

The passage utilises the core ideologies put forth by the British that eunuchs were untrustworthy personnel to have in political spaces, and that they were a danger to children. It then merges and recasts these ideologies in ways that work to depict them as symbols of violence willing to do anything to get their way and facilitate their underhand work. The hijra’s threat against the girls deviates from the more common link between hijras and the danger they are thought to pose to children - kidnapping little boys in order to take them in to their communities - broadening the remit of this ideology substantially to cast them as generically dangerous to all children, and for purposes entirely separated from their sacred function. This threat reignites the trope of the white woman in danger and heightens the aggressive image of the hijras, reinstating deviant traits as dominant.

It is noteworthy that, whilst the hijra character is evidently violently sexualised in this depiction, the threat is made to ensure Alice’s silence, not to make her submit to the sexual assault. The hijra’s primary concern thus seems to be in relation to their employer/master, and the negotiation of sexuality within this dynamic; whilst the hijra is the facilitator of the gang rape, preparing Alice and delivering her to the Nawab and his companions, his own position is meant to be an asexual one, limited to facilitating and not participating. In this way, the passage takes up the idea of eunuchs having a boundary or gateway role in Mughal spaces, in which they act as arbiters between men and women and guard the division of space to ensure gendered order and propriety, and radically transforms it. By heavily inflecting this role with ideologies of the threat brown men pose to white

213 Delhi, p.256.
women, the hijra’s role as gender negotiator is recast as the facilitator of sexual
violence, and they themselves are recast as hypersexual, violent and deviant within
this environment through passages such as that featured above. The hijra is,
ultimately, the custodian of deviance, both representing and facilitating it.

It has been shown that the idea of hijras being a danger to children is
utilised in the literature but is hugely extended beyond the conventional
association of them in the social sphere as kidnappers and castrators. In the texts,
it is transmuted into a violent capitalist version in which hijras buy young boys (in
texts such as *Narcopolis* and *The Impressionist*), do not deliver the children from
danger (in *Habibi*, in which Zam makes some of his own choices but is pimped out
and ultimately kidnapped nonetheless) and pose a threat to children even when
their joining the hijras is not the question (in the threatening of girl children in
*Delhi*). In addition, this stereotype is amalgamated with others stemming from the
British administration’s ideas about hijras/eunuchs and preoccupations with
social ordering, such as the involvement of hijras in underhand plots, their
tendency to manipulate their positions within Mughal spaces for deviant, rather
than legitimately political, purposes, and their ability to navigate gendered spaces
in ways which were considered to be inappropriately sexualised. The end result is
an uncritical production of this piled-on image of hijras as fulfilling all the
stereotypes surrounding them, and doing so in hyperviolent, hypersexualised
ways. In the process they become literary bogeymen, taking on all the rumours and
stereotypes which others attach to them uncritically, above and beyond the
original associations. In this way, the hijras are stripped of individuality or
complexity and instead become symbols of deviance in the broadest terms,
absorbing, reiterating and heightening whatever deviance is put on them.

Thus far, I have shown how literary texts take up the ideas embedded in
British ideologies about hijras and replicate, distort and extend them for their own
narrative purposes, adding up to an image of hijras as dangerous manipulators
who undermine the political system and will do anything, often including harming
children, to achieve their aims. In this final section of the analysis I take a slightly
different approach, moving forwards to consider the literary usage of an idea
constructed by, rather than informing, the British criminalisation of hijras. It was
argued in the historical analysis with which this chapter began that a central aim of criminalisation was to reduce the hijras’ public visibility in pursuit of social ordering in line with Western understandings of a binary gendered system and heteronormative social framework. By banning hijras from appearing in public or taking on their traditional roles at cisgendered citizens’ celebration events, and creating major obstacles to the continuation of their communities through prohibitions against adoption and the inheritance of property, the British administration in India set in place a system the natural outcome of which would be a huge drop in hijra numbers and the containment of the remainder to the periphery of public life; hijras would, in theory, disappear either because there would in future be no more or because remaining members would be publicly invisible. It would appear that in part this has come true. The loss of prestige attached to a hijra identity, alongside waning belief in their abilities, has driven many hijras away from traditional badhai work and into sex work and begging; this has in turn consolidated their image as unrespectable, anti-social figures and strengthened their associations with social marginality.

Academic accounts routinely bring up the idea of hijra communities being somewhat wary of outsiders, but the majority do so whilst including a strong element of understanding of the structural reasons behind it, either in their inclusion of details of the hijras’ criminalisation and its effect on their ability to access public spaces or by providing accounts of the discussions they had with hijras around being allowed to speak to their community. For instance, Serena Nanda claims from the outset that hijras’ ‘lives appeared shrouded in great secrecy ... there appeared to be a conspiracy of silence’ and that most ‘writing on the hijras is contradictory, superficial, and sensationalist. This is partly due to hijras’ reluctance to talk about themselves to outsiders’.214 Simultaneously, however, she includes numerous references to the difficulties wider society presents for their integration, to which their reluctance can be attributed, most notably in the testimony chapters (chapters five through eight) and chapter nine, ‘Hijra lives in Context’. Reddy, on the other hand, directly attributes hijras’ reluctance to speak to outsiders to being hounded by scholars and terrorised by

the police. Reddy also quotes one hijra who claimed that the only reason she agreed to speak to Reddy on her first visit was because the latter’s short hair led her to believe that Reddy might be a teenage boy wanting to become a hijra.

In contrast, the vast majority of fictional literature presenting hijra characters naturalises this secrecy, casting it as self-chosen and as a tendency towards anti-sociality rather than a legitimate fear of reprisal from other citizens. This was one aspect of their depiction as the accomplices or, often, ringleaders in politicised plots, given the element of secretive, underhand scheming involved, shown to be a prominent theme in Habibi, The Impressionist and Delhi. Here I consider the more explicit use of secrecy as a trope of hijra characterisation, and its use in constructing them as purposefully marginal and thus, both anti-social and potentially criminal, before turning to The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, which uses the same concept but does so to note both the public perception of hijra secrecy as a marker of deviance and the nature of this perception as a self-fulfilling prophecy, rather than a naturalised character trait.

In City of Djinns, Dalrymple frames the hijras’ secretiveness through aggression and lies. Dalrymple spends days trying to find hijras who will speak to him; although he is successful in locating their houses, ‘[s]ometimes I would receive a monosyllabic answer to a question, but generally my enquiries were met with either blank silences or, more often, with graphic expletives.’ Indeed, Dalrymple pointedly argues that the hijras are a common sight, but that:

...despite their frequent appearances in public, very little is actually known about the Indian eunuchs. They are fiercely secretive and of their own choice inhabit a dim world of ambiguity and half-truths. They trust no one, and hate being questioned about their lives; if they are pressed, at best they will slam their doors in your face. Only occasionally does a scandal-a

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215 Reddy, With Respect to Sex, pp.3-4.
216 Reddy, With Respect to Sex, p.1.
217 City of Djinns, p.170.
stabbing during a territorial dispute or rumours of a forcible castration - throw them into the headlines and into the clear light of day.²¹⁸

Even when Dalrymple is successful in finding a group of hijras who are willing to talk to him, he undermines their narratives. Razia claims that she is very well educated, having gone to a prestigious school, but Dalrymple is tentative about accepting this, specifically on the basis of his distrust of hijras in general rather than Razia in particular, saying that 'I was never able to establish whether she was telling the truth - virtually all the hijras I talked to shrouded the facts of their lives in a thick wrap of fantasies' despite conceding that 'she was certainly from a middle-class background and spoke fluent English'.²¹⁹

Not only do the examples given above attest to Dalrymple’s own belief that the hijras are wilfully deceptive and that this is the cause of little being known about them by outsiders, but the insidious way in which these claims are woven throughout his account of them predisposes the reader to question their claims also. The hijras, ultimately, are cast as not just being secretive in the sense of being an enclosed or remote community, but as being overtly-aggressive guardians of their community and its secrets, and of being unreliable liars as part of this shrouding. Most crucially, they are said to be this way 'of their own choice'.²²⁰ Put together, the reference to choice and the extroverted aggression with which they respond (as opposed to, say, looking frightened and vacating the scene quietly), alongside the lack of references to the hijras’ legal history or the British administration’s treatment of them (in a text which is elsewhere very strong on its understanding of colonial history) naturalise the hijras’ marginality, casting the community as wilfully anti-social and thus deviant insofar as they have no desire to take up the offer of communication with a wider society which, the text appears to argue erroneously, is all too willing to talk with them and understand them.

Given that City of Djinns is a travelogue, I have limited my analysis here and in other chapters to the way in which Dalrymple as an author frames the hijras

²¹⁸ City of Djinns, p.170.
²¹⁹ City of Djinns, p.177, emphasis original.
²²⁰ City of Djinns, p.170.
rather than to specific narrative events, given that this framing represents the points at which the author constructs the hijras in particular ways, the focus of the investigation at hand, as opposed to the purportedly accurate contents of his interactions with them. However, turning to the fictional texts we see similar readings of the hijras replicated in the way that the hijras are positioned, and extended through the narratives in which they are implicated.

*Delhi: A Novel, The Impressionist* and *Habibi* each speak to the secretiveness of the hijras by putting them at the centre of violent, underhand plots. A similar construction of hijras is also apparent in Leslie Forbes’ novel *Bombay Ice*, in which the main hijra character Sami, whose murder the protagonist is trying to solve, is found to have been creating forgeries of antiques as part of a criminal smuggling network. Whilst on this occasion the violence associated with hijras’ involvement in secretive plots is turned inwards- Sami becomes the victim rather than the aggressor- *Bombay Ice* nonetheless performs a similar transmutation of the idea of hijras being secretive as a protective response to their social marginality into a naturalised association with the criminal underworld. Eliding the socio-legal framework, which has necessitated the hijras’ guarded secrecy, has the effect of constructing characters who are natural criminals, akin to their construction under the CTA. Depicting their anti-sociality as coming from within replaces the pity response that would be possible through a construction of them as victims of circumstance with a reading as shadowy symbols of deviance, consistently represented as engaging in anti-social and illegal activities in a range of settings.

However, Arundhati Roy’s 2017 novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is singular in this corpus, in that it does reference the public stereotypes about hijras but does so in ways which are attentive to their constructed nature and delves beyond the stereotypes to develop a more rounded construction of its hijra characters, particularly the central character Anjum. With specific reference to the supposed guarded secretiveness of the hijras, Roy addresses one of the most common areas of claimed secrecy, the hijras’ practices around death, early on in the following exchange between Anjum and her blind Imam friend:
‘Tell me, you people, when you die, where do they bury you? Who bathes the bodies? Who says the prayers?’

Anjum said nothing for a long time. Then she leaned across and whispered back, untree-like, ‘Imam Sahib, when people speak of colour- red, blue, orange, when they describe the sky at sunset, or moonrise during Ramzaan- what goes through your mind?’

Having wounded each other thus, deeply, almost mortally, the two sat quietly side by side on someone’s sunny grave, haemorrhaging. Eventually it was Anjum who broke the silence.

‘You tell me,’ she said. ‘You’re the Imam Sahib, not me. Where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? Do you not think that the All-Seeing, Almighty One who put us on this Earth has made proper arrangements to take us away?’... Even though Anjum’s departure from the Khwabgah had been far from cordial, she knew that its dreams and its secrets were not hers alone to betray.221

Whilst the final lines of the extract above do attest to the fact that Anjum’s evasiveness stems in part from community loyalty, replicating the idea of the hijras as a closed-off community who choose not to be open about their practises with outsiders, the rest of the quote leaves open the idea of much deeper reasons for Anjum’s secrecy. Whilst the passage resists a clear-cut reading, her response to the Imam indicates that she rejects the assumption that just because her gender is unconventional, that puts her outside of universal human experiences such as the rites around death, just as he may experience the world around him through ways other than sight but his experience should still be considered valid and deeply felt in its own right. Simultaneously, the extract could be read to mean that she acknowledges that things are somewhat different for her, but that she resents being questioned about her difference from a socially normative perspective,

221 Ministry, pp.5-6.
which makes it appear that her experiences are somehow lesser or a curiosity; asking the Imam about his experience of moments of sunset or moonrise but limiting it to asking about these experiences through the unavailable (for him) sense of sight draws the Imam’s attention to the fact that this is an exceptionally narrow and exclusionary way of approaching the question. This reading speaks to the idea that it is the value of disclosure being queried, irrespective of the thing that is disclosed; their silent pain following the dialogue demonstrates a deeper understanding which does not need to be vocalised, in which both participants can understand the pain of being forced to explain and account for themselves in order to validate their identities, aside from the question of what precisely they are being called upon to explain.

In either understanding of the response, Anjum goes beyond simply guarding her communities’ secrets, instead drawing attention to and protesting the normative framework through which the question is being asked. In this sense, Roy is not presenting the hijras’ tendency not to discuss their private traditions as their being a closed-off community, but rather as a resistance to being interpellated through understandings which are alien to the traditions at hand. If the world is going to misconstrue and distort the information they give, Anjum argues, then it is better not to give the information at all. Given the distorted representations which have been seen throughout this thesis, this is a poignant and powerful comment to make. The idea that it is misrepresentation rather than sharing information which the hijras reject is underscored by a moment later in the novel. The Imam has, in the meantime, become a permanent resident of Anjum’s graveyard community (the first after Anjum herself) and has spent months getting to know her as an individual rather than through public understandings of hijras as a category. At this point, it becomes appropriate to let him in to their supposed secrets, which turn out to be quite normative after all:

When Ustad Kulsoom Bi passed away in her sleep she was buried in grand fashion in the Hijron Ka Khanqah in Mehrauli. But Bombay Silk was buried in Anjum’s graveyard. And so were many other Hijras from all over Delhi.
(In this way, Imam Ziauddin finally received the answer to his long-ago question...)

The passage treads a fine line between demonstrating that the Imam gets his answers once he is considered an insider rather than someone demanding that the hijras validate their identities by submitting to outsiders’ questioning and keeping many of these answers from the reader. We know that the hijras are buried, and where. We know nothing of the specifics of these incidents: the rites and rituals surrounding the burials, whether the Imam himself performed them, whether others came for the funerals, whether there were any other non-hijras amongst them, and many other questions. In this way, Roy maintains the boundary between allowing knowledge to insiders and denying it to those looking in from the outside. Including the reader in the category of outsiders both reiterates the idea that it is forced disclosure which is rejected (rather than that the hijras’ traditions are in any way too negative or deviant to disclose) and stops the text from descending into that which it explicitly rejects (an account which promises to delve into hijra communities and come up with juicy, exotic titbits).

**Conclusion**

This analysis has discussed the ways that the British administration in India criminalised the hijras both as sexual actors in a wider matrix of heteronormative ordering and as a specific community perceived as inherently criminal. More so than the fact of criminalisation, the subject of this analysis has been the ideological imperatives which informed it and the way this impacted on later ideologies of hijras’ social positions and characters. The British administration clearly demonstrated anxieties around hijras/eunuchs as symbols of and potential transmitters of gendered and sexual disorder. These anxieties manifested in the laws themselves through their moralistic overtones and the administration’s

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222 *Ministry*, p.80.
willingness to accept rumour or suspicion as the basis for charging a hijra under Section 377 or registering them under the Criminal Tribes Act. Additionally, when investigating the discussions held around the introduction of these laws, stereotyping was once again evident in the willingness of colonial officials to see rumours or their own repulsion for the hijras as valid reasons to criminalise them. As such, it is clear that enforced heteronormativity and gender binarism were seen as key components of the wider project of the civilising mission and British officials’ attempts to manage what they felt to be the deviance and disorder of Indian society.

Many of the specific fears about the hijras and eunuchs are re-examined, manipulated, distorted and extended in the literature analysed. In these texts, hijras fulfil the rumours about them by kidnapping children or being part of underground criminal networks; chief eunuchs, meanwhile, enact mutinous plots to enhance their own political positions and eunuch attendants facilitate sexual assault rather than sexual propriety. Most crucial, however, has been recognising the way that these associations are combined to heighten the reading of hijras as always and in every way deviant. Children are kidnapped to be sexually abused in political plots and eunuchs who facilitate rape are violent themselves, both sexually and by threatening children to ensure they are not found out. Extreme representations such as these, which rest on combining or sequencing numerous negative stereotypes, cast hijras and eunuchs as dangerous, amoral criminals who only care about their own advancement and not the harm that results from their actions. As shall be seen in the final chapter, this is a common trope of hijra representation, in which they come to stand in for extreme deviance broadly and generically.

In the final part of the analysis, we saw how the enforced invisibility of hijra communities brought about by criminalisation, most pointedly in the stipulation in the CTA that they were not to appear in public in feminine clothes, has morphed in its literary usage into naturalised, self-enforced secrecy which depicts the hijras as wilfully anti-social. Ultimately, the combination of hyperbolic deviance and naturalised marginality attached to literary hijras renders them as archetypal
villains and terrifying bogeymen who represent all that is other and are by their very nature marginal and shadowy.

If this is the function that hijras are made to perform in the social imaginary, one in which they are specifically called upon to act as the deviant other to normative society, then it is difficult to conceive of their being received into the social mainstream without a correlating shift in their public perceptions. I move now to the final chapter of this thesis to explore these issues through the ongoing fight against criminalisation, and for hijras’ rights as citizens, examining in the process the ways that this has led to a breakdown in literary uses of hijras as authors fail to imagine a future for them beyond their historically inscribed associations.
Chapter Four

Third Sex in the City: The Overburdening and Ambivalence of the Hijra Category in Postcolonial India

Ambivalence has played a key role in the representation of hijras throughout this thesis: ambivalence from wider society about the role they have to play, whether sacred or sacrilegious, has been evident throughout. Ambivalence on the part of academics, whose desire to understand the hijras’ conceptual role as a gender identity, a community and a tradition has conflicted with their desire to do anthropological justice to hijras’ lived realities, has created complex accounts which have had to be broken down and examined for their biases and slants. Ambivalence about wider political issues, issues of who should rule a nation and what that nation, and its inhabitants, should be like, have played out through the bodies of the hijras in their literary appearances and historical connections. In chapter three, it was seen how moral and political ambivalence about the existence of a third gender was taken up through law, in the laying down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860) and the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). In this final chapter, which focuses on representations of hijras in post-Independence India, the question of hijras’ legal status and their concurrent position within society at large becomes even more fractured, complicated and ultimately, ambivalent, as shall become clear. Ambivalence, then, can be said to be the key to understanding the hijras’ simultaneous marginality and longevity, and the curiously sympathetic position taken on them as a category despite the continuous literary and real-world disdain shown to individuals.

This chapter brings together the hijras’ postcolonial legal history and the burgeoning activism that it has led to with their often far more critical and distant literary re-imaginings. In so doing, it argues that there are two separate societal structures in place, the level of public discourse and the level of socio-legal inclusion, and that the hijras are an accepted part of the former but that, as was the case in the previous chapter, they jar with the latter both as a concept and as individuals. The result is social resistance to the formalisation of the hijra role and,
as I explore in the later stages of the chapter, an inability to conceive of a way for their ‘traditional’ status to merge with the demands of ‘modern’ India, leading to a projected reading-out of the hijras from society in the literature at the same time as targeted legal protection is, in some ways, increasing.

The associations made between hijras and morally and/or legally dubious institutions which renders them as marginal but established figures has a second impact in the texts, in their association with (specifically deviant) excess. The hijras are associated with prostitution, the criminal underworld and the slums, but regularly they are associated with all these factors plus hypersexuality and, often, aggression; they become, ultimately, scapegoats of gender, taking on everything which is negative or despised as their seemingly natural attributes, and becoming in the process figures of excessive otherness, the core to which deviance gravitates and around which it orbits. If characters wish to enter this world, they do so through the hijras; when they wish to leave, the hijra is left behind in the process. This conceptual value of the hijra category, as a dumping ground for the recognised but unwanted aspects of social behaviour, once again positions them as undesirable whilst simultaneously guaranteeing them a social position because of their utility. Thus, the question of their social acceptance is again complicated: hijras are conceived of as being necessary for negative reasons, and thus their continuation seems as guaranteed as their marginalisation.

Hijras’ Postcolonial Trajectory

In the years since independence, the legal position of the hijras has been a volatile and often contradictory one. The Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1949 and the groups it criminalised were formerly de-notified in 1952, removing many of the most practical limitations on the hijras’ ability to publicly integrate. Many of the castes and tribes whose opportunities were damaged by this law were then recognised under the new categories of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCT), which guaranteed them reservations in politics, education and government jobs in an attempt to rectify some of the structural damage done by earlier legal
discrimination and long-standing caste discrimination. Being a member of an SCT also offered better protection from discriminatory violence under the provisions put in place in 1989 through the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Whilst these legal reforms have not by any means meant an end to discrimination on the ground, they do at least provide a legal route to tackle such discrimination and public backing to attempts at community empowerment. The hijras, on the other hand, were de-notified as a specific criminal group with the end of the Criminal Tribes Act but were not and have never yet been included in the list of SCTs. They also remained criminalised under Section 377, which was retained intact in the version of the Indian Penal Code adopted after independence.

In the previous chapter I examined the law in its original context and discussed the ways in which the wording, which is both ambiguous and pointedly moralistic, allows it to be utilized to strongly condemn a range of alternative sexual and gender expressions. In the post-Independence period it is widely understood as the section of the law which criminalizes sodomy and, more widely, homosexuality. In 2001 a lawsuit was filed against the Indian Government by the Naz Foundation, an NGO predominantly focusing on HIV prevention and support for people living with HIV/AIDS, many of whose service users were being criminalised under S.377. Throughout the early 2000s a major campaign was fought by a coalition of organizations, including the Naz Foundation, under the umbrella group ‘Voices Against 377’ to have the law read down such that it could no longer be applied to two consenting adults acting in private, regardless of their gender identities.

On 2nd July 2009 this campaign was successful, with the Delhi High Court concluding that ‘Section 377 IPC, insofar as it criminalizes consensual sexual acts of adults in private, is violative of Articles 21, 14 and 15 of the Constitution’. However, on 11th December 2013 the Supreme Court overturned the 2009 decision, claiming that the Delhi High Court, who originally made the

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224 The broad remit of Section 377 means that it is not only used in cases involving consensual adults; Section 377 has been applied more often to cases involving the sexual assault or rape of minors than to homosexual/bisexual adult or transgender people. For this reason, the campaign focused on having the law read down rather than repealed so that it could still be used in cases of rape, sexual assault and child sexual abuse.
pronouncement, did not have the necessary jurisdiction and that this was a matter for parliament to decide.226

The particular political volatility of this situation is crucial; this is not a matter of having gone back to square one by having S.377 re-implemented. For four years, people across India were able to come out, organize groups and events based on their sexual and gender alterity, and live in the public eye. There is no way to simply step back into the closet; those who can be penalized under S.377 are now more widely known and in more immediate danger because of it. It is thus not the case that this is simply a frustrating extra chapter in the fight against colonial law; rather, this is a new situation which must be recognized in its specific context as a fight against the de-formalization of alterity in Indian law. By ‘de-formalization’, I refer to the idea that hijras are publicly recognised and at least tolerated in India, but that there are serious tensions around officially validating their identities given that this could be seen to celebrate other associations attached to them, such as non-heteronormative sexualities and gender expressions.

Numerous attempts have been made to return to the 2009 declaration, but all petitions against the 2013 reversal have been unsuccessful, barring the very final recourse, a petition to have the matter heard by a constitutional review bench on the grounds that the law contravenes Indian citizens’ right to dignity and security in private life. This petition was accepted by the Supreme Court in January 2016. A positive sign came in August 2017 when the Supreme Court ruled that the right to privacy is an intrinsic and fundamental right under the country’s constitution. In this ruling, the link to S.377 was made clear in comments that the constitution should guarantee ‘the unhindered fulfilment of one’s sexual orientation, as an element of privacy and dignity’.227 On 8th January 2018, the Supreme Court formally announced that they would revisit S.377 by October 2018; whilst it is impossible to offer a firm conclusion given that this discussion is yet to take place, given the declaration regarding the constitution made in August 2017,

as one senior lawyer within India has put it, it seems unlikely that the challenge has any choice ‘but to succeed’.228

In April 2014, four months after section 377 was reinstated, a private member’s bill was introduced to the Indian parliament entitled the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill (2014).229 The bill proposed to give the third gender legal recognition on all government documents, meaning that people could apply for driving licences, passports and voter registration, amongst others, as transgender. It would also reserve 2% of all higher education places and government employment for transgender people and make hate crimes against transgender people punishable with up to a year in prison. Although some quarters argued that some of the bill’s proposals are impracticable, it was passed in the upper house in 2015.230

The bill must now pass through the lower house to become law. However, when it appeared in the lower house in 2016 it was in a radically different form, under a new title, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill.231 The original bill guaranteed transgender people (an umbrella term which hijras were formally recognised under) the right to self-identification, government documents such as passports, ration cards and driving licences, reservations in education and jobs and substantial government oversight to ensure their rights are granted in practice; in contrast, the 2016 bill is a hollow version which uses outdated, offensive language in its definition of transgender people, lacks any government accountability or funding to ensure it is put into action, waters down the original stipulations and, ultimately, ‘if passed it will reverse all the gains the community has achieved in its pursuit of dignity through decades of struggle’.232

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Specifically, this is realised in three main shifts as the bill progressed through its various versions: first, the reduction of government oversight, rendering the bill’s proposals as suggestions rather than prescriptions/proscriptions, and a concurrent reduction in the financial investment intended to support these initiatives. One crucial example is the stipulations made in section 10 of the 2014 version, which are entirely absent in later versions and which read as follows:

(1) The appropriate Government and local authorities shall take all appropriate administrative, social, educational and other measures to protect transgender persons, both within and outside the home, from all forms of abuse, violence and exploitation.

(2) Any person, or registered organization who or which has reason to believe that an act of abuse, violence or exploitation has been, or is being, or is likely to be committed against any transgender person, may give information about it to the Executive Magistrate in whose jurisdiction such incident occurs or is likely to occur, who, on receipt of such information, shall take immediate steps to stop it or prevent its occurrence as the case may be, or pass such order as he deems fit for the protection of such transgender person including an order,—

(a) to rescue the victim by authorizing the police or any reliable organization working for transgender persons to provide for the safe custody, or rehabilitation of such transgender person, or both, as the case may be;

(b) for providing protective custody to the transgender person if such person so desires; and

(c) to provide for maintenance to such transgender person.
The removal of this and similar sections means a lack of official oversight and a lack of provisions, such as protective custody or maintenance, for victims.

Second, there has been a move between 2014 and 2016 from self-identification as transgender to the need to appear before a deeply intrusive and demeaning ‘District level screening committee’ to prove one’s status, which could include physical inspection to ensure the individual’s body fit the state’s understanding of transgender. Not mentioned in the 2014 version, the 2015 version of the bill stipulates that this committee must be ‘headed by the Collector/District Magistrate and comprising District Social Welfare Officer, psychologist, psychiatrist, a social worker and two representatives of transgender community and such other person or official as the State Govt/UT Administration deems appropriate.’ By the 2016 version, the make-up of the committee had changed to ‘the Chief Medical Officer’, ‘District Social Welfare Officer’, ‘a Psychologist or Psychiatrist’, ‘a representative of transgender community’ and ‘an officer of the appropriate Government to be nominated by that Government.’ Whilst the final participant is somewhat more restrained in the later version, the social worker has also been replaced by the chief medical officer, the inclusion of a psychologist and a psychiatrist has reduced to either/or and the number of representatives of the transgende community has reduced from two to one, further isolating the candidate.

Third, the terminology used in the text of the bill has shifted from utilising ‘transgender’ as an umbrella term which explicitly includes ‘a number of socio-cultural identities such as — kinnars, hijras, aravanis, jogtas etc.’ in the 2014 version to one which not only emits these specificities, but uses language of inadequacy and lack in describing transgender people as ‘neither wholly female nor wholly male… neither female nor male’ in its later iterations. Encouraging progress has been made on the second point as a result of activists campaigning against intrusive welfare boards, resulting in the removal of this stipulation from
the version due to appear before parliament imminently. However, the general downward trajectory of the bill’s scope alongside the fact that it has stagnated in courts despite public displays of approval means that those whom the bill affects are living with deep trepidation about its effects.

The bill was referred to a standing committee, who returned a report in July 2017 making recommendations to target the inadequacies of the second version. The Government, however, decided to go ahead without taking on these recommendations, and tabled the TP(PoR) for discussion in the winter session of parliament, prompting activists to vow to protest in response. The winter session finished without the bill having come to the floor, and so at the time of writing it is tabled to be discussed during the budget session which ends on April 6th 2018. Thus, similarly to S.377, the bill is currently under intense public scrutiny, but formal outcomes are pending.

Against this legal backdrop, the public position of hijras in post-independence India has undergone marked changes from their former prestige and even from their position under the British Raj. As fewer and fewer people believe in the sacred powers of the hijras, their traditional badhai work has become concurrently less economically viable, leading (given their social marginality and criminalized status) to a huge increase in hijras working as prostitutes. Though this runs contrary to their asexual, ascetic ideal, it is an economic necessity as one of the few avenues open to them. Numerous academics and NGOs have cited this move as a major cause for concern, due to the risks of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, the risks of violence that sex work poses, and the loss of their traditional work and communities, alongside the loss of any social prestige they may be able to claim from it. Framed by this context of political volatility, this chapter explores the position of hijras in post-independence India.

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238 People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka (PUCL-K), ‘Human Rights Violations Against the Transgender Community: A study of kothi and hijra sex workers in Bangalore, India (Karnataka: PUCL-K 2003); this concern was also reflected in the Naz Foundation’s decision to instigate a law suit opposing S377.
society as it is constructed in literary representations. In the process, it explores urgent questions surrounding whether hijras have a future in this framework, and if so, what form it may take.

In the first half of this analysis, I consider constructions of literary hijras in the present day. Allowing for various times of writing, the present encapsulates the mid-1980s (*Delhi: A Novel*), mid-1990s (*Bombay Ice*) and mid-2010s (*Narcopolis*) for the three texts respectively. Following this, I investigate how authors of fiction consider hijras when their focus is on futurity, continuing with the analysis of *Narcopolis* before turning to consider *River of Gods*. In the first stage, the hijras’ sub-social legal position is foregrounded; in future settings, it is often gone, offering a damning response to the question of whether the social imaginary conceives of a place for hijras in the future. Within this sub-social position, hijras fulfil a gendered scapegoat function in which they are loaded with the excess and deviance other characters require as a pressure valve, an outlet for their deviant desires which allows them to then return to mainstream society with dignity, leaving the hijras on the side lines. Thus, literary hijras fulfil a key social function, but are themselves extremely marginal, often unpleasant and ultimately unsalvageable figures. These associations are partly rejected by the more nuanced questioning of hijra futurity presented by the most recent text in my corpus, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and as such I close the analysis by exploring its concerns around the hijras’ changing social positions.

**Literary Hijras in the Present**

Part of the project of chapter two was to demonstrate the ways that hijras are associated with Mughal eunuchs, including slavery and the negotiation of interactions with cisgendered citizens, and this was fruitfully explored through Khushwant Singh’s novel *Delhi*. The characterisation of Bhagmati, the novel’s central contemporary hijra character, was touched upon to demonstrate the distortions these representations undergo when applied to present day hijras. In this retelling, slavery is used symbolically to reference the complex web of needs
and limits within which Bhagmati attempts to survive, and as a mutually beneficial
dialogue between individuals in an unequal power relationship. Yet the complexity
of Bhagmati’s representation is only partially recognised in connecting her with
the Mughal elements of Singh’s historical narrative; there is much more to be
gleaned from considering the present-day figure in her own right.

This analysis explores Bhagmati’s characterisation through the framework
of this chapter’s focus on the ambivalent but necessary position of literary hijras.
Bhagmati fulfils a sub- or extra-social function which in numerous ways holds
together the protagonist’s social fabric as well as the various strands of the text.
She operates as a ghostly figure when necessary, haunting the edge of the narrative
in ways that allow the author to weave together his historically complex tapestry
under the guise of the protagonist teaching Bhagmati; she is malleable to the
changing needs of her lover and the text, altering her affiliations and self-
presentation in ways which detract from her own characterisation but are fruitful
for the narrative; and she is a depository of excess, and naturalised as such by her
depiction as a symbol of excess in herself.

On a whole-text level, alternate chapters are named for Bhagmati, totalling
ten chapters. Whilst half do include episodes involving the two main characters, or
give more details about Bhagmati’s life, two of those include him having sex with
other women and another two do not feature her in at least half the chapter; of the
other five chapters named ‘Bhagmati’, one begins with her leaving and four do not
feature her as a present participant at all, instead focusing on the protagonist
sleeping with an army wife, his belief in ghosts (which he mentions she shares),
farting and mangoes respectively. Even from this surface-level analysis it is
immediately clear that Bhagmati is fulfilling a function separate from her physical
involvement, and as such fulfils the trope of the ghostly or absent hijra who haunts
the periphery of the narrative to facilitate certain elements (such as a reflection on
sex with Bhagmati, which opens the door for the protagonist to reminisce about his
past conquests, or a question from her setting off a historical sub-narrative via an
explanation from her teacherly partner). The trope of the hijra character is thus a
framing device bringing together diverse strands above her fleshing-out as a
character in her own right.
When present, Bhagmati is consistently foregrounded as a figure of excess and malleability; rather than highlighting one form of deviance, all elements of her depiction are hyperbolic, dramatizing the narrative but, on a deeper level, acting as a depository for the anti-social elements of his psychology, thus retaining his public stability. Bhagmati thus fulfils a position as a social scapegoat, taking on the role of the anti-social deviant to ensure the cisgendered character of his relative normality.

Bhagmati is depicted as a self-indulgent glutton, who not only enjoys her food but is selfish with it and without the manners or sensitivity to others’ needs to behave otherwise. In the chapter focusing on mangoes, the protagonist comments (in Bhagmati’s absence) that:

> these days [he has] to scout around for more and more mangoes for the way Bhagmati tucks in I wouldn’t get to eat any. Without as much as a by your leave she will eat three or four at a time, suck their kernels with great relish till there’s nothing left on them. She ends her feasting with a loud belch, washes her hands and face - then proceeds to tie up whatever fruit remains on the table in the folds of her sari to take home. “I know you haven’t paid for them,” she tells me. “My poor family hasn’t tasted a mango this season,” she says as she leaves.239

Bhagmati’s gluttony operates on both a physical level - openly indulging herself and being comfortable with her bodily processes - and on a social level - manipulating the situation and their relationship for her own benefit. Whilst the protagonist appears to be upset by both, he ‘scout[s] around for more’ to enable her and doesn’t stop her from taking them home, demonstrating at least acceptance of her behaviour. By further probing the protagonist’s character, this acceptance becomes more understandable. Bhagmati’s behaviour is an uninhibited

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239 Delhi, p.347.
version of his own; given the content of the rest of the chapter he is evidently a fierce lover of mangoes himself, and Bhagmati’s belch is the fulfilment of the removal of painful wind that he spends an entire other chapter fantasising about. On a social level, the links are even more evident. Whilst attempting to seduce a stenographer working in the West German Embassy, the protagonist devises a tactic to ensure he gets the best of what his comparatively richer companion can offer him:

Since restaurants were not permitted to serve alcohol I carried a hip-flask and when the waiter was not looking poured a slug of Indian whisky in her Coke. I explained that this was all an Indian citizen could afford as the cost of Scotch was prohibitive. She took the hint. (This gambit also worked with the diplomats.) Thereafter whenever I invited her home or took her out she brought a bottle of Scotch or wine with her.240

Both characters use very similar tactics, but Bhagmati is much more flagrant in her behaviour; she is ultimately that which the protagonist wishes to be, were he not reined in by decorum. The fact that Bhagmati does not seem to be subject to social etiquette thus demonstrates that she occupies a presumed sub-social niche; hijras, recognised as fringe members of society, are able to personify traits that mainstream characters cannot. This niche then fulfils an important social function in the wider system organised around gender, as a manifestation of the unconscious and a guarantor to the socially-normative (in this case, the protagonist) that their behaviour is ok by warrant of a much more extreme comparison (whatever he is, he isn’t as bad as her).

As has been common for literary hijras throughout this thesis, Bhagmati’s extremity and malleability is also made to operate around her gender and sexual ability, which are in turn amalgamated such that her hijra body is represented as

240 Delhi, p.43.
being coterminous with hypersexuality, both in terms of desire and ability. Singh underlines this in a particularly hyperbolic account of Bhagmati’s sexual prowess:

When men came to expend their lust on hijdas - it is surprising how many prefer them to women - Bhagmati got more patrons than anyone else in her troupe. She could give herself as a woman; she could give herself as a boy. She also discovered that some men preferred to be treated as women. Though limited in her resources, she learnt how to give them pleasure too. There were no variations of sex that Bhagmati found unnatural or did not enjoy. Despite being the plainest of hijdas, she came to be sought by the old and young, the potent and impotent, by homosexuals, sadists and masochists.

Bhagmati regards a bed in the same way as an all-in wrestler regards the arena when engaged in a bout where no holds are barred. Bhagmati is the all-purpose man-woman sex maniac.241

Bhagmati’s natural hermaphroditism is hyperbolised as sexual excess, which is immediately constructed as having a social value; she is ‘all-purpose’ even before she is ‘man-woman’. The description, whilst casting Bhagmati in an extreme light in that she apparently desires to do these things (‘no variations... she did not enjoy’), focuses more strongly on the people she does these things for. She is, after all, a prostitute, and thus her sexual abilities and encounters are constructed as a service. Thus, her social value as a hypersexual, malleable figure, but one who is de-individualised by the transactional nature of the sexual encounter, is affirmed on the group level.

With the stage thus set, Bhagmati’s utility via her sexual abilities is affirmed on the individual level through the value she has for the protagonist. He first encounters Bhagmati lying unconscious on a road outside Delhi, having just been released from prison, and takes her home to care for her. Their first sexual encounter, that same night, sets the tone of their relationship to come, which shifts

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241 Delhi, p.30.
between different levels of closeness and affection, financial transaction, and an intense connection with one another beyond sexual expression: 'The three acts of sex were like the Scala menti of a mystic’s ascent to union with the Divine. The first rung in the ladder was the purgatory; the second, the seeking; the third, the final act of destruction of the individual self (fana) and the merging of two lights into one'.

Bhagmati’s hypersexual abilities touch her partner on a spiritual as well as physical level, creating a bond between them strong enough that although he is ‘ashamed of [his] liaison with Bhagmati, [he] cannot keep away... for too long’. In this way, despite numerous insulting descriptions of Bhagmati (including as ‘the worst-dressed whore in Delhi’, ‘the plainest-looking whore in Delhi’ and ‘the coarsest whore in Delhi’ all in the space of three paragraphs) he knows that he will always be drawn back to her because she fulfils him in a way in which his numerous affairs cannot.

Bhagmati’s abilities to give physical pleasure are not only adaptable to different people or states of mind/need, as explored so far, but also across time. As the protagonist ages, his desires change substantially and he finds that although he sees her much less regularly as his desire wanes, she is still able to adapt and debase herself to perform the exact action he needs:

Where will I find another woman like Bhagmati who will abase herself to soothe my temper? She puts my legs in her lap and rubs the soles of my feet. She is a skilled masseuse. She knows I am beginning to enjoy a good massage more than sex. Sometimes I can’t get roused till she has rubbed oil in my scalp and vigorously massaged the dandruff itch out of it with her stubby, sturdy fingers. Next to my scalp it is my feet which respond to her ministrations. If I don’t fall off to sleep I end up by sleeping with the masseuse. My frayed nerves are soothed. My temper dissolves. I no longer

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242 Delhi, p.41.  
243 Delhi, p.2.  
244 Delhi, p.28.
want to buy myself an air ticket to go abroad to get away from Bhagmati and Delhi. I told you- once you are in their clutches there is no escape.245

Bhagmati is constructed as the perfect complement to her partner’s temperament even when his needs change from sexually rampant (he apologizes in chapter one if the book reads as ‘a Fucking Man's Guide to Delhi’) to ‘enjoy[ing] a good massage more’.246 Whilst this may not seem particularly unusual- after all, they have both aged and changed- the way her malleability is framed causes it to operate in line with hijra tropes. Bhagmati’s sexual understanding and abilities are constructed as being able to keep him coming back to her despite the fact he is deeply disgusted by her and irritated by many of her mannerisms. Like a siren, the literary hijra is granted the supernatural ability to know exactly what men want and to provide it such that they can’t be resisted. Bhagmati is thereby constructed through the highly specific trope of hypersexuality, a distortion of hijras’ gendered otherness away from asexuality to mean, instead, extremity. Simultaneously, she is cast through the much less specific, generalised trope of hijras being malleable symbols adaptable to the needs of the narrative. The use of both specificity and adaptability in the same character attests to the use of hijra characters as narrative devices rather than consistently-formulated figures.

Leslie Forbes’ murder mystery novel Bombay Ice also creates similar effects to Delhi by again utilising the tropes of the absent, ghostly hijra and a construction of literary hijras as malleable repositories of excess. The former is heightened specifically by the fact that the main hijra character, Sami, is dead the entire narrative, and it is her murder that Roz Bengal is attempting to solve. In addition, aspects of her lived experience similarly recast her as a peripheral figure, one who haunts the edges of families as the unclaimed child and the adult sex worker whose clients are often married, and who haunts the edges of business dealings in the position of the blackmailer, the night worker and the unofficial labourer drafted in to produce counterfeits.

245 Delhi, p.315.
246 Delhi, p.2, p.315.
Yet despite her physical absence, the theme of excess is also heightened in this novel, not specifically in being embedded within Sami’s personal characterisation (as was the case with Bhagmati) but rather in her social connections and public roles. Thus, *Bombay Ice* acts as a fruitful second text for analysis by bringing into clearer view the way in which these tropes of literary hijras fulfil purposes of social organisation and containment.

Sami is a hijra and prostitute living in a housing unit in Mumbai. She was abandoned as a child but was told that her father was a famous Bollywood producer and given a photograph which contains her, her mother, Prosper Sharma (Roz’ brother-in-law) and Caleb Mistry (both of whom are Bollywood producers, with Mistry, a former street boy, having been inducted into the trade by Sharma, who was already prosperous). Sami begins to stalk Sharma, believing him to be her father; however, Sami is actually Mistry’s child by a woman he met whilst living on the streets before his rise to fame. Though the two are never married they maintain their relationship until Sharma’s first wife, Maya, convinces Sami’s mother that Sami’s hijra tendencies will stop Mistry from succeeding, and she abandons her child. Mistry is devastated by the loss of his son and the unnamed mother eventually kills herself as a result. Sami is there, stalking Sharma and his wife and taking pictures, the day Maya dies in a reported suicide which is widely believed, and later shown, to be a murder ordered by Sharma. Sami approaches Sharma, who simultaneously begins paying her for sex and introducing his business partners to her for that purpose, knowing that she believes him to be her father. Sharma also- having noticed her excellent artistic abilities- has Sami produce replica antiques for him for a scam involving replacing the originals with replicas and selling the originals to overseas buyers. Sami has her neighbour secretly take pictures of her having sex with Sharma and his business partners, which she uses to blackmail him. Her two demands are the money for her nirvan operation and to save her housing complex, which belongs to one of his associates and is scheduled to be torn down. Sharma then arranges Sami’s murder, in which she is cut, drowned and left on Chowpatty Beach.

Whilst the above synopsis arranges events in chronological order, the ordering in the narrative is a series of twists, turns and revelations with numerous
dead ends. Whilst it is a standard element of detective fiction for connections to be made stemming outwards from the victim and bringing together strands of narrative with them as the focal point, Sami’s reach is hyperbolic even by these standards. Just as Sami herself is a useful backdrop rather than an active participant in the narrative, the reasoning behind her actions does not have to be followed through so long as it facilitates the wider narrative. Much of this is achieved through stereotypes related to Sami being a hijra. For instance, though she works as a prop designer she is also a prostitute; despite the fact that hijras consistently argue that they do sex work out of financial necessity, the link between hijras and prostitution is being used fruitfully for the narrative (enabling the blackmail scheme) even where it is inconsistent for Sami herself. Sami is thus constructed as a figure of malleable excess, to the point of character flaws and contradictions which are not addressed owing to her role as a functional object rather than a developed individual.

Despite the fact that most hijras in the novel are already dead, there are a small number who feature in person. One such character is Sushila, who is shy on first meeting: ‘Four women welcomed me with a soft chorus of “Namaste”. One had her sari pulled well forward over her face but what I could see revealed features so finely etched it was impossible to believe she had once been a man’. It turns out that she has information to offer, and she finds Roz back in Mumbai to tell her about Sami’s death. Immediately, what began as shyness is explicitly linked with the common trope of hijras as ghostly figures: ‘When something touched my arm, I was prepared for ghosts. And I recognized her at once, my little fish sucked up to the surface from the deep. Although she had painted her face this time with more chalk than you’d find on a school blackboard. It was the shy, beautiful hijra from Bina’s community’. This introduction sets the scene for Sushila’s involvement, portraying her as a sort of phantom in her appearance, come to uncover the secrets of the dead. She finds Roz without being looked for, brings second hand information gathered from a local gangster, and refuses to have her interview

247 Bombay Ice, pp.102-103.
248 Bombay Ice, p.109.
recorded (though Roz secretly does). Most importantly, Sushila turns out to be the alter-ego of a character who has previously been introduced.

Sushila, Sami and a man named Robi (who works in Sharma's props department) are supposedly mutual friends, and Robi has already made himself known to Roz, though warning her not to get too close to the case in the process. When Roz meets Sushila to gather information about the case, she asks for Sushila's number and is told to contact her through Robi. Later, Roz calls Robi for this purpose, but then realises that he himself might be useful to her at this stage as she is trying to trace some pictures belonging to Sami and wishes to get into the central props department, where she thinks they have been left. Robi agrees to meet her that night and says he will bring Sushila as the guard is attracted to her, and so it will be easier to get in without him raising the alarm. When Roz arrives, no-one shows; when she eventually enters the props unit Robi is being tortured by Sharma’s associates. Roz escapes but, although his death is not confirmed, it is clear that Robi’s injuries were not survivable. Sushila is not heard from again, and on a subsequent visit to Sami and Sushila’s guru the two put together the pieces and realise that Sushila and Robi were the same person.

On another level, then, Sushila - as the hijra manifestation of this dual character - operates as the ghostly or marginal figure, as it is Robi’s injuries that are shown and whose death is presumed, whilst it is Sushila who slips away from the narrative as a result; thus, she is caught between being dead and not-being. As a construction in her own right, Sushila simply serves the function of passing clues to the protagonist and is then, role fulfilled, written out of the narrative. The identity of hijra, in the process, is used as a device to add an additional twist to a character, a useful bolt-on to the pre-established character of Robi rather than a fully developed singular identity.

As was the case with Sami’s depiction, there are inconsistencies in the story of Robi/Sushila which are not accounted for. For instance, the above account of Roz’ first sighting of Sushila described her as having ‘features so finely etched it was impossible to believe she had once been a man’, whilst the introduction to Robi describes him in similar, but pointedly masculinised, terms: 'Under the stage
blood and bruises he had the finely chiselled classical features of a hero'.

More crucially, it is never explained how Robi intended to bring Sushila with him and for the two to both be at the unit at the same time, a problem which is resolved for the narrative only by his abduction and the abandonment of the plan. Just as Sami’s character contains flaws owing to her use as a plot device, bending her construction to the point of breaking to suit the narrative, Sushila/Robi’s character construction is contradictory and underdeveloped, but their narrative is effective in its primary aims of drama, revelation, violence and the supply of clues. Once again, hijras are fruitfully malleable for the ability to link them to criminal or deviant events, leading authors to use them to hold together sensational or contradictory elements.

Jeet Thayil’s novel *Narcopolis* continues the theme of overburdening hijra characters with deviance and criminal associations and extends the sensationalism of *Bombay Ice* to include not only the improbable but the supernatural. In 2012, during the period of decriminalization, *Narcopolis* was published and shortlisted for the Booker prize. Telling the story of an opium den in Mumbai’s red-light district, and the people who frequent and run it, the novel is a masala narrative of violence, drugs, prostitution, the changing face of Mumbai’s underworld and an exploration of the human capacity for pain and violence. The main hijra character in the novel is Dimple, who was given by her impoverished mother to a priest at the age of ‘seven or eight’, who sold her to the hijras, where she was emasculated and introduced to sex work. In the time period of the novel she begins as a part-time prostitute in a hijra brothel and part-time tender of the opium pipes in Rashid’s khana (opium den), but later goes full-time at the khana, moving in to a small room as Rashid’s lover, in between the drug den and the floor occupied by his family. By the novel’s close she has died of cancer in the protagonist’s absence but returns to haunt both the narrative and its characters.

Dimple is a liminal figure, both socially connected and simultaneously peripheral, bringing the characters together and being used and discarded by them in turn. Ultimately her complex liminality stems from the fact that she is, as with

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249 *Bombay Ice*, p.103, p.60.
250 *Narcopolis*, p.67.
the other hijras discussed thus far, constructed as being a long-standing and extreme figure of sub-sociality, part of the Mumbai underworld and thus both deviant and necessary at once. The novel is thus located at an important legal, literary and socio-political juncture, not only marking the decriminalization of hijras but, crucially, working through their position in Indian society and shedding a great deal of light on the social positioning of hijras in this period.

There is one group of hijras in the novel, who live and work at ‘007’, the brothel to which Dimple is sold as a child. The hijra community and their organization into guru-chela relationships are recast as a madam-prostitute relationship and communal dependency in the brothel space. Dimple’s character carries these connections yet further into the Bombay underworld, to the city’s opium dens and in particular Rashid’s khana, the site in which pimps, gangsters and addicts alike appear and pass through the physical space and the narrative. Dimple works in both the khana and the brothel; in addition to the excess depicted by the piling-on of both these forms of social marginality, which I shall come to shortly, the institutions themselves serve to foreground the connection between Dimple and social marginality. The idea that hijras have a traditional, recognizable position in Indian society, but that it is a position which is despised and lowly, rather than respected, is thus a major element of their depiction in *Narcopolis*. In being read through prostitution and an opium den, respectively the apocryphal oldest profession in the world and a criminal setting, Dimple’s environments are stripped of the at least partial mediator of hijras’ traditional work having sacred sanction. Simultaneously, they are cast as archaic, further underlining the fact that they do not fit alongside wider society; the narrator imagines what a stranger would think of the khana and it strikes him as ‘a wavering image, unreal, something out of the sixteenth century’, leaving him feeling like ‘an interloper from the future come to gawk at the poor and unfortunate who lived in a time before antibiotics and television and aeroplanes’.\(^{251}\)

The two associations serve to cement the image of Dimple and the hijras more generally as socially established but socially despised. Their position is stable but side lined, and thus operates on a sub-social level parallel to ordinary society. I

\(^{251}\) *Narcopolis*, p.38.
consider this position as one form of the image of literary hijras as ghostly, in that they haunt the social periphery, occupying a position in between the normative and the fully unaccounted for. This theme, of excess and marginality combining in hijra characters to create a deviant extra-social space, has commonly been seen to be carried through to their gender representation, and Dimple is no exception. Once again, a third gender category is utilised as a needed space in social constructions; in this instance, it is to reflect back on cisgendered characters and enable them to understand the world around them. Dimple is particularly eloquent in one explanation:

Woman and man are words other people use, not me. I’m not sure what I am. Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I’m both. But men and women are so different, how can one person be both? Isn’t that what you’re thinking? Well I’m both and I’ve learned some things, to my cost, the kind of thing you’re better off not knowing if you’re meant to live in the world. For example I know something about love and how lovers want to consume and be consumed and disappear into each other. I know how they yearn to make two equal one and I know it can never be.\footnote{Narcopolis, p.11.}

Dimple’s non-binary placement leaves her on shaky ground with regards to understanding her own gender - ‘I’m not sure what I am’ - but on much firmer terrain as a reflection on the gender binary and its organisation, having insights into heteronormative love that are positioned as only being possible to see from the outside. Thus, Dimple’s thirdness is not enabling for her as an individual, but it is enabling as a narrative strategy to produce such moments of insight within the text as a whole. Continuing this theme, Dimple near-echoes Judith Butler in commenting that ‘[c]lothes are costumes or disguises. The image has nothing to do with the truth. And what is the truth? Whatever you want it to be. Men are women and women are men. Everybody is everything’.\footnote{Narcopolis, p.57; Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory’, \textit{Theatre}, Dec.1988, 40, 4, pp.519-531 (pp.519-520).}
patterns and performances of socialization renders her a misfit in her lived experience. She is, and knows, so much that it is almost impossible for her to be in the world, and she herself recognizes that she is not ‘meant to live’ in it, pointing to the social marginality that her insight brings.

When section 377 was first introduced it was precisely this otherness and extremity which, it is argued, the Raj was attempting to control; the purpose was to clarify categories which hijras and sexual minorities were thought to contort and confuse, producing a stable gender binary and an understandable, controllable network of sexuality, a project which was extended through the CTA. It is my argument that this ambivalence around non-conventional expressions of gender and sexuality persists in contemporary literature, but in a somewhat different form. In the case of Narcopolis, Dimple is hypersexualized, but rather than break up the conventional family she operates as an unofficial addition to it, through her prostitution, which offers a commercialized, isolated exchange of sexuality, and her position in between the khana and the homestead, adding to Rashid’s empire rather than breaking up his family. This is repeated in her approach to gender as a wider system, in which she is positioned as the knowledgeable outsider who can understand and negotiate the heteronormative world, without truly being a part of it.

Together, what these three texts - Delhi, Bombay Ice and Narcopolis - suggest is that literary hijras fulfil a vital function as a scapegoat for deviant and hyperbolic behaviour and that this position is naturalised by their being a hijra, with hypersexualisation beginning in the body, stemming out into their social interactions (as prostitutes and criminals, and thus self-chosen members of sub-social positions) and operating as the basis of their relationships with the other main characters. Once this position has been thus naturalised, it is utilised for the benefit of these other characters, who are able to sideline their own deviance into this one relationship and maintain their social integrity otherwise.

If, as I believe has been the case, this understanding of hijras in the social imaginary has contaminated understandings of hijras in the real world, then this functional but unauthorized understanding of their social use value would
necessitate resistance to formalization; the impetus in the present, the novels suggest, is to continue informally, under the radar, adding weight to the idea that the reversal of S.377 demonstrates an ambivalence around the formal recognition of alternative sexualities and not necessarily a rejection of these sexualities themselves. However, whilst they may have a marginalised but relatively stable social niche carved out for them in the present, their role becomes much less assured looking into the future.

Looking Forwards: Is There a Future for the Hijras?

The question of literary hijras’ futurity has consistently been denied by the texts explored in this thesis. In Bombay Ice the hijras have either been dead since before the start of the narrative or die once they have given over their clues to the protagonist, once again vacating the narrative as soon as their use value for others is diminished. Bhagmati awaits her death with Singh in Delhi’s closing pages. This is in turn replicated in the treatment of Dimple in Narcopolis, whose death in an ellipsis staged to show the swift modernisation of old Bombay into new Mumbai demonstrates a similar inability to conceptualise a role for hijras in this new setting, a representation I shall unpack shortly. Not all literary hijras literally die, but the exceptions follow a clear pattern; in instances in which the ‘hijra’ figure has been established early on as masculine and then has transitioned under duress into a non-binary presented figure, the death of the hijra element is achieved without the concurrent death of the masculine character through a reversion to the masculine identity (Habibi, The Impressionist). Thus, it can be summarised that characters do not typically make it to the end of the narrative in the third gender.

Whilst the removal of the hijras is consistently upheld in literature, there are two texts whose specific methods of doing so warrant further investigation as they yield a deeper understanding of the specific concerns underwriting this lack of imagined futures. I therefore return first to Narcopolis and then to Ian McDonald’s 2012 novel River of Gods. Dimple has consistently been shown to be both malleable to the point of the supernatural in Narcopolis; her death is thus not
the end of her narrative, and her reintroduction as a 'spectre' is valuable for considering her use value for cisgendered citizens further. In *River of Gods*, the main 'nute' character Tal offers an interesting comparison by physically surviving the narrative; if hijras die, and men who are temporarily made to present as hijras re-become men, then by utilising a new category McDonald gives himself the opportunity to write a new story for the nutes. In it, Tal does not die, but instead escapes a near-death experience and leaves. Whilst the positivity of Tal's survival feels worth clinging to, the complications posed by yts exile warrant further investigation.

Earlier it was noted that poverty and social precarity have led to a huge increase in the number of hijras either supplementing their badhai work with sex work or being full time sex workers. As has been seen throughout this analysis, *Narcopolis* picks up on these concerns and reframes them in yet more extreme ways with the hijras all already cast as sex workers and their community home as a brothel in Thayil's narrative. As this movement down the social ladder has already been affirmed, anxiety around their forced withdrawal from society in the face of India’s reinvention as a modern nation plays out in the loss of even these sub-social economic niches. When the narrator, Dom, returns to Bombay years later he finds that the changes begun during his days there have escalated rapidly. The junkies he was friends with have switched to heroin and no longer smoke as a community, but as discreet individuals looking for a fix. Rashid’s khana is gone and in its place is an IT business run by his now-grown son, testament to India’s movement into the technological age. The tolerated commercial underworld of Bombay has disintegrated, seemingly forever, in the face of multinational corporations and their ability to pay for the land:

The brothels and drug dens were gone. In their place were hundreds of tiny cubicles or storefronts, each indistinguishable from the next. The street itself was as cramped and ramshackle as ever, but there was a McDonald’s
on the corner and a mini mall and supermarkets, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of the neighbourhood followed.\textsuperscript{254}

While Dom returns to Bombay to reflect on its changing face, Dimple has died in his absence. Dimple’s physical presence is no longer congruent with the narrative at hand; there is no brothel or drug den in which to place her, no community of smokers for her to tend to and Rashid has become fervently religious in his old age.

As was discussed earlier, Dimple and the other hijra characters operate as extensions of their functional capacity rather than as fully developed individuals; they are providers of black market commodities, they themselves are commodities, and they are wholly dependent on others and on their use value for survival. Once these avenues close with the changes Bombay undergoes, the hijras do not just struggle, or even die, but become functional impossibilities, quietly vacating the narrative in the interlude. Whilst Dimple’s death is at least acknowledged, if off-scene, there is no mention of the fate of 007’s other inhabitants in these late stages.

However, the narrative is not finished with Dimple as, following her death, Rashid realizes his love for her and prays to God to see her again. Dimple comes back to Rashid as a spectre, explaining that ‘I’m not a ghost. I’m still here. I’ve been here all this time but I kept out of your way. Dead do not always become ghosts \textit{[sic]}. We are like dreams that travel from one person to the other. We return, but only if you love us’.\textsuperscript{255} Her return to the narrative is only made possible by a combination of being called for by the re-opening of an association someone else had with her - Rashid’s desire to see her - and supernatural intervention. Notably, when the associations were lost she automatically vacated the narrative, but now she is being willed back into the narrative by another’s desire, though it breaks the bounds of realism. As with her malleability throughout, she bends to the needs of the narrative and is cast in superhuman and subhuman ways.

In a number of ways, the novel is unable to situate Dimple and instead renders her as a figure of excess and, simultaneously, of nothingness; because

\textsuperscript{254} Narcopolis, p.271.
\textsuperscript{255} Narcopolis, p.290.
there is no terminology for what she is (‘I’m not sure what I am. Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I’m both’) and because it doesn’t fit with the world around her, she is (despite being a near-constant presence in a story from which numerous other characters drop out) the one who comes with least definition and least integration. She is a central figure of her institutions, but she is not enabled to move beyond them. When they go, she must; when they call, she comes. This, I feel, strongly replicates the objectification of hijras in wider Indian society, in which they are seen as a token of India’s rich, living mythology, but are not protected as human beings in the reality of their, often poor and unsafe, lived experiences.

Ultimately, then, we have seen in the earlier analysis and here that there are three crucial aspects to Dimple’s representation which feed into the debate around S.377 and hijras’ acceptance or marginalisation in India today and moving forwards. Put together, they attest to the uneasy position of the hijras in India. The novel simultaneously recognizes their traditional standing but also their marginality, and whilst it weaves the community into its representation of the past, it struggles to imagine a position for them in India’s future. Thus, ambivalence rather than outright rejection best describes the novel’s treatment of the hijras and this, I believe, is a crucial factor to recognize in understanding the difficulties faced in attempts to formalize hijra rights in Indian law.

The common belief in hijras being a ‘traditional’ part of Indian society or having a traditional status in it morphs in its literary retelling into association with the Mumbai underworld. Rather than sacred legitimacy, the traditions Dimple is drawn from are of opium use and the backstreet businesses the disappearance of which the novel documents, as India is propelled into the technical age. Like their craft, the hijras are socially integrated insofar as they have a longstanding functional niche in their communities, but they are not socially acceptable, because these niches are not. Thus, formalization is again the issue at hand, rather than functional inclusion.

256 Narcopolis, p.11.
Secondly, the multiplicity of associations extends this point. She is not only ‘Dimple of the third gender’ or ‘Dimple the drug dealer’ or ‘Dimple the prostitute’; she is all of the above and more. She is an accumulation of excess, a scapegoat for all that is socially deviant and thus a symbol of otherness, broadly and generically. If this is the purpose of the hijra label in terms of social ordering, then formalization is inappropriate as it is precisely the space for social excess which they provide which is useful to society at large.

Thirdly, as these aspects begin to disappear from Mumbai, Dimple, and the forms of otherness she embodies, become symptomatic of the past which is part of the city’s social fabric but no longer physically present. Dimple is thus moved to the position of spectre; she has no physical space without these institutions, so the narrative and wider society, fundamentally, don’t have a place for her. She is not given the opportunity to adapt, as Rashid and his son are in the new business, or to leave and form a life elsewhere, as the narrator does; she is too intricately tied to her surroundings, a product of them which can only be understood through them, and without them she is, essentially, a narrative and human impossibility.

All three— a traditional but despised social position, a rendering through generalized, deviant otherness, and an inability to fit with modern society— form the disjuncture between hijras’ accepted existence in India and their lack of legal, formal recognition. What Narcopolis demonstrates is that there are two social layers, the extra- or sub-legal in which the hijras are clearly established and the formal or legal which is unable and unwilling to contain them.

Ian McDonald’s 2004 novel River of Gods is set further in the future, where the hijras no longer exist (although the term ‘hijra’ is retained and used to insult characters’ masculinity on numerous occasions). Nanak, the nute in whose home/office the surgery is performed, is ytself unskilled and simply brokers the surgeries, which are carried out remotely by ‘cheap surgeons’. The first introduction given to Nanak is as ‘the kind doctor, the good nute, the guru of the sweet knives’ and henceforth, throughout the narrative Tal refers to Nanak as yts guru, replicating the guru-chela relationship amongst contemporary hijras.257 In

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chapter one this thesis discussed the dai mas, hijras who perform the nirvan operation and claim that they are granted the powers and blessings of Bahuchara Mata in order to do so. In this futuristic recasting of the hijras into nutes, the dai mas are recast into Nanak’s character, who also draws yts powers from elsewhere, but in this representation the sacred power of the deity is replaced with a direct challenge to it, through technology taking over the power to change the make-up of the body. The final product of both the nirvaan and Tal’s operation is the socially recognised hijra or nute, and both are considered as semi-human; the hijras, as discussed earlier in this thesis, are perceived as being imbued with sacred powers following the operation, and thus are conceptualised as being outside of the strictly human, instead being sacred beings without being full deities themselves and thus semi-human, semi-divine. The nutes, in turn, are conceptualised as being semi-human, semi-aeai following their operations, having amalgamated the organic elements of their bodies with internal rewiring.

In other words, the structure of hijra communities is maintained but the technologisation and secularisation of the narrative correlates with the move from hijra to nute, recasting tradition and the sacred as criminality and a threat to the gods themselves. In the process, the guru is stripped of personal abilities and becomes simply a facilitator of the production of more nutes; Tal and the other nutes are likewise no longer perceived as even partially sacred, but as hybrids nonetheless. This recasting of the hijras and their associations, losing the sacred element, is demonstrative of the extreme ambivalence surrounding hijras’ sacred role, which is very much a present-day concern. Already it has been noted that fewer and fewer people believe in the hijras’ sacred powers and they are coming to be seen in their badhai work as simply entertainers at best, and as aggressive extortionists at worst, or losing this economic niche entirely and turning to begging and sex work. McDonald’s nutes follow through this loss of sacred attachments, reducing the nutes to technological anomalies and denying them any sort of organised or community-based work. Despite Tal’s reference to Nanak as yts Guru, there is no shared living space and nutes appear to live entirely independently, coming to the Guru only as they would a doctor or computer technician.
Tal recalls yts surgery as being put on a:

... table that is not a table, but a bed of gel in a tank of robots. Yt was lain on that table, anaesthetised to within a glimmer of death, autonomic responses wired to a medical aeai that kept yts lungs pumping, heart beating, blood circulating... As the old skin was incinerated and the new one that had been seeded three months before from a sample of Tal's DNA and an egg sold by some basti woman grew ripe in its tank, the machines went in... In their São Paulo offices, the cheap surgeons operated on air with their manipulator gloves and opened up intimate, bloody vistas of Tal's body on their visors. Osteobots sculpted bone, reshaping a cheek here, widening a pelvis, shaving slivers from shoulder blades, dislocating, relocating, amputating, substituting plastic and titanium. As they worked, teams of GUMbots removed all genitalia, replumbed ureter and urethra, and respliced the hormone triggers and neural response pathways to the array of sub-dermal studs embedded in the left forearm... The aeai hooked into the back of tal's skull now had to run a full autonomic nervous system test that the chip grafts had seated correctly and that the neural firing patterns yt had previously associated with gender would trigger the new, implanted behaviours... The helpful machines put the top back on yts head, reconnected everything that had been disconnected and draped Tal in yts new skin fresh from the stem cell vat.258

The surgery Tal undergoes evidently extends beyond what is currently understood by gender confirmation surgeries and uses extreme technologisation to break down and reconstitute the entire body, creating a hybrid human-aeai end product. The sub-dermal studs mentioned, when pressed in the correct combination, induce hormonal surges such as the release of massive quantities of adrenalin, or reactions including orgasm. Having had the operation is referred to as having Stepped Away, and from this point the individual is seen to have stepped

258 River of Gods, pp.278-280, emphasis original.
outside of gender and it is no longer seen as being their concern; indeed, Tal refuses to specify yt’s birth sex, arguing that now that yt has Stepped Away such questions are irrelevant, and the passage above gives the only indications (the references to scaling down the shoulder blades and widening the pelvis indicating the androgynisation of a male anatomy).

It would appear that we are dealing here with a very different text to those previously analysed. The unique category of ‘nutes’ has the potential to represent gender alterity differently, given that it is neither tied to the associations of hijra or eunuch nor is the identity in a co-relationship with cisgendered citizens, as the hijras’ is because of their need to perform for and interact with others in their traditional role. However, Tal’s narrative does replicate many of the issues surrounding literary hijras, as yt’s tale becomes the story of a nute attempting to Step Away from the concerns of the Gendered, an attempt which is unsuccessful and leads to their removal from the narrative altogether.

Tal is relatively new in Varanasi and is surprised and excited to be invited to a high-profile media event welcoming a Russian supermodel, another nute, to the city. However, it unfolds that this is all part of a ploy to use Tal to take scandalising photographs of the Government’s Chief Minister, Shaheen Badoor Khan, who is suspected to have a sexual proclivity for nutes. Ultimately the plot is successful; Tal falls in love with Khan, leading to a crisis of self because of yt’s attraction to a Gendered, but despite having feelings for Tal, Khan, a married man in the public eye, attempts to bribe yt with ₹100,000 to stay silent and not contact him. This is the moment at which the photographer takes the damning photographs of Khan, sat in a club where Gendered and nutes can meet, handing over a wad of cash to a nute. The political fallout is huge, with mobs attempting to lynch both Khan and Tal; whilst Khan ultimately regains his reputation and becomes something of a political hero, Tal ultimately ends up in exile, leaving for Kathmandu (Nepal, a neutral zone in the ongoing war) for safety.

Although my focus in discussing this novel is on the way in which non-binary genders contribute to constructions of futurity and, in particular, on how the future is imagined for these individuals, it is nonetheless important to take into
account that, once again, the primary third-sex character is utilised in a storyline which is more concerned with the perceived sexual deviance of a cisgendered person than it is with them themselves. Tal is ultimately a disposable tool for bringing down Khan’s government, and whilst yts own concerns about the relationship are brief, romantic and ultimately cast aside in the name of love, Khan’s concerns are dwelt on at length. Once again, a non-binary gendered character is used conceptually, as a symbol of otherness and deviant sexuality rather than as a fully embodied individual; at the same time, the failure to accept third-gendered people as equal members of society is clear, despite the social advancement seen in other areas. The morning after the incriminating photographs are taken, the news breaks and an already heated mob aimed against the government goes on the rampage. Tal is spotted by rioters and runs for yts life, hearing the shouts of yts pursuers as it runs out of energy:

We are closing. We are fast. We are faster than you, unnatural, perverted thing. You are bloated with unnaturalness and vice. We will stamp on you, slug. We will hear you burst beneath our boots. Tal is failing, failing. Fading. There’s nothing left in yt. The batteries are flat. Zero charge. Tal taps commands into yts subdermals. Seconds later the adrenaline rush hits. Yt’ll pay dearly for it later. Yt’ll pay anything now. Tal pulls away from the hunters. Yt can see the elevator bank. Let there be one. Ardhanaarisvara, Lord of the divided things, let there be one, and let it work.\textsuperscript{259}

It is made clear, through both the immediacy of the threat indicated by the unmarked speech of the karsevaks and through the truncated sentences indicating Tal’s complete inability to carry on, that without the use of artificial support, both internal (technologically-activated hormones) and external (a technologized means of escape and space of safety), this moment would not be survivable for Tal. Thus, the human/social death of the hijras, which was observed in their being killed off or written out of most every narrative featured in this thesis, is

\textsuperscript{259} River of Gods, p.330.
maintained in *River of Gods* by Tal passing through the gateway of the human and becoming machine; was Tal fully human, yt would certainly have died at that moment. But machines cannot die, and so yt cannot be written out this way and must instead be retired from the narrative. The mob thus fulfils the function of isolating Tal, cutting yt off from yts society and yts humanity.

This is Tal’s first removal from the narrative. The second comes later when Tal is forced into exile. Although it could be argued that this counts as *surviving* the narrative in literal terms, the fact is that the narrative effect is precisely the same, with the character of Tal being written out before the conclusion. Later in the narrative, Shaheen Badoor Khan uncovers a plot against the government and the tide of public opinion turns, leading to him being returned to the ministry as a hero. However, the damage is done with respect to the public opinion of Tal, and yt is effectively exiled, taking Khan up on his offer to help yt escape to Kathmandu in fear for yts life. Tal is fully aware of what this decision would mean, understanding yts role as a puppet in others’ games; before yt ultimately does decide to go into exile, it worries that:

> Yt should have taken the money... A crore rupees... that could take yt anywhere. Anywhere on the planet. But that would be to accept yts role. Who has written that yt must be punished?... Tal looks at yts small life, unpicks the terrible vulnerabilities that have turned it into an unthinking political weapon. Alien, alone, isolated, new.²⁶⁰

Thus, Tal’s gender presentation and the social response to it (the horror and disgust at a public official being ‘a lover of nutes’) leads to yts physical removal from the country and the narrative. Despite the focus of the novel being on futurity, it still struggles alongside much of the contemporary canon to envisage a future for non-binary gendered persons. Having written out the hijras as a community entirely in staging its narrative, the novel then proceeds to stage a double removal

of Tal from society once it has played out 'its role', a role which is indeed political and rests on public understandings of sexual and gendered propriety in which, once again, thirdness becomes the repository of deviance and Tal a symbol of it.

Tal, Sami, Sushila and Bhagmati each have their functions for their narratives; each (with the exception of Sushila) are cast as main characters, which underscores their objectification and ultimate removal all the more. None is ultimately fully developed as a character in their own right, demonstrating malleability to the demands of other characters and even malleability in their own portrayals to the point of inconsistencies and narrative flaws. All four occupy a sub-social niche which contains them at the social margins and allows them to be used as repositories for deviance, hypersexuality, anti-social behaviour and explorations of the self by other, cisgendered, characters. These established but marginal social positions are eroded as modernity comes to India and the resulting clean-up renders them as narrative impossibilities, stripping them of their sacred attachments, their communities and ultimately their livelihoods. Tal and Dimple both attempt to counter this writing-out of their social function by being able to step back and reflect on social organisation, Dimple with her insights and Tal in having Stepped Away; however, as the second part of this analysis has shown, both are still contained by the same tropes in these new roles and so are ultimately unsuccessful in carving out viable, sustainable new positions for themselves.

Is this writing-out of hijra communities as they are currently known simply a fantasy of cisgendered authors' imaginations, their idea of what organised, heteronormative modernity would look like? Or is it based on genuine concerns about the stability of hijra communities and life styles in politically volatile times? It is my belief that literary hijras are a hyperbolic, distorted rendering, but of a concern which does contain a very genuine kernel of truth. Hijra communities are under a great deal of pressure and they are changing, but the writing-out of hijras in literature rests on their passivity as underdeveloped characters and does not therefore correlate with the very genuine efforts to protect, adapt and develop hijra communities being made by hijras themselves and activists who work with them. In the final part of this analysis, I explore the political terrain of the present day in more detail through The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, a novel which is
sensitive to the problems of hijras’ negotiation of contemporary space and tackles, in a nuanced and multi-layered way, the question of community continuity.

**Making a Future Through New Communities and Identities: The Ministry of Utmost Happiness**

In chapter one, I analysed the attack Anjum undergoes at the hands of a Hindu nationalist mob, as a representative example of the shift in public usages of Hindu traditions and their relation to hijras. Here, I return only briefly to this moment, but discuss at length the after-effects on Anjum and the way that hijra futures, as individuals and as a community, are explored in the process. It was shown in chapter one that the mob’s reduction of Anjum to a symbolic hijra rather than an individual destroys her sense of self and acts as the catalyst for her leaving the organised hijra network. The relevant passage, however, ties Anjum’s reduction to a talisman in with a wider, scathing reading of the talismans and charms used by those in the mob, to make the point that it is the attackers themselves who have a corrupted understanding of Hinduism and not Anjum who only has value as a symbol:

After all, it was to ward off bad luck that the fingers that gripped the slashing swords and flashing daggers were studded with lucky stones embedded in thick gold rings. It was to ward off bad luck that the wrists wielding iron rods that bludgeoned people to death were festooned with red puja threads lovingly tied by adoring mothers.261

The juxtaposition here between the charms and the violence demonstrate the skin-deep level of commitment to Hinduism espoused by these apparent ardent believers. Roy can thus be seen to be arguing that Hindutva is a manipulation of

261 Ministry, p.62.
Hinduism to justify an oppressive political structure, given that it has no effect on morality or behaviour beyond self-interested outward displays. The reduction of Anjum to a talisman therefore becomes an attempt to interpellate her into this system, and it is this- the political distortion of her deeply personalised identity in ways that are not only against her understanding of herself, but which traumatise her - which Anjum is set up to reject.

It is important to note that Anjum is cast as Muslim, and so her connection to Hinduism is as a hijra rather than as an individual believer. Anjum is thus not having a crisis of faith by leaving the organised hijra community. Rather, she rejects a public system which reduces her to a fetish whilst engaging in deeply violent and inhumane actions. She decides to leave the organised, publicly-recognised hijra community, but throughout the narrative she ‘stubbornly insist[s] on calling herself a Hijra’.262 Through Anjum, Roy distinguishes between the individualised experience of gender alterity and the political distortion of sacred symbols, and is thereby able to retain and celebrate the former as the narrative progresses whilst firmly rejecting the latter.

Moving forwards, it is Anjum’s specific status as a survivor which is poignant in a consideration of the wider place of hijras as a group in modern India. Anjum is amongst the survivors of the 2002 Gujarat riots, and the only survivor from the specific attack in which she is involved. It is very specifically her hijra identity which saves her, as discussed above, and for this reason ‘Anjum never forgot that she was only Butchers’ Luck. For the rest of her life, even when it appeared otherwise, her relationship with the Rest-of-Her-Life remained precarious and reckless.’263 The trauma ultimately leads to Anjum leaving the hijra Khwabgah and performing a living death, taking shelter alone in a graveyard as ‘a ravaged, feral spectre, out-haunting every resident djinn and spirit, ambushing bereaved families who came to bury their dead with a grief so wild, so untethered, that it clean outstripped theirs.’264 This reference specifically depicts Anjum as a form of ghost, as already being partway between the world of the living and the

262 Ministry, p.38.
263 Ministry, p.66.
264 Ministry, p.63.
dead; elsewhere she is depicted in a similar limbo, but in terms of being in a slow process of dying:

Every few months the municipal authorities stuck a notice on Anjum's front door that said squatters were strictly prohibited from living in the graveyard and that any unauthorized construction would be demolished within a week. She told them that she wasn't living in it, she was dying in it—and for that she didn't need permission from the municipality because she had authorization from the Almighty Himself.

None of the municipal officers who visited her was man enough to take the matter further and run the risk of being embarrassed by her legendary abilities. Also, like everyone else, they feared being cursed by a Hijra. So they chose the path of appeasement and petty extortion. They settled on a not-inconsiderable sum of money to be paid to them, along with a non-vegetarian meal, on Diwali as well as Eid. And they agreed that if the house expanded the sum would expand proportionately.⁴⁶⁵

Anjum's living death in the graveyard is symbolic of the simultaneous archaism but also the continuation of the hijras as a community. Anjum is trapped by her interpellation as a hijra, and thus as 'Butcher's Luck'; she can neither return to her community now that she recognises that this is what contemporary India has reduced them to, nor is she enabled to move forwards whilst still being tied to and identified with this label. The mob do not allow her to die because of her symbolic value, in the same way that hijras as a concept are still deeply entwined with Hindu society and its rituals. But in the present-day context, she is not able to fully live either, because the economic and social options for hijras are negligible outside of their traditional communities and waning belief alongside criminalisation has led to a severe decrease in their earning potential or social value within these communities. It is alluded to in the novel that Anjum has previously been earning a

⁴⁶⁵ Ministry, p.67.
living through prostitution. Now, in her older years, even this option is closed to
her. Barred from joining society proper, all Anjum can do outside of the hijra
community is scratch out an existence in a graveyard, waiting to join her deceased
family in it underground.

The second part of the quote also speaks to the limbo that Anjum finds
herself in, with the municipal workers allowing her to stay because of two factors
drawn from tradition and modernity respectively: they are simultaneously afraid
of her because of the connotations they draw from her hijra identity, and they are
able to extort her through bribery, a common form of corruption. Whilst the
meeting of the two does ensure that she at least has the graveyard to live in, the
duality once again shows Anjum being pinned between the traditional and the
contemporary, and ultimately all this grants her is access to the space in which to
perform her living death, rather than any accruing benefits or opportunities.

However, despite the claim that her reduction to ‘Butcher’s Luck’ stays with
her always, Anjum’s living death in the graveyard is only the start of the narrative.
At this point she is living alone but begins to occupy herself by building rooms
around the graves, keeping the connection between the living and the dead but
skewing it in the opposite direction, with the living beginning to take precedence.
Very shortly a community begins to develop with her at its centre. First Anjum’s
blind Imam friend moves in permanently, and then the construction in the
graveyard becomes a guest house which Anjum selectively lets ‘down-and-out
travellers’ stay in, including ‘Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out
of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas’. 266
Whilst hijras are ongoing guests, the permanent residents added throughout the
narrative are not, including instead a young Dalit man who has reinvented himself
as Saddam Hussein and whose life mission is to kill the policeman who caused his
father’s murder, a woman who was part of the insurgency in Kashmir, the
abandoned baby she has taken in who turns out to be the orphaned child of an
Adivasi freedom fighter from Dandakaranya, and ‘a Noah’s Ark of injured
animals’. 267 Alongside its residents and its use as a guest house, a number of small

266 Ministry, p.68.
267 Ministry, p.399.
businesses which operate as community initiatives spring up, with Saddam, Anjum and the Imam operating a funeral parlour in the graveyard for those too poor or too polluted (including prostitutes) to be buried elsewhere, and Tilo, the insurgent, giving classes for local children, charging just enough in fees to provide for herself and to buy some equipment.

Whilst Anjum may never be able to let go of the trauma of Gujarat, the narrative thus finds a way to move her on from it. She maintains a functional relationship with her hijra community in the form of a pension, visits, gifts and burying their dead, whilst being the centre of a new community of misfits and outsiders who aren’t hijra-specific outside of this traditional group. Anjum’s experience with the Hindutva mob thus works to propel her outwards from her reduction to a symbol as hijra, and in its place she is able to develop a new community based on shared oppression and marginality.

On the one hand, the transfer of Anjum from a marginal community which has, at the least, historical and sacred connections, to another marginal community which does not, alongside the latter’s pointed placement at the very edges of society/life (being that it is situated in a graveyard) replicates stereotypical readings of hijra communities in the worst possible way. Anjum’s social marginality is foregrounded by this setting and the lack of alternatives available to her when she leaves the Khwabgah; in this sense, the graveyard community is a product of shared poverty and denial of access to more socially central spaces, or even to full recognition by wider society. Anjum underlines this reading herself in telling Saddam that:

‘Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have... you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there is no haqeeqat [reality]. Arre, even we aren’t real. We don’t really exist.’

\[268\] Ministry, p.84, emphasis original.
Simultaneously, Anjum’s position at the centre of the new community positions her as the hub of difference and deviance. Elsewhere in this thesis, we have seen similar groups circling around a third-gender character, such as in *Narcopolis* with the opium addicts and criminals who come together around Dimple’s pipe and in the hypersexual, consumerist and ultimately criminal party held in the Ardhanarishvara temple in *River of Gods*. Additionally, as was discussed at length in the previous chapter, there is a stereotype repeated across texts of hijras wilfully choosing to enclose themselves in secretive, marginal communities, ignoring the structural violence done to them by the state and wider society which has led to this enclosure as a necessary act of self-preservation. Placing a third-gender character at the centre appears to act as a narrative device facilitating the coming together of other forms of deviance; the central character then both acts as the glue holding together this group and, in their reiteration across texts, as naturalising these groups in the first place through the hijras’ underlying connotation as members of marginal communities.

The above is, however, a static reading of the graveyard community. The text is attentive to the social frameworks which have rendered these figures marginal, taking time to tell each individual’s story and to demonstrate the structural oppression which has brought them to the graveyard. Many of these stories speak of state violence, the denial of rights to traditional communities, and caste oppression, issues with which the author has worked closely and written about extensively in her non-fiction work. For Anjum, her dual identity as a Muslim and a hijra led to her witnessing a massacre and being spared as a talisman, leaving her with deep psychological wounds which make living in the mainstream impossible for her. As such, *Ministry* moves away from blaming hijras, or the other groups such as Dalits, Adivasis and Kashmiris, for their own marginality by working through the structural issues which deny them social integration. Simultaneously, in the community they build together, it shows their

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capacity to build their own society in an egalitarian, mutually supportive way which is sensitive to and beneficial for others suffering around them, including the animals they take in and the children they educate. In this way, the graveyard community operates as an archetypal society in which each individual is looked after, and their worth is determined by their actions rather than their origins or other community affiliations. The fact that it is enclosed in the graveyard is more of an indictment of society at large, which has pushed them into this marginal space, than it is of the inhabitants who flourish within these confines.

The more pressing question for Roy’s non-binary characters is not whether they will disappear entirely, but what form gender alterity will take moving forwards and, in connection, whether the hijras, as a tradition and a recognisable community, will still be part of the social landscape. An assumption underlies this nuanced exploration that gender non-conformity is a universal phenomenon which will always present itself in some individuals as long as there is a gender binary against which these figures are positioned; it is not this phenomenon itself, but the ways in which it is experienced and the forms through which it is expressed which are socially constructed. One way that this is expressed is in the retention of hijra identities by individuals who have left the formal hijra community structure, including Anjum, Nimmo and the unnamed expelled hijras who come to the guest house, many of whom have taken on work not consistent with hijra norms. These examples imply that the label ‘hijra’ is expanding outside of these structures and taking on meaning for discrete individuals forming their own life paths.

The more prominent juxtaposition, however, is between ‘hijra’ and ‘trans’, a label which has a huge amount of potential within a globalised LGBTQ discourse but which, the novel argues, also holds out the potential to replace and thereby eradicate more local understandings of the non-binary self. Earlier, it was noted that the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (2016) represents a scaling down and restriction of the original provisions of the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill (2014). In its watered-down version, the bill has the potential to operate as image over substance, declaring a public interest in the protection of vulnerable citizens without necessitating any concrete action or expenditure, or indeed targeting many of the main concerns of the affected communities. As a
political declaration on the global stage, the bill puts forward an image of an accepting, liberal India and ensures that this is picked up by other countries by utilising a discourse of Trans which has global currency, subsuming more localised and traditional identities under this one umbrella term.

A direct comparison made between Anjum and Saeeda, a younger, trans-identified resident of the Khwabgah pinpoints these issues and exposes the links being drawn between traditionalism and hijra identification, on the one hand, and modernity and trans identification, on the other:

She was a graduate and knew English. More importantly, she could speak the new language of the times - she could use the terms cis-Man and FtoM and MtoF and in interviews she referred to herself as 'transperson'. Anjum, on the other hand, mocked what she called the 'trans-france' business, and stubbornly insisted on referring to herself as a Hijra.

Like many of the younger generation, Saeeda switched easily between traditional salwar kameez and Western clothes - jeans, skirts, halter-necks that showed off her long, beautifully muscled back. What she lacked in local flavour and old-world charm she more than made up for with her modern understanding, her knowledge of the law and her involvement with Gender Rights Groups (she had even spoken at two conferences). All this placed her in a different league from Anjum. Also, Saeeda had edged Anjum out of the Number One spot in the media. The foreign newspapers had dumped the old exotics in favour of the younger generation. The exotics didn’t suit the image of the New India - a nuclear power and an emerging destination for international finance.270

Whilst Saeeda’s identification as trans rather than as a hijra is entirely valid in itself, this analysis critiques the way that such labels are publicly constructed and understood and the effect that the privileging of certain identities has on others, rather than critiquing individual identities per se. The comparison made between

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270 Ministry, p.38, emphasis original.
Anjum and Saeeda attests clearly to trans identities having greater global currency, but one which relies on image over substance, and specifically their correlation with the ‘image of the New India’ which the media are attempting to cultivate. Saeeda’s clothing and the terminology she can use both operate as outward markers contributing to this image, which focuses on image and public perception rather than a different felt identity underlying Saeeda’s taking-on of a trans, rather than hijra, label. Not only are the attributes skin-deep, but they are poignantly westernised, in the specific clothing referenced and the LGBTQ framework of the terminology.

Most poignantly, this is not just a reflection on Saeeda or her identity; it is specifically pitted against Anjum’s hijra one. The two are not just seen as distinct but co-existing, expressing unity through diversity; rather, trans threatens and ultimately replaces hijra in the social imaginary, with Saeeda being ‘in a different league from Anjum’, ‘[edging] Anjum out’ until finally ‘the old exotics [are dumped] in favour of the younger generation [because t]he exotics didn’t suit the image of the New India’.271 The hierarchisation of identities leads ultimately to the exclusivity of trans as the recognised and valuable identity, to the detriment of other groups who cannot be subsumed under this label. Whilst the novel delicately leaves open the question of whether the hijras will in fact disappear entirely as a result of the usurping of third-gender identity under the trans label, it certainly explores anxieties surrounding this potential outcome:

Saeeda said that because sexual-reassignment surgery was becoming cheaper, better, and more accessible to people, Hijras would soon disappear. 'Nobody will need to go through what we've been through any more.'

'You mean no more Indo-Pak?' Nimmo Gorakhpuri said.

'It wasn't all bad,' Anjum said. 'I think it would be a shame if we became extinct.'272

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271 *Ministry*, p.38, emphasis original.
Here, the reference to ‘sexual-reassignment surgery’ pinpoints the fact that what is at stake is the loss of a third gender, with surgery allowing individuals to move from one interpellation to the other within a binary gender system; were these opportunities more widely available, Saeeda argues, no-one would ‘need to’ occupy a third space, with the underlying assumption being that no-one would choose to in this scenario. Saeeda recognises being hijra only as a stand-in for being trans; thirdness is necessary when you don’t fit your given category and can’t move to the desired one, and thus is fundamentally positioned as incommensurate with the ‘system’.

Nimmo’s take on thirdness is somewhat different, but still negatively inflected. Nimmo identifies as a hijra but has left the organised community to pursue an independent career; she is thus aligned relatively closely with Anjum, but has not constructed a different community as Anjum has, preferring to be independent for the most part and visit the graveyard community at times. Nimmo therefore embodies an individualised hijra identity. From this position, she recognises the hardship of occupying an indeterminate gendered position through the reference to ‘Indo-Pak’, a concept developed earlier in the novel to express feelings of inner turmoil over one’s gender identity and of the body being at war with the individual, developing in ways that do not correlate with self-identity. Nimmo’s is a more affect-orientated response which is seduced by the seemingly straightforward nature of sexual-reassignment surgery that Saeeda puts forward and the opportunity it holds out to be socially integrated. Whilst this is a naïve reading of transgender experiences, it operates on the level of the individual and the potential to alleviate their hardships, seeing promise in a more mainstreamed way to express their identities and live in their bodies. Thus, Nimmo’s potential rejection of thirdness is not a rejection of hijras as a category, but a recognition of the social and personal trauma of being forced to occupy an indeterminate space.

Anjum’s response, however, recognises the value of thirdness in itself and refuses to collapse individuals’ experiences of gender alterity into one universal

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form. She recognises that trans identities and hijra identities are neither one and the same, nor is a hijra identity a poor stand-in where access to a trans identity is not attainable. Whilst being attentive to the hardships brought up in Nimmo’s response, balancing her statement to say that ‘it wasn’t all bad’, Anjum is used as the voice of thirdness, testifying to the idea that this has never been about wanting to become or becoming women, and that becoming transwomen will not be the preferable or complete version that a hijra identity attempts to work towards. Instead, Anjum focuses on what will be lost in the process of universalisation of the experience of gendered otherness and, specifically, the reduction of the gender system to a binary. These new opportunities might make things easier for discrete individuals, but in the process, they would render the hijra label and hijra communities ‘extinct’. Anjum is not specific about exactly which parts of the experience she feels it would be ‘a shame’ to lose and which were negative, but the overall argument taken from this excerpt is that attachments are made to a third gender position which are both unique and valuable.

It has been my argument throughout this thesis that there are elements of a third-gender positioning which are unique, and that this space provides opportunities to think differently about social formation, individual difference and concepts of gender and sexuality which are not possible for identities, trans or cis, working within the binary system. The overwhelming majority of these opportunities, when taken up by writers working from within the binary system and often from the West, have been used to attach negative, extreme and/or subversive associations to the third gender. Here, Roy gives her hijra character a moment to reflect upon the positive attachments made by those inhabiting these positions. Whilst Roy does not populate this reflection with specifics, this is appropriate given her authorial position as a binary-gendered person. It has never been the remit of this thesis to consider the lived experience of hijras, but suffice it to say for the purposes of the argument being made that moments such as these underline the orientalising, sensationalising constructedness of the way that thirdness is conceptualised by the writers considered, as against potentially more

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274 *Ministry*, p.409, emphasis mine.
nuanced and positive readings of their communities which could come from those within them.

**Conclusion**

This analysis has explored both the positioning of hijras in post-independence accounts set in their respective presents, and the representation of hijra futures, or lack thereof, moving forwards. With regards to the present, it has been shown that thirdness as a concept helps to maintain the social order by providing an off-loading space for excess, deviance and criminality, securing the boundaries of the normative in the process; thus, third spaces (including hijras as conceptual third spaces within literature) are necessary but their function is to be outside of the system. These figures can, by definition, never be integrated. Instead, they perform their function on the periphery, acting both as depositories for deviance to be contained from normative society in an accessible but distinct space, and as a congregation point around which for other deviants to gather, again containing these groups at the social margins.

Reducing literary hijras to a narrative device in this way leaves their futures precarious. In the course of this analysis, it was shown that the authors either abandon their hijra characters outright (by killing them off) when they are no longer needed to perform a narrative function, or, where attempts are made to integrate them into a modern setting in the ‘new India’, the texts struggle to find a place for them in this environment, leading to other forms of abandonment such as reducing the hijras to ghosts (such as in Dimple’s case) or exiling them (as in River of Gods). Ultimately, only *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is partially successful in retaining its hijra characters through to the end of the narrative, but as was extensively shown, the novel demonstrates the ambivalence surrounding hijra positioning and the intensity of the questions surrounding it in the current political environment. Without coming down decidedly on one or the other side of the debate, Roy’s novel highlights the fact that change can either offer the potential to overcome a reductive reading of hijras-as-symbols by integrating them into wider,
though still marginal, communities, or conversely that change can be a threat to hijras by universalising a binary reading of gender which allows for trans identities, but has no room for thirdness or for hijras’ particular traditions and identity associations outside of their gender identity. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* celebrates at least partial social integration but laments the loss of thirdness in the process, showing the movement away from organised hijra communities as a personal trauma, even if it can lead to a community of good, and the move to trans exclusivity, if it happens, as a narrowing of society and thus as a loss.

Whilst *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* takes the issue of the splitting of hijra communities and the question of emerging communities to the group level, commenting on hijras/thirdness as a whole, its construction of the hijras replicates the concepts attached to individual hijras/third-gender people by the other texts. Overall, ambivalence about what the hijras stand for and their position on the social margins (whether it can or should be maintained, mainstreamed or disappeared) manifests across texts as excess. So many attachments are made to the hijras-as representatives of social marginality, as hypersexual, as inherently other- that the category cannot cope under the strain, and the result is either their reduction to symbols or their being written out from a more streamlined image of modern India.

The simultaneous overburdening of the hijras with this wealth of attachments and the fact that so many of the attachments are negative come together to create the ambivalence around the hijras discussed earlier in this chapter. The inability to reduce hijras to one singular reading, and to fit this reading into a formal social framework, is replicated in the pending status of hijras’ rights under the law despite years of campaigning. As public ambivalence about the hijras leaves politicians unable to firmly pass or reject these laws, the future looks uncertain, particularly given the negative turn the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill (2014) has taken in its passage through the courts. What both the literature analysed here and the discussions taking place in legal spaces demonstrate is that a project which attempts to reduce the hijras to one singular reading does not work; they will always be complicated, split and multiple figures.
It is in this regard that excess, read as multiplicity, can be a beneficial recognition for the questions at hand. Understanding non-cisgendered identities as being felt and expressed in multiple, individualised ways is much harder to account for within a linear narrative, be it literary or legal. But it is the reality of lived experience, and despite the difficulties it poses, it would appear to be the only way to make change which has positive benefits for the people it affects. The question, then, must be one of defying and defending against the negative attachments made to hijras rather than allowing them to be reduced to a singular, unrepresentative reading. There is no going backwards from this point; the only option for non-cisgendered people is to recognise that society struggles to conceive of futures for them and to continue being a part of these conversations so that they can push the dialogue forwards and create futures for themselves.
This thesis has explored the construction of the literary hijra through historical and mythological references. The extent to which these references have been drawn upon in order to utilise the hijras as a narrative device has been surprising, given the wealth of associations which have been brought forward and shown to be utilised by the literary authors to construct their characters. After much reflection and analysis moving through the various historical periods, the deviance attributed to the hijras has been unpacked to show that it does in fact draw from the specifics of the historical and mythological material; it is the ways in which these associations are negatively inscribed and layered on to one another which constructs literary hijras as scapegoats for gendered and social deviance.

Examining the way that different historical associations are reworked to produce the hijra character has shown that authors utilise this figure in ways which are useful to their narratives but damaging to the image of the hijra in the social imaginary. Whilst historical accuracy was by no means expected in analysing the fiction, the fact that hijras have a rich historical and mythical presence led me to begin this analysis expecting to find a mixture of positive and negative uses of this material. Instead, hijras consistently act as the central figure of otherness enabling the authors to hold together complex, sensationalised narratives and bring together groups of characters who are outside of the social norm. Through this process, hijras become depositories of deviance, consistently associated with naturalised marginality, anti-sociality and hypersexuality.

As such, this thesis has engaged productively with and made an original contribution to three socio-political discussions. Firstly, it can be beneficial in understanding the impact of imperialism and colonisation (both Mughal and British) on the present day hijra community, through its attentiveness to varied constructions of third-gender subjects in the relevant historical periods and their continuing legacies. Both these aspects and, predominantly, the literary analyses which have drawn from and gone beyond these historical references, can
contribute to a more developed understanding of the social position and treatment of hijras, understanding which acts as a necessary precursor to addressing their continued marginalisation and the stigma attached to their communities. This second contribution is particularly valuable given its timeliness, in the context of continuing debates around and potential legal reforms addressing hijras’ rights. Thirdly, on a more theoretical level, this thesis develops understandings of thirdness as a wider conceptual and socio-political concept, by following through a sustained analysis of a particular inhabited third-gender category and demonstrating the ways that historical, political and social shifts have impacted on its public understandings. As such, this thesis has a role to play in developing gender theory and queer theory. By bringing into the discussion both a lived category and its imaginative reinterpretations, this argument has demonstrated not just that the two are mutually constituted, but (through the reinterpretation of older material to create an entirely different image of the hijras in more recent depictions) that gender construction is a subjective, politically-dependent project which can reverse the associations of history not by forgetting them, but by rewriting them.

Chapter one demonstrated that these attachments are contrary to hijras’ positions in Hinduism by firstly examining their representations in sacred mythology. In these stories, hijras are sacred beings who represent self-sacrifice, religious dedication and cosmic unity, and who are rewarded with powers which they use to perform socially beneficial roles for the greater public good. The contrast between this image of the hijras and that put forward in literary texts is demonstrative of the way that literary hijras are produced as negatively-inscribed constructions. Many of the texts either elide or drastically minimise the hijras’ sacred connections. Those which do bring these stories into the foreground were seen to use them to attest to hijras’ marginality, either as forgotten people or as public jokes, or else to focus on their power to curse rather than bless, depicting them as terrifying, threatening figures.

With their Hindu associations turned against them or relegated to the margins of the narratives, hijras in literature are then fleshed out through other associations. Chapter two began the work of analysing the connections made
between hijras and eunuchs, which was continued in chapter three. The key ideas utilised by the authors in relation to this period were of slavery, associated with eunuchs but here extended to hijras, and sexual practices, insofar as eunuchs in the harems fulfilled a role as the guardians of sexual boundaries and purity. In their literary reworkings, both of these associations are negatively inscribed. Strikingly, the association of both eunuchs and hijras with asexuality is reversed to become hypersexuality, with characters both being marked as hypersexual themselves and using their position to prostitute others, arrange for illicit encounters under the radar of their masters, facilitate sexual violence or being cast as pawns in others’ sexualised plots.

Whilst this reversal of associations around sexuality is explicit, even sensationalised, the trope of slavery is used in somewhat more complex ways. The potential for an enslaved individual to benefit from the socio-political networks available to them, including teacher-disciple structures which carried an element of duty for both participants, are reworked into manipulative attempts at self-gain in Delhi: A Novel. In The Impressionist and Habibi, slavery is combined with hypersexuality as part of the use of hijra/eunuch and slave identities as narrative devices facilitating developmental processes. By temporarily taking on these identities, the characters of Pran and Zam are taken from being young boys with anti-social sexual tendencies or, in Zam’s case, deep-rooted anxieties around sexuality and sexual propriety, and moulded into heteronormative, socially acceptable and acceptedly masculine figures. In this reading, the hijra identity is seen as a space outside of normative sexuality in which one can reflect upon and develop one’s own identity before re-entering the mainstream. As such, it is a useful narrative device which both highlights the characters’ sexual abnormality for the reader (through the need for such a drastic intervention) and allows them to become self-aware. As a representation of hijras, however, it reduces them to just such a narrative device and underlines their supposed otherness. It also enables the hijras being ultimately discarded as an identity in a move which fundamentally prioritises heteronormative masculinity and holds it up as substantially preferable.
In chapter three, this reading of sexual and gendered otherness as anti-social and demonstrative of abnormality was seen fundamentally to underpin the British administration’s social engineering project in India. The criminalisation of the hijras was constructed in such a way as to depict non-heteronormativity as deviant, potentially dangerous for the general populous, and ‘contrary to the order of nature’, intertwining it with numerous other forms of anti-sociality through its being connected with sexual violence (through the broader remit of S.377) and inherent, generalised criminality (in the stipulations of the CTA). The aim of this project was to relegate sexual and gendered otherness, and specifically hijras, to the social margins, with hopes of ultimately eradicating the community entirely. Whilst in practice eradication has evidently not been the result, marginality and a construction of hijras as sub-social and potential threats has evidently found its way into the literature at hand (and, as chapter four demonstrated, into the wider social imaginary).

The literary analysis of chapter three demonstrated this by focusing on three key aspects of hijras’ depictions: their association with underhand political plots (both as hijras and as eunuchs, and often featuring a strong element of sexual violence to further associate their lack of political suitability with apparent sexual barbarity); their being a constant danger to children, which is widened to include not just those who they wish to castrate but also others, such as those they wish to abuse for their own political purposes (Pran), those they wish to use as slaves (Zam) and girl children (Alice Aldwell’s children); and, stemming from their relegation from public spaces as a result of colonial interventions, a skewed perception of hijras’ protective secrecy as naturalized anti-sociality and aggression towards those outside of their communities. The by-product of all three associations is to naturalize the image of the hijras that was produced by the British administration, not just reiterating the stereotypes presented of them but intertwining them in ways which heighten the threatening otherness they are made to represent. In the process, the amalgamation of hijras with eunuchs (using the worst associations attached to each) constructs characters who are overburdened with negative attributes, ultimately becoming symbols of generic deviance who will do anything to anyone to get their own way.
Overburdening then became a key feature continuing into chapter four. Socio-politically, by the contemporary period decades of criminalisation under S377 and a lack of redress for the damage done by their inclusion in the CTA had established the hijras as marginal, poverty-stricken communities. As a result, they were forced to turn to begging, sex work and increasingly aggressive demands for money from binary-gendered citizens. These attempts at self-preservation served to reiterate and extend the idea that hijras were deplorable criminals and further curtail their associations with sacred asexuality, instead positing them as prostitutes. Yet this is not to say that their prior, more positive, associations have been entirely forgotten. Many people do still believe in the powers of the hijras and see them as an integral part of religious ceremonies and celebrations associated with fertility. Simultaneously, where they do engage in criminal or undesirable activities, some of the general public, alongside academics and NGOs, recognise this as the self-protective and economic necessity that it is, seeing the hijras as the victims of structural inequality rather than people who opt for this life. The result is a complex scenario which is encapsulated both in the ambivalence shown to them in the legal back-and-forth over S377 and the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill (2014), and in their contemporary literary portrayals.

It was seen, in the first part of the literary analysis of chapter four, that the overburdening of the hijras as a conceptual category manifests, once again, in its most negative dimensions. Whilst there is an element of pity built in to some of the hijra characters’ stories, such as Dimple (who was sold to a brothel) and Sami (who was murdered whilst trying to discover her parentage), both these characters and others are made to represent all that is non-normative. In effect, they become dumping grounds for excessive, multiple forms of otherness. Because they are not heteronormative they come to represent sexual otherness in all its forms and are therefore cast as hypersexual. Because they are associated with the social margins, they are cast as criminals, drug addicts and prostitutes, encapsulating a broad but scathing view of what social marginality can mean. Lastly, because they are associated with communities of other marginal figures through the widespread belief that hijras only live in groups of their own kind, they become in literature
central figures around which other misfits and social outcasts orbit and to which they gravitate.

Looking forwards into the future, issues then arise for authors wanting to create and shape hijra characters. The image of modern India which the authors strive to create replaces the image of a land seething with exciting, exotic otherness with one of a potential global superpower, a technological hub and a place increasingly becoming a part of globalised capitalist networks. Given that the hijras are so deeply invested as characters with the prior image, acting as both depositories and hubs for orientalised, sensationalised otherness, and given that their function in the narrative is to facilitate plotlines which bring out this exotic strangeness, it becomes impossible for the vast majority of authors to imagine a place for them in New India. As a result, literary hijras are either killed off or otherwise disposed of, through plotlines such as exile or the reconciliation of the individual with their heteronormative, masculine identity. Having been more attentive throughout to the structural inequalities which give a misguided image of the hijras, Arundhati Roy’s novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not so dependent on an unsustainably negative and sensationalised image of its hijras, and so is able to be the only text whose hijra characters are still present in its closing pages. However, given that (as outlined above) this ambivalence about the future role of hijras is not exclusively a literary construction, but is reflective of their fraught legal and social positioning, even this text must ultimately hang a question mark over the idea of hijras continuing as a community in the face of a shifting social landscape.

The format of this thesis has been to divide the chapters to consider each historical period discreetly; however, as has been seen in returning to texts multiple times, the content of the chapters’ analyses and in the overview given above, the material considered has drawn on various historical periods and selectively utilised attributes from each to build up the overall image of the hijras which has been constructed. Ultimately, I argue, hijras are overwhelmingly utilised as figures of deviance, negatively inflected and with otherness naturalized into their characterisations rather than being attentive to the structural inequalities which have led to their marginality. The texts consistently draw on and,
importantly, merge elements associated with hijras from throughout history to build up their characters as hyperbolic figures layered with otherness, using the variety of associations to create an image of them as timeless figures of otherness in all its forms. Bringing in such a boundless character facilitates plotlines and holds together disparate groups of characters which are sensational, thrilling in their exploration of the underworld, and ultimately orientalising portrayals of exciting deviance. Whilst these storylines have the potential to capture a readership, they also reiterate and cement the marginal, negative public image of the hijras in the process. Literary hijras often emerge as plot devices, even when their characters are fleshed out, designed to provide a space to explore the anti-social rather than balanced characters in their own right.

Throughout this thesis I have taken care to distinguish between literary hijras, the construction of which has been the focus of analysis, and hijras as they appear in the socio-historical record. The latter has been drawn on as a means of understanding the references used by the authors of literary texts, but time and again it has become evident that these references metamorphose in the process to fulfil particular narrative purposes. As such, I do not offer a conclusion here on the reality of lived experiences for hijras in their daily lives. However, the attention paid to the social landscape which circulates around understandings of who the hijras are and for what they stand has led to a greater insight into the way they are being considered in current socio-political discourses, which ultimately once again draw on politicians’ and the public’s understandings of hijras rather than intimate knowledge of their lived existence.

The current ambivalence encapsulated in the legal processes ongoing around hijra rights is demonstrative of their overburdening in the social imaginary, whilst simultaneously testifying to the fact that, unlike their representation in the vast majority of the literature examined here, the public view of them is not exclusively negative. That is to say, if they truly were considered to be the criminals, monsters and sexually violent predators that they are depicted as, then the legal decisions being made would most likely have been resolved against them. Instead, what is being seen is a fierce debate being waged both within political spheres, in which the Delhi high court made a judgment which was
overruled by parliament, who look set to be effectively overruled by a constitutional review bench, and in the wider public arena, between pro-rights campaigners on the one hand and religious traditionalists on the other.

I attribute this ambivalence not only to varied discreet opinions about the hijras, but specifically to their overburdening as symbols also. Hijras are simultaneously being read as sacred, age-old elements of Hinduism, as an affront to religious ideas of family and sexual purity and as symptomatic of Westernisation (when they are brought in under the rubric of LGBTQ rights campaigns) which many believe is a threat to traditional Indian values, making it almost impossible for the government—particularly the current, Hindu nationalist government—to staunchly decide either for or against them without causing outrage from some quarters.

Similarly, as public officials attempt to position India as a major player on the global stage, questions have arisen around whether hijras are indeed a part of a globalised LGBTQ narrative (and therefore their rights must be guaranteed for India to claim this position without facing condemnation from other states) or whether, as Arundhati Roy seems to suggest, defining them thus risks subsuming their specific identities as third-gendered under a reductive reading of gender alterity as meaning transgender, exclusively.

On a more local level, accepting them into the social mainstream by facilitating their access to legal rights, official recognition and the opportunities that come with it (such as access to education and employment) can either be constructed as an abhorrent move which accepts criminality and extortion, drawing on their negative public image, or as rectifying the damage done by a society which, in depicting them this way, has relegated them to the margins and forced them to find niches for themselves in these activities. It is both too soon, given the ongoing nature of the legal debates, and beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a firm conclusion on how these questions will be decided; my argument is that the hijras have been caught up in public cognitive dissonance which allows them to be all these things and more. Ultimately, deciding on their legal rights is not a question of opposing opinions, but of simultaneous contradictory opinions,
and this explains why there have been constant delays and adjustments rather than clear cut decisions.

One crucial way of interrupting this cycle would be to prioritise hijras’ self-understandings over the complex and often contradictory image of them constructed by the wider public. Whilst hijras do not, of course, unanimously understand their identities in a singular way, listening to their voices and taking on board the needs they argue are most fundamental to their quality of life would break through the tendency to reduce them to symbols and thereby offer a way of bringing the debate back to the level of human rights and dignity. Whilst this work can only be done by hijras themselves, supported by facilitators who can enable platforms for their voices to be heard, one avenue for future work to support these radically marginalised voices would be to turn the attention from analysing fictional literature written by non-hijras to analysing work produced by hijras reflecting on their own experiences. Such a project would claim cultural space for the hijras in broadening the reach of these voices, contributing to eroding their marginalisation, as well as offering a clear contrast to their symbolic depiction in fictional texts. Hijra autobiographies have proliferated in recent years and are ripe for such an analysis.275

Due to the linguistic limitations of the author and the specifics of its remit as a PhD thesis, this analysis has focused solely on anglophone literary depictions of hijras. A second method of developing a more attentive, politically salient picture of the way hijras are understood as a public category would be to examine representations of hijras produced in Indian languages. A localised analysis such as this would likely bring up somewhat different conclusions and would certainly have more on-the-ground applicability to debates around whether, and in what form, hijras should be incorporated into the social mainstream. Such a project would, I argue, need to be undertaken alongside the former, which would draw on hijras’ self-writing; an attempt to truly apply the outcomes of work such as this to

the political environment of lived reality would be seriously compromised if it did not take into account hijras' own experiences within that framework.
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