The Emergence of a New Genre: Examining Identity, Culture, and Community in Hijra Life Writing Texts

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Abstract

In this thesis, I seek to examine how hijras represent themselves, their culture, and their communities in works of stylistically innovative life writing texts. I focus my analysis on *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxmi Tripathi (2016), *Our Lives, Our Words* by A. Revathi (2020), and *Myself, Mona Ahmed* by Mona Ahmed (2001). I frame my research as an examination of hijra life writing as an emerging genre, and I choose these texts as examples from the genre because they complicate questions of authorship (because they are all to varying extent collaboratively authored), and style and form (they all structure their life stories uniquely, and use unusual forms to do so, using photography, epistolary form, and stories from traditional Hindu myth and legend to help tell their life stories).

Although the primary texts are stylistically different, they all share common themes with their authors dedicating large sections of their writing to discussion of five key topics, which will form the basis of my thesis chapters. The first chapter draws on the related themes of identity, culture, and literary form and style, and I discuss how these ideas interplay and create the basis for both the life writing texts themselves, and my thesis. Chapter Two's focus is violence, and I look at how the authors represent gender-based violence against hijras as both an interpersonal and systemic issue. The focus for Chapter Three is family and kinship bonds, and I analyse the authors' representation of biological family relationships, as well as the kinship they find within hijra communities. In Chapter Four I look at dance in the life writing texts, which is represented by the authors as both an employment opportunity, and a joyful cultural practice. The final chapter examines how the authors write about the spaces they inhabit, looking to both their physical surroundings, and the conceptual and psychological space they occupy in the mind of the Indian public.

Reading these texts in this way allows for a nuanced and complicated understanding of how hijra authors present their lives, and breaks free of the burden of literary depictions and representations in sociological studies. This aforementioned literature often frames hijras solely as the victims of aggressive political policies (such as under the British Raj) or as perpetrators of violence and criminality (as many sensationalist novels frame them as) which have been at the forefront of scholarship about hijras for many decades. By writing their own narratives, hijra authors are able to take agency of their own stories and lives, often with surprising, joyful, and complex results.

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all my friends in Cornwall and Cardiff. Starting this project during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 could have been a particularly lonely experience (not least because I chose to pursue PhD study as a "distance learning" option for the first year or so, because of the pandemic, but also because this type of sustained, personal research lends itself well to isolation). You made sure that I was surrounded by love and joy, despite the physical distance between us.

Lily Clayton and Lucy Isherwood have provided humour and comfort in challenging circumstances, and have allowed me to have some semblance of work/PhD-life balance despite the odds. They have been patient in the face of my complaints and have encouraged me to set boundaries to those who would prefer me not to have them. In many ways they have kept me sane and grounded. To my sister, Sarah, for providing solidarity and comedy in emotionally taxing times, and allowing me to return the favour.

To my wonderful partner, Dan, who has supported and encouraged me throughout this process. I could not have completed this project without your love, kindness, and proof-reading skills. The fact that I am the one pursuing a PhD, when you are infinitely more intelligent, interesting, and talented than me is still a surprise. And last but certainly not least thanks to my dog, Olive, who will never read this but may well chew up a printed copy of this thesis. Thank you for your warmth and love, and your capacity to destabilise anthropocentric family structures.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Introduction

Beyond the Trope: Rethinking Hijra Stories

In 2022, Geentanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* was the first novel written in Hindi to win the International Booker Prize. The novel begins, "A tale tells itself. It can be complete, but also incomplete, the way all tales are. This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself" (Shree 11). One way that Shree utilises the theme of women and borders is through her character, Rosie. Rosie is a hijra,[1] a gender identity which crosses the border between male and female, simultaneously inhabiting both genders and neither, and is its own identity which is specific and unique to the Indian subcontinent, being deeply embedded in the history and culture of the region. Shree's novel is one of few novels featuring a hijra protagonist which has found great success in both India and the English-speaking West, selling 30,000 copies in Britain and 85,000 copies in India (split amongst the English and Hindi versions) (Alter n.p.).

In 2018, coincidentally when Shree published the original Hindi text of *Tomb of Sand*, entitled रेत समाधि (*Ret Samadhi*) in Hindi, I also wrote my Master's dissertation, *India's Third Gender: Exploring Queer Identity, Liminal Space and Sex Work in India's Post-Colonial Hijra Communities*. My Master's degree was in English Literary Studies, with an emphasis on World and Postcolonial Cultures, and while I had an interest in non-fiction works, I focussed largely on works of fiction for this project. This Master's thesis was a study which compared the representations of real-life hijras in both autobiographical and biographical texts (including some of the authors whose works I explore in this thesis), with fictional representations in popular Indian texts. Whilst this was a worthwhile and rewarding project, which allowed me to investigate how hijras are perceived in popular fiction and its readership, the research I did also revealed that, to date, there had not been, and still has not been, any in-depth study of life writing works by hijras.

While there is a range of fiction focussing of hijra protagonists (Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2021), Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Anosh Irani's *The Parcel* (2016) and Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), to name a few popular novels) and academic scholarship purporting to 'uncover' the lives of hijras, far less of the existing scholarship has investigated the genre of life writing and autobiography, which can ostensibly reveal intimate and previously undisclosed information

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[1] Please see p.18 for a more detailed definition and description of hijra identity.

about hijras' individual lives and their cultural and communal traditions from their own perspectives and from within their own communities. To me, this seems a particularly egregious omission. Although many scholars lament the poor material conditions and unfair societal judgements which affect hijras (I discuss these works of scholarship throughout this introduction), few look towards hijras themselves to understand how these conditions affect them and to understand what changes hijras themselves would like to see.

Whilst there are very few academic sources which analyse and examine hijra life writing using a wide-ranging (analysing multiple texts) and in-depth approach (using a close-reading methodology), there are some articles which discuss particular hijra life writing texts. For example, Corrêa de Oliveira Ramos' 2018 paper, "The Voice of an Indian Trans Woman: A Hijra Autobiography" looks at Revathi's second life writing text, *The Truth about Me* (2010), and explores how the act of writing one's life story might provide a sense of agency in an otherwise powerless life, as Ramos perceives it. Atanu Samanta's 2017 article, "Gender Discrimination in A. Revathi's Autobiography", also looks to the same text for inspiration and discusses "gender colonisation" in India (Samanta 220). Tanupriya's "Redefined Families and Subsystems: Reading Kinship and Hierarchical Structures in Select Hijra Autobiographies" looks to the same text, as well as Vidya's *I Am Vidya* (2014) to investigate gharana structures.[2] Pratishi Hazarika also looked to Vidya's and Revathi's text in "The Quest to Reclaim the Lost Status of Hijra in India" (2012) and examines the "systemic disempowerment of hijras and their elimination from the narrative of the nation" (Pratishi 230). In 2014, Gillian Dooley and Gayathri Prabhu wrote "Writing a Life between Gender Lines: Conversations with A. Revathi about her Autobiography" which was largely an interview with the author. Finally, Rovel Sequira's "Show and Tell: Life History and Hijra Activism in India" (2022) which mentions Revathi's second text, as well as Laxmi's *Me*

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[2] The gharana (household) is where many hijras live and work, and many think of their gharana peers as family members, calling their gurus (leaders) "mother", their guru's guru "grandmother", and their fellow chelas (disciples or followers) "sister". Although typically the feminine form of "chela" is "cheli", the authors all use the masculine form of the word. This aligns with a seemingly wider use of both masculine and feminine language about themselves and their peers, e.g. Mona sometimes uses the English word "brothers" to refer to her gharana peers. From the Hindi word "ghar" meaning house, the term "gharana" is often used in Hindustani music circles to mean a group of musicians or dancers who perform the same type of music or dance. Hijras use the term to mean household or community.

Hijra, Me Laxmi (2015), looks to the changing political climate in which these texts were able to be written and released.

Although these are valuable sources which have begun to look at the importance of hijras' own voices, few have looked at hijra life writing as a genre, or have used these texts as their main focus. They explore hijra life writing as a source of insight into LGBTQ+ and hijra activism, gender discrimination, or the political climate in India, rather than studying these texts as literary works of merit which champion hijras' own voices. Instead, in my own thesis, I centre the authors' voices in order to understand what they draw importance to, often through affective or emotional language (and I discuss the importance of this later in this introduction). I also frame hijra life writing as an emerging genre in its own right, asking what the texts have in common, and how this might act as a blueprint for understanding the genre as it grows and expands.

My thesis seeks to examine and analyse how hijras represent themselves, their culture, and their communities in works of stylistically innovative life writing texts. I focus on *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxmi Tripathi (2016), *Our Lives, Our Words* by A. Revathi (2020), and *Myself, Mona Ahmed* by Mona Ahmed (2001).[3] These texts are stylistically varied, with Mona Ahmed's text being composed largely of photographs of Mona,[4] her daughter, and their gharana, taken by her friend Dayanita Singh; Revathi's text is structured around a selection of interviews with different hijras co-habiting in a gharana; and Laxmi's is a more typical autobiography in its straightforward, mostly linear, structure and style, but with the tone of a celebrity tell-all. My primary texts are stylistically different but they all share common themes, and all dedicate large sections of their writing to discussing five key topics, which will form the basis of my thesis chapters. The first chapter, "Identity, Experience, and Literary Form", draws on the related themes of identity, culture, and literary form and style, and I discuss how these ideas interplay and create the basis for both the life writing texts themselves, and my thesis. The second of these themes is violence – "Violence and the Everyday: Gendered Violence and Creating Agency through Writing", the third theme is family and kinship bonds, - "Inside the Hijra Gharana: Queering the Family Unit and

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[3] Please see p. 23 for a more detailed description of the texts and their authors.

[4] I refer to Mona Ahmed by her first name throughout this thesis to avoid referring to her by her dead name, Ahmed, which she took as a last name after changing her first name to align with her gender identity. The other authors are known by, and self-styled as, just one name. Therefore, I refer to the main authors/editors as "Mona", "Laxmi", and "Revathi".

Kinship Bonds in Hijra Life Writing Texts" - the fourth is dance, which is both framed by the authors as an employment opportunity, and as a joyful cultural practice in "Dance, Musicality, and Movement: Creating Connection and Finding Joy in Hijra Life Writing Texts". The final theme is how the authors write about the spaces they inhabit, both their physical surroundings, and the space they occupy in the mind of the Indian public, which I explore in "Life on the Thresholds: Reconstructing Liminal Spaces".

The Shape and Scope of This Thesis: Rationale and Research Questions

Hijra life writing is not simply a form of autobiographical writing about (and authored by) hijra protagonists, but they are also texts produced within a society which treats hijra individuals and communities in a particular way: at once structurally marginalised and delegitimised, while being hallowed as demigods, which I detail further later in this introduction. In this thesis, I analyse how the material circumstances of living in modern Indian society are represented by hijra authors in their personal life narratives. However, I also ask how these particular texts have come into being: who were they authored by, what stylistic forms do the authors use to better tell their stories, whom published them, how have the authors accessed the publishing industry, and what market conditions contextualise and change hijra life writing as a contemporary literary genre?

My three primary case studies are all life writing texts which are collaboratively authored: the subject writes alongside one or more contributors, which allows the subject's more marginalised voice to be heard, while being somewhat tempered by more 'legitimate' voices – for example, cis people, celebrities, 'serious' artists and authors, or less controversial members of the LGBTQ+ community (i.e. voices from outside hijra communities representing the mainstream target readership). This collaborative nature of the texts forms a key point about hijra life writing as an emerging genre: it seems to me that these marginalised voices can only be heard through working with more legitimate authors, at least for now. The three texts I focus on also employ stylistically interesting and unique literary forms, which I theorise as their "collage aesthetic". Using these inventive forms is a way for the authors to tell their stories in a unique and personal way, despite the expectations and constraints of "autobiography" as a genre, which I discuss further on in this chapter.

Whilst it is difficult to understand hijra life writing as a genre of its own in the current moment because there are so few life writing texts authored by hijras, I use these texts as a foundation for what the genre may become in the future. Currently, hijra texts are not representative of the majority of hijras because the communities by and large do not have

access to the publishing industry (these social and economic barriers are something I delve into further, later on in this chapter), and unless publishers go out of their way to champion marginalised voices, this will continue to be the case. However, the authors of my case studies can and do tell us about the communities and cultures they are, or have been, a part of *and* how their relative privilege does not protect them from the very real threats that hang over hijra communities, such as gender-based, class, caste, and sexual minority violence.

I use a decolonising methodology throughout my thesis, and chose the topics for each of my chapters accordingly; namely, I write on themes and topics which the authors themselves give thematic or affective weight to, and explicitly name as important elements of their lives. While many sociological studies focus solely on the hardships and social injustices hijras face (which are, of course, important), this can add an element of privilege-based saviourism and voyeurism. However, by looking at the authors' lives through their own words and on their own terms, we find a complex and irresolute intersection between social injustices and violence, *as well as* joy, community, *and* the mundanity and normality of everyday hijra lives. I move away from privileging academic sources over literary sources to provide these insights, and although these are used, I go to the texts *first* to create my commentary and analysis, and these scholarly texts *second* only to aid my understanding of cultural specificities and complicate my analysis, not to frame the authors of these academic texts as experts. I position hijra authors as the experts of their own lives, cultures, and communities. In my work, some of my key aims are to begin to formulate a framework for conceptualising what the hijra life writing genre is, and to articulate what the authors say about their own lives and how they choose to say it.

My thesis is split into five main chapters where I analyse various themes which the texts have in common, and in these chapters I look to the authors themselves to see what topics and experiences seem most important to them; which topics do they linger on, and which do they use emotive or affective language about? In my first chapter, "Identity, Experience, and Literary Form", I discuss the fundamental themes of the texts, and the literary forms the authors craft in order to tell their stories. In this chapter, I ask how authors' gender identities, and experiences of these, are reflected in the non-traditional forms they use to tell their life stories. I call upon literary and queer theory which states that often gender non-conforming, or queer, authors find freedom in using non-traditional forms which do not centre maleness, legibility, coherence, and rationality (which are the basis of many traditional autobiographical works and a convention of writing the self which began in the Enlightenment period in Western Europe) (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 2–3). I

also ask why these particular texts are valuable in analysing and comparing works of hijra life writing, and what experiences the authors have which make these texts useful in understanding questions of identity: what paths have they taken in their lives, and how have these contributed to their understandings of their own queerness? I also ask how translation and writing in non-native languages affect their ability to convey ideas about identity and gender precisely and with cultural specify.

In my second chapter, "Everyday Violence: Gendered Violence and Creating Agency through Writing", I investigate the complex and multiple violences the authors face due to their hijra identity. This gendered violence is perhaps the most well-documented part of hijra life in other academic studies, with many studies detailing the physical consequences of such violence, as in, for example Salman Rushdie's, "The Half-Woman God" in *AIDS Sutra: Untold Stories from India* (2015) and Amit Kumar Singh's "From Colonial Castaways to Current Tribulation: Tragedy of Indian Hijras" (2022). In my own work, due to the personal and intimate framing of the life writing genre, I focus on the hijras' emotional responses to these attacks. I also analyse the diction, style, and tone of the authors' writing, with their descriptions of these violent events varying hugely. I ask how physical, sexual, and emotional violence from their families and peers during childhood impacts their current outlook, and whether those past violences are mirrored in their adult lives. I also ask how violence enacted by society (the government and the judicial system, as well as historical nation-wide violences like Partition) are felt materially in the authors' lives, today. Looking to hijras specifically to understand such structural violence is invaluable in understanding the layered and compounding effects that these multiple types of violence can have on a community which has been marginalised for so long.

In some ways, my third chapter, "Inside the Hijra Gharana: Queering the Family Unit and Kinship Bonds in Hijra Life Writing Texts", shows how the authors are able to navigate violence and suffering through kinship bonding. I will examine the kinship ties which are highlighted in hijra life witing texts. These take on various forms, such as biological family ties (often with parents and siblings), gharana family networks, as well as the hijras' relationships with their (adopted) children. Guru-chela (mother-daughter/leader-disciple) relationships, within the wider family setting of the hijra gharana, are one of the most

frequently referenced facets of hijra life in the existing research.[5] I ask how the cultural confines of the gharana affect the authors' understanding of mothering and whether more traditional understandings of mother-daughter relationships can exist within the gharana, how gharana relationships are complicated by the economic underpinnings of the discipleship system, and whether loving family connections can be sustained in these environments. I also ask how relationships between humans and non-humans are characterised in hijra life writing texts, and how these relationships 'queer' typical understandings of kinship bonds and family units. Finally, I look at the ways the authors portray both romantic relationships and biological family relationships, and particularly the ways in which gender norms are depicted: how do the authors understand their relationships within (or contrary to) the heteronormative romantic and familial norms and expectations of Indian society?

My fourth chapter, "Dance, Musicality, and Movement: Creating Connection and Finding Joy in Hijra Life Writing Texts", examines how dance in particular creates and strengthens these kinship bonds, as well as providing joyful embodiment within hijra communities. This question of joyful embodiment serves to counter both common stories of queer dysphoria and goes some way in finding balance between this chapter and Chapter Two which includes stories of the authors experiencing both physical and psychological violence, and instead looks to the hijras affirming their hijra identity through and with the body. I explore how traditional hijra identity and culture – particularly relating to gharana relationships – is deeply intertwined with musicality, performance, and dance, and I ask how the authors identities as hijras are established through dance and ritualised movement. I also ask how their femininity is expressed through the body and dance. Finally, I ask how dance is characterised by the authors' ability to express joy and excitement through the body.

In my final chapter, "Life on the Thresholds: Reconstructing Liminal Spaces", following on from the discussion about crossing boundaries in performance spaces, I will consider the spaces (both physical and spiritual) – such as gharanas and graveyards – that the authors inhabit in their texts. These living spaces can often be characterised as liminal borderlands. They are both invisible and hyper-visible by virtue of being known as hijra

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[5] See Jessica Hinchy's *Enslaved Childhoods in Eighteenth-Century Awadh* (2015) and Samadrita Kuiti's "'Mother-Warriors': Queer Motherhood as Resistance in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" (2020).

gharanas, and are almost untouchable spaces, treated similarly to Dalit[6] homes by wider society. By theorising gharanas and graveyards (which Mona lives in) as heterotopic spaces, I will explore how people and communities who are considered 'other' are relegated to live in these liminal spaces, but are conversely also allowed to live more freely when they are not being perceived and regulated by heteronormative society. In this chapter, I ask if the authors feel that the spaces they inhabit are safe, and if they are spaces where their cultural histories can be insulted from heteronormative violence. I also ask whether the hijras' involvement in the sex work industry further marginalises them, and how this impacts the spaces they inhabit.

Throughout this thesis, and especially in Chapter Two (which is largely concerned with how violence is represented in the texts), I make clear that I do not aim to frame these authors' works or lives themselves as being concerned solely or primarily with violence. I frame my research as significantly different from previous studies, which are often only concerned with how and why hijras are the victims of violence, and make clear that the authors themselves often frame violence as just one part of their lives, which are otherwise filled with joy, opportunity, and love.

However, my decision to make my second chapter about violence seems in some ways to signal that violence is at the centre of the texts, and of my research. My choice to order the chapters in this way was two-fold. Firstly, as my thesis is in conversation with other academic research, in which violence is an important and common theme, I felt that this theme needed to be addressed early in the thesis: to show my knowledge of the existing research field, to situate my work within this field, and also to clearly show both the similarities and differences between my approach and my academic colleagues approach: for whilst many existing studies focus only or primarily on violence, I frame this within a much wider network of experiences and emotions which are discussed by the authors. Secondly, during my earlier drafts of the thesis, I framed much of this chapter around the authors' responses to this violence as being one of experiencing long-lasting trauma. This chapter on violence and trauma directly followed on from discussions around fragmented literary form, collage, and using these literary devices as methods of expressing and telling trauma.

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[6] A person belonging to the lowest caste, also commonly termed "untouchable". See "Emergence of Hijra Life-Writing Genres: What Makes a Hijra Life Story?" on p. 28 for a more detailed discussion of Dalit life.

However, as my research and writing developed, I chose not to pursue this line of research. Because I felt it was important to let the texts lead my analysis and research, and the authors themselves did not portray the events as traumatic (using this specific language), and did not describe themselves as suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder, or and other trauma-related health issues, I felt that my use of this terminology was inappropriate. I also did not wish to pathologize or medicalise their experiences, especially as someone with no specific medical or psychology training, and particularly when the authors have not consented to this.

I also want to note here that while readers of this thesis might question the position of Chapter Five, as the subject of space (both physical and as my understanding of it through a more theoretical lens) could potentially be useful as a framing chapter at the beginning of the thesis to discuss, amongst other things, where hijras and their gharanas might be physically located. However, I felt strongly that this chapter was an important way to end the thesis: it both followed on logically from Chapter Four which discusses dance as an art form which takes up spaces and encourages hijra and non-hijra individuals to share space, but also because it ends the thesis by encouraging the reader to think about futurity and potentiality. Encouraging my reader to look to the future is important to me: to understand what my primary texts say about hijra life and how the realities of living in India as a hijra might be improved in the future.

The Political and Social Environment in Modern India: My Project in This Context
Within the law and legal frameworks in India, hijras are located at a particular juncture within both gender recognition and sexuality recognition. Laws protecting and, in turn, criminalising the wider LGBTQ+ community have had a complex history in India. Perhaps most famous are the colonial British laws which criminalised particularly hijra culture, and queer culture more broadly. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 criminalised various groups of people, including nomadic tribes living in India, as well as hijras.[7] This Act allowed local

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[7] The CTA was rooted in caste discrimination, with lawmakers believing that social and biological determinism was the cause of crime, and therefore targeted the castes that were deemed most at risk for criminality. Nomadism was thought to be a considerable risk factor because it inferred landlessness, and therefore poverty, which would lead to petty crimes like thievery. However, other groups, such as hijras were also seen as likely criminals because of their secretive practices and cultural practices which swayed from the "norm" of Indian

governments and the police to register and surveil hijras, as well as fine and imprison them for appearing in female dress in public, or dancing and playing music in public. They were sometimes also accused of kidnapping and castrating children (K.S. Radhakrishnan 12). The British Colonial Government also criminalised all sexual acts which were not heterosexual penetrative or reproductive sex (including anal and oral sex, as these were considered 'unnatural') in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) (1860). Although this Section seems to be aimed largely at gay men, transgender people and hijras were also targeted. For example, in the case of "Queen Empress vs. Khairati" (1884) of the Allahabad High Court, a hijra was arrested and prosecuted for being a "habitual sodomite" (K.S. Radhakrishnan 13).[8]

In modern India, the journey to decriminalise sodomy has been a complex one. In 1994, the anti-sodomy law of Section 377 of the IPC was challenged, and was repealed after two further decades. In 2009, the Delhi High Court ruled that Section 377 was unconstitutional, and decriminalised sodomy between two consenting adults (Puri 101).[9] However, in 2013, the Supreme Court recriminalised sodomy, stating that the Delhi High Court had been lacking justification for its decriminalisation, and determined that the original Section 377 was *not* discriminatory against the LGBTQ+ community, as it applies to all Indian citizens (Puri 139). However, in part because of the immense criticism this ruling received, in 2018, the Supreme Court reassessed this decision and ruled that all non-penile-vaginal sexual acts among consenting adults were legal (Rai and Kipgen 7). Despite this being a huge step forward for LGBTQ+ rights in India, it did not specifically give rights and protections for any gender non-conforming people.

Alongside this battle to end anti-sodomy laws in India, a parallel petition was formed in 2012 by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) to establish rights for the transgender community. The NALSA petition "sought to create a third gender […] for hijras

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society. For a more in-depth discussion of the CTA, please look to Jessica Hinchy's excellent book *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, C.1850– 1900* (2019), and her following article "Gender, Family, and the Policing of the 'Criminal Tribes' in Nineteenth-Century North India" (2020) for a concise overview.

[8]Although the hijra in question is not named as such, the case notes state, "The man in question is not a eunuch in the literal sense […] he was found singing dressed as a woman among the women" (K.S. Radhakrishnan 13).

[9] See Jyoti Puri's excellent book, *Sexual states: Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India* (2016) for a full history of these complex legal battles.

and other transgender persons, and to provide specific legal remedies with regard to marriage, adoption, and access to socioeconomic opportunities" (Rai and Kipgen 8). These rights had previously been difficult to navigate for gender non-conforming people, as their official documentation would only show the gender they had been assigned at birth, which affected their ability to gain access to things like voting rights, property ownership, and marriage (Rai and Kipgen 8). In 2014, the judgement by the Supreme Court of India (the NALSA act) declared a legal "third gender", which confirmed their rights under the constitution of India, allowing them to marry, divorce, and adopt children, amongst other rights granted to other citizens. The ruling also gave trans people the right to legally self-identify as female, male, or third gender without having had gender-affirming surgery, and also granted admission to education and employment due to their low socio-economic position (K.S. Radhakrishnan).

Although the 2014 NALSA ruling and the 2018 Supreme Court ruling go a long way in countering anti-LGBTQ+ colonial laws and affording protections and rights to the LGBTQ+ community in India, and particularly to trans people, the NALSA ruling has come under criticism for erasing India-specific gender non-conforming identities in favour of more Western identity categories like "trans", "non-binary", and "third gender". Furthermore, the ruling itself was both unspecific and narrow in scope in its use of the terms 'transgender' and "third gender". In the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment's (MSJE) "Report of the Expert Committee on the Issues Relating to Transgender Persons", Justice Sikri stated, "we make it clear at the outset that when we discuss about the question of conferring distinct identity, we are restrictive in our meaning which has to be given to [transgender] community i.e. hijra etc., as explained above" (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 111). Justice Sikri, then, seemed to suggest that any use of the word "transgender" applies to hijras (and seemingly only hijras, and his use of "etc" does nothing to clarify whom he means). In their article, "Contradictory Tendencies" (2014), Aniruddha Dutta states that this sort of language from judges ruling in these cases, "has bolstered reductive interpretations of the judgment that leave out other trans or gender variant groups such as trans masculine people" (Dutta 231). As I discuss below, there is a huge breadth of traditional, pre-colonial gender non-conforming identities in India, and these identities are also left out of the ruling because of the language used by contemporary judges; at best rulings like these are ambiguous, and at worst they erase and ignore a plethora of gender non-conforming people and communities.

The relationship between the government - who at the time of writing is run by the right-wing Hindutva Bharatuya Janata Party (BJP), who won their third election in 2024 - and gender non-conforming people, as well as the wider LGBTQ+ community, is a complex one.

The BJP has faced increasing critiques of pinkwashing or rainbow-washing, whereby LGB(TQIA+) rights and protections are used as examples of liberalism, often to disguise or justify a country's failings in other areas or their otherwise conservative leanings, which I discuss further in Chapter Five, "Life on the Thresholds: Reconstructing Liminal Spaces". Often these so-called rights or protections do little to actually help those in the LGBTQIA+ community, and are more about the promotion of the country's standing on the global stage, and particularly how it is perceived in the West.[10] So, while India's government is looking towards the future, using liberal policies towards the LGBT community to (at least in part) help India's standing in the West, traditional pre-colonial gender identities are not necessarily included in that.

Perhaps somewhat conversely, it seems that hijras have received less recognition and representation in the mainstream Indian media than gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. In their article "Gender Nonconformance in Nonconformance in Non-Western Contexts", Saatvika Rai and Josephine Kipgen state that "the politics of sexuality became visible in public spaces with the introduction of private cable television in the 1990s. In 1996, *Fire*, the first Hindi film that dealt largely with a lesbian relationship was released" (Rai and Kipgen 16). Although this film was controversial at the time, it paved the way for further film and television centring gay and lesbian relationships, which are now considered far less controversial. Conversely, hijras and other gender nonconforming people have been hugely underrepresented in film and television. Rai and Kipgen state that when there are hijra characters in Bollywood films, they are a misrepresentation of hijra identity and culture, stating that "the on-screen portrayals of [h]ijras in Indian cinema have usually come in the form of providing comic relief or invoking terror in the minds of the lead cast and large audience" (Rai and Kipgen 17).

In this context, where hijras are typically being used as political pawns in the Hindutva political narrative and where, despite recognition in the law, their material living

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[10] Although India is increasingly referenced in literature surrounding this phenomenon, the term has been largely used about Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership. Netanyahu has consistently presented Israel as a gay-friendly country in direct opposition to Palestine. Sa'ed Atshan, author of "Global Solidarity and the Politics of Pinkwashing" (2020) states that Israel uses this juxtaposition between the two countries' attitudes and policies on LGB(TQIA+) issues to "highlight the superior humanity of the former and the subhumanity of the latter, who deserve to be dominated" (Atshan 72).

conditions are largely unchanged, and many continue to be impoverished, it is important that we listen to hijras themselves to understand their lives, their communities, their cultures, and the changes they want to see. Therefore, I choose to investigate life writing texts to understand these questions. Using my three case studies, it is interesting to see that all of the authors are, or have been, involved in political activism in some sense – whether in trying to shape law and policy, as Laxmi has done by being a witness and giving a statement in the NALSA hearing, or on a grassroots community level as Mona does by setting up a school for children to study the Qur'an. The authors are all from different castes, and classes, and religious and geographic backgrounds, and therefore provide a diverse range of opinions as to how political policy and the law affects hijras at different points of the social spectrum. Perhaps most useful is the comparison between the relative fame of Laxmi (and how this privilege protects her from the worst elements of the lived realities of many hijras, such as impoverished living conditions) and the material living conditions of Mona and Revathi's contributors. Particularly in Revathi's edited collection, we see many of the contributors living in abject poverty with unstable housing conditions and few legitimate opportunities for employment. In this sense, we can gauge the disenfranchisement many of these hijras feel, and understand that policy and law does not go far enough in protecting society's most vulnerable.

Who Are Hijras?: Mapping Gender Non-Conforming Identities in India

Typically, hijras have been understood as gender non-conforming people in the Indian subcontinent who have been assigned male at birth but who identify as either female, as neither female nor male, or as both.[11] The term "hijra" is used primarily in India, but also in other areas of South Asia, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Rai and Kipgen 1). Commonly, they live together in shared households, called gharanas, and are initiated into discipleship relationships with more senior figures in the household, called gurus, which I will explain and analyse in detail in my later chapter, "Queering the Family Unit: Inside Hijra Gharanas". Their economic activities usually fall into three categories: "manti (or basti), that is to say, begging; bad[h]ai, [blessing] the marriage celebration; and pun, the selling of sex" (The Half-Woman God 111). Many hijras, as well as in common lore,

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[11] Hijras typically would not use the term non-binary, which is more common in the West.

see their cultural origins in the story of Lord Ram, told in the *Ramayana*.[12] The story goes like this:

> Lord Rama […] was leaving for the forest upon being banished from the kingdom for 14 years, turns around to his followers and asks all the "men and women" to return to the city. Among his followers, the hijras alone do not feel bound by this direction and decide to stay with him. Impressed with their devotion, Rama sanctions them the power to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like childbirth and marriage, and also at inaugural functions which, it is believed set the stage for the custom of *badhai* in which hijras sing, dance and confer blessings.[13] (K.S. Radhakrishnan 14)

This story both indicates clearly that hijras' gender identity does not fall into either binary category, as they are neither "men [nor] women", but also that that their community (through their community's ancestors) has been blessed by Rama (an embodiment of Vishnu), and therefore their community has been legitimised through a godly figure. This story is often referenced by hijras (for example in Laxmi's first autobiographical text, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015)) and plays a key role in tracing hijras' role in ancient Indian society, as well as understanding how this role is historicised and defined today. However, there is no official definition for what makes a hijra, and although these are some of the traits, qualities, and behaviours which help signify the hijra gender identity and positionality, there are many hijras who do not align themselves with wider society's ideas about their identity. As Rai and Kipgen state, "Hijras cannot be described simply in biological and sexual or gender terms and must be understood through a broader sociocultural lens comprising the formal and informal institutional structures that are inherent in the [South Asian] context" (Rai and Kipgen 1).

There is also no clear, universally agreed boundary between hijras and other queer identities in India, and terms to describe gender identity are sometimes used interchangeably. Whereas these terms are interchangeably used to refer to the same marginalised queer communities in South Asia, especially prior to the recent circulation of the term

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[12] The Ramayana is an ancient Sanskrit text which, in part, tells the life story of King Ram.

[13] The Hindi word "badhai" literally translates as "congratulations" in English. Hijras perform dances and bless a newly married couple or newborn baby at these ceremonies. Within the context of writing about hijras, these performances are known as badhai.

"transgender", they have unique regional and mythological associations, as Jennifer Ung Loh discusses in her 2014 article "Relations that Give us the Strength to Live". There are also differences in their choice to live either within or outside of the biological family home, as Pushpesh Kumar analyses in "Desire, Violence and 'Pink Money': Life of Kothis in a Small City of Western India" (2018), in which she discusses both kothi and hijra identity. Furthermore, the most important element of these identities is an individual's ability to self-identify as any (or more than one) of these terms, rather than outsiders being able to "identify" or label members of the gender non-conforming community. I discuss the intricacies of these identities further below.

The term "kinnar" is sometimes used instead of hijra (in Hindi) but is also used to mean intersex people. Meanwhile, "kothi" is used to mean a feminine gay man (while their more typically masculine partners are called panthis), and is sometimes used to refer to male sex workers. Although some sources do not see hijras and kothis as two distinct groups, most do, with kothis most often being positioned as gender non-conforming or gender-fluid men. However, in Kira Hall's 2005 article, "Intertextual Sexuality: Parodies of Class, Identity, and Desire in Liminal Delhi", she describes how the kothis in her study would copy hijras' dress, behaviours, and language in order to fraudulently attend birth and wedding celebrations to earn money. Although this is a small group, and cannot be seen as representative of all kothis, this overlap between the communities' cultures is important to bear in mind as it demonstrates how complex and intertwined these identities are, as well as how they differ not just between communities, but also from person to person.

These traditional terms for gender non-conforming people are also region- and language-specific, with the above terms being most commonly used by Hindi-speaking populations, while terms like "aravani" and "thirunangai" are used instead of "hijra" and "trans woman" in the Tamil language (Ung Loh n.p.). The terms "jogti" and "jogta" are used to describe trans women who dedicate their lives to working in temples, and often specifically do not identify as hijras. Similarly, Shiv-shakthis are trans women in Andhra Pradesh who consider themselves wives of various gods, but particularly Shiva (Kumar 82).[14]

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[14] In Indian myth and Hindu religion, Shiva appears as a god who swaps their gender – "Each of the great gods, Vishnu and Shiva, is transformed into a female in a famous cycle of myths […]. Indeed, serial transformation, which in a sense appears to be horizontal, first one sex and then another, is really vertical: it is an attempt to recover a lost possibility, to express an ambiguity that is present from the start, revealed when it seems to be transformed" (Doniger,

The boundaries between these gender identities, as with any identity, are not clear-cut and yet they are subtly distinct. Whilst there are these traditional, India-specific terms for a variety of forms of gender non-conformity, many gender non-conforming people also use terms popularised in the West, such as "trans" and "non-binary". In her 2018 article, Shraddha Chatterjee writes that the term "transgender" started to become more commonplace in India in the 2000s, when foreign nongovernmental organisations began to provide HIV/AIDS care to LGBTQ+ communities in India, bringing their language and terminology with them. Chatterjee states, "What globalization has also been linked to, with respect to queer activism in India, is the production of a taxonomy of terms […] which has been seen as becoming consolidated into identity […] the politics of transnational funding gave birth to newer terms and produced new categories of subjects whose sexuality and gender began to be mapped in altered ways" (Shraddha Chatterjee 312). Chatterjee even discusses kothi identities, and sees this term as emerging around the same time to describe men who were more effeminate, and as having helped to define identities and typical roles in some gay relationships.

In my primary texts, the authors themselves do not necessarily identify as just one of these identities. For example, throughout *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi refers to herself as both as a woman and as a hijra. In her statement in the NALSA hearing, she referred to herself both as a hijra and as a transgender person (K.S. Radhakrishnan 3). She also does not follow many of the norms of hijra culture: she does not live in a gharana, she does not perform at badhais, and she does not use begging or sex work as a mode of employment. Mona Ahmed refers to herself only as a hijra but uses language that places her and her gharana peers as more 'between genders' in comparison Laxmi, as she uses both male and female pronouns for everyone else in her hijra gharana and herself, but exclusively calls herself a "mother" rather than any male relation to her daughter. Like Laxmi, she too leaves her gharana and

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Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India 260). In some myths, he also castrates himself (Doniger, "God's Body, or, The Lingam Made Flesh: Conflicts over the Representation of the Sexual Body of the Hindu God Shiva" 495), and joins forces with another god, Shakti, to become Ardhanarishvara, the half-woman God who is, "[half] male, the other [half] female, and [who] represents the coming together of Shiva and Shakti, the forces of Being and Doing, the fire and the heat, in the body of the third, double-gendered deity" (Rushdie 105). In these various ways, Shiva represents gender non-conformity and is therefore an important deity to many gender non-conforming Indians.

subsequently lives alone. Revathi's contributors represent varied lives: by turns they refer to themselves as hijras, aravanis (the Tamil terms for hijra), and women, and they alternatively live in gharanas, with their parents, or with romantic partners.

In this way, these texts serve to emphasise that gender identity and hijra culture is not unambiguous, and that people can inhabit multiple gender identities or positionalities simultaneously, despite so much scholarship emphasising the distinctiveness of the hijra gender category compared to other gender identities. The texts also demonstrate that assigning people's gender identities based on particular characteristics (for example, that hijras live in gharana communities) is also not necessarily an appropriate way to think about individuals' gender identities. The authors all provide different insights and understandings of different ways of being a hijra, and conceptions of gender. This type of knowledge is why I feel it is so important to recognise how people self-identify and why I put so much emphasis on listening to and exploring the distinctive literary vocabularies of the authors themselves. Often the authors' views and opinions directly challenge scholarly and popular understandings about who hijras are and how they live, and their life writing texts can provide a wealth of information which can clarify, as well as complicate, the existing knowledge and framings of hijra life and identity.

Primary Texts: Who are the Authors?

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (often self-styled as simply Laxmi), the most well-known and influential of the authors, is a hijra activist who does public talks, including TED talks in 2017 and 2018, as well as a dancer, actress, and a recognised presence on social media. She is most well known for winning the popular Indian reality television program, *Bigg Boss*, in 2011. In her activist work, perhaps her most impactful effort was her involvement in the NALSA ruling of 2014, where she provided testimony about the discrimination she has faced throughout her life due to her gender identity (K.S. Radhakrishnan 7). However, Laxmi has also faced criticism from the LGBTQ+ and hijra communities in India for her right-wing, Hindutva political views and alliances. She has also faced accusations of anti-Islamic rhetoric due to her support for the controversial building of a Hindu temple on the site of a demolished mosque, which is allegedly the site of Lord Ram's birth.[15] Laxmi has written two

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[15] The mosque, Babri Masjid, was demolished in 1992 by the Hindutva group Vishva Hindu Parishad and resulted in the death of 2000-3000 people. The construction of the new Hindu

life writing texts, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) and *Red Lipstick: The Men in my Life* (2017). Whilst the two texts do not focus on distinct themes or parts of Laxmi's life, her first book largely concentrates more on her journey towards becoming an activist and prominent figure in the LGBTQ+ community in India, whilst her second book looks at her personal relationships, mostly with men, and how her gender identity has affected them.

I have chosen to focus on *Red Lipstick*, not only because it is less well known, and therefore rarely analysed in studies on hijra writing, but also because Laxmi's storytelling takes on a more experimental quality. For example, the structure of the text is unusual, with different sections being thematically arranged around various characters (real or not) in her life, rather than following the more typical Bildungsroman-esque structure of her first book. The section titles take inspiration from varied sources. For example, some are named after gods, with the first chapter titled "The Creator" (referring to Brahma or Agni, the second chapter is titled "The Preserver" (Vishnu) and the fifth chapter is titled "The Destroyer" (Shiva). However, Laxmi also takes inspiration from pop culture, for example, chapter six is titled "The Love Monologue" which is subtitled with a quote from Alanis Morissette's "Uninvited", which reads "Like any hot-blooded woman / I have simply wanted an object to crave" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 176). Chapter Six: "Manthan: The Churning of Laxmi" seems to be a reference to the 1976 film *Manthan* which is the first Indian crowd funded film. The other two chapters are named after (and written from the perspectives of) people in Laxmi's life. Chapter Four is called "Raju's Monologue" and is written from Laxmi's perspective but from the view of her male alter ego. Chapter Three is written by Laxmi's friend, Prince Manvendra, and is entitled "Prince Manvendra's Monologue: Laxmi, My Sister". Because these chapters' themes – pop culture, religion, and personal perspectives and relationships – appear to be randomly ordered throughout the book, the structure of the book seems particularly unusual.

Revathi is also a celebrated hijra activist from Tamil Nadu. After moving from her native Tamil Nadu to Bangalore, Revathi began working at an NGO called Sangama, an LGBT rights and HIV prevention group which works particularly with lower caste and class sex workers to provide education and healthcare. She now works as the director of the organisation. Aside from working as an activist, Revathi has also appeared in the Tamil film *Thenavattu* (2008) and the Malayalam film *Antharam* (2022). Revathi's first autobiographical

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temple was funded by the current Indian government and the Hidutva political party, the Bharatiya Janana Party.

text is considered to be the first hijra life writing text to be published in India,[16] and Revathi herself credits the text as the frontrunner of the genre (Mayanth n.p.). This book, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), which is more typically autobiographical, formed the basis for one of the chapters of my Master's thesis in 2019, and charts her move from being the victim of anti-hijra bullying in her youth to being a pioneer of LGBTQ+ activism.

Revathi's text *Our Lives, Our Words* (2011), originally published in Tamil as *Unarvum Uruvamum,* is a collection of stories from other hijras, with an autobiographical introduction about her own life. Revathi interviews sixteen other hijras about their lives and then orders them thematically in chapters about, for example, their upbringing, their families, and their involvement with activism. Revathi, an insider in hijra communities, is able to gather these stories which are orally communicated to her. By grouping the stories thematically, she conveys to the reader the common oppressions and difficulties many hijras face, and acts as a conduit for these hijras to tell and disseminate their stories. However, in essence, Revathi is not the author of a life writing text, but rather acts as an editor for these hijras.

Mona Ahmed is perhaps the least well-known of all the authors, having never published another text and not rising to national fame, although achieving somewhat of a local celebrity status in Old Delhi, where she lived until her death in 2017 at the age of 81. Mona was approached by the celebrated artist, Dayanita Singh, after Singh was given the undertaking of photographing a group of local hijras by a newspaper editor from *The London Times*. Singh eventually befriended Mona: a rare and unlikely friendship between a wealthy upper-caste photographer who frequently works and lives abroad and a poor hijra whose living situation becomes more precarious as their friendship continues. Although considered a local celebrity by many, Mona never wrote or contributed to another book, and lived in a graveyard for the last two decades of her life, during and after the publication of her life writing text.

The text, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) follows her life from 1991 when she lives in a gharana with a group of other hijras and her adopted daughter, Ayesha, to 2000 when Mona has been evicted from the gharana, has had her daughter taken away by her hijra guru, and

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[16] Many popular sources cite this text as the first hijra life writing text – see Gayathri and Dooley (2014), Ramos (2018), Samanta (2017). However, as I state in this thesis, Mona Ahmed's *Myself Mona Ahmed*, which was published in 2001, is arguably the first hijra life writing text (although it takes a more unusual form).

now resides in a graveyard. The text is largely made up of Singh's photographs of Mona in which she performs for the camera in varying states of feigned candidness, with Mona adding captions – which often provide a contrasting narrative to the one which is shown in the photograph. Mona's emails to the book's publisher, Mr Walter, are also included in the book and provide meandering stream-of-consciousness narratives. Also relevant to discussing the authors' identities are their geographical and linguistic backgrounds, as I will discuss later, in Chapter One.[17]

Complexities of Authorship: Complicating "Autobiography"

Something that all my primary texts have in common is their shared, and somewhat ambiguous, authorship. This might initially be surprising, as I have framed these texts as somewhat autobiographical (although I prefer to use the term "life writing"). Whilst the texts do tell the life stories of their (main) authors, all of the texts are also authored by at least one other person, whose life story is not contained in the main narrative.

For example, *Myself Mona Ahmed* is authored by both Mona Ahmed and her friend and photographer, Dayanita Singh. While the work is presented as the life of Mona Ahmed, and it seems the process of deciding how to take the photographs, as well as which photographs to use was collaborative, Singh herself suggests that it was unlikely that Mona would have been able to have her self-authored life story published without having Singh as her co-author. Singh tells us in her introduction that this project, and her friendship with Mona, began as an assignment commissioned by *The London Times* to take photographs of Indian hijras to accompany a newspaper article covering the same topic. Singh describes the project as part of a wider trend in the media coverage depicting India as "either exotic or a disaster" with stories about "eunuchs[18] […] prostitution, child labour, dowry deaths, and child marriage" (Singh and Ahmed 9) compounding and further developing these stereotypes about

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[17] See p.49 for further detail.

[18] In Mughal courts, hijras (or eunuchs, as they were then referred to) often served as the protector of the courtly harem or zenana (a part of the household exclusively for women). Although not hijras in a cultural or gendered sense of the term, many scholars see these eunuchs as a starting point for the development of hijra culture and gender identity. The term eunuch continued throughout the colonial period to refer to hijras, and is still occasionally used today. I avoid using this term as it implicitly infers an identity which is created only through castration.

India in the Western psyche. Although this project was never completed, one would perhaps ask why Singh agreed to work on the project, and why she continued to pursue Mona as a subject for her photography after this project came to a close. Singh states that these photographs of Mona were taken "off and on, with no intention of ever publishing [them]" (Singh and Ahmed 16), however, as a photographer, Singh's creative, stylistic and curatorial influence is still evident throughout the book. Singh also frames the book as Mona's project, in which she presents herself to the world and is able to tell her story on her own terms. Singh tells us that when she approached Mona about a publisher who wanted to tell Mona's story – it is unclear whether Singh pitched this project to the publisher before approaching Mona - she believed that the book would be a written biography (authored by someone interviewing Mona) but consequently "realized that [Singh had] probably underestimated her and that she could tell her own story, weaving together fact and fiction" (Singh and Ahmed 16). However, although Mona has chosen which photographs to include in the book, and has authored the written sections, it seems clear that Singh had a defined artistic vision for her photographs of Mona which often did not include the posed, performative photographs Mona liked. It is also clear from some of Singh's comments, made in the aftermath of the book's publication, that she sees herself, at least partially, as the book's author or the co-teller of Mona's story. That the project only came about after Singh's involvement with a national newspaper, and perhaps due to her connections in the publishing world, both because of this and because of her relative fame, is indicative of the fact that Mona would otherwise not have been able to publish her life story; it is Dayanita Singh who was able to remove the barriers of social exclusion which surrounded Mona, and that stood between her and becoming the published author of an autobiographical text.

In Revathi's text, though she is credited as the author but in the text, she writes very little about her own life, and does so exclusively in the introduction. Revathi interviews sixteen other hijras about their lives and then orders them thematically in chapters about, for example, their upbringing, their families, and their involvement with activism. Revathi, an insider in hijra communities, is able to gather these stories which are orally communicated to her. By grouping the stories thematically, she is able to convey to the reader the common oppressions and difficulties many hijras face, and acts as a conduit for these hijras to tell and disseminate their stories. However, in essence, Revathi is not the author of a life writing text, but rather acts as an editor, curator and translator of a series of hijra life stories. However, it is likely only through Revathi's already established connections in the publishing industry

(through writing and publishing her own life narrative a few years previously) that these hijras are able to have their stories published.

In Laxmi's text, her friend, Prince Mandrevendra Singh Gohil of Rajpipla, the first openly gay member of India's royalty, also writes a chapter. The text could be categorised as a collaborative or collective autobiography, with the chapter written by Prince Mandrevendra serving to authenticate Laxmi's stories about their relationship, whilst also providing a commentary on his own life and the differences between his experience as an upper-caste, upper-class gay man and Laxmi's experience as an upper-caste, middle-class hijra. His chapter also provides a fascinating subversion of traditional hagliological forms of life writing in which regular people tell, or mythologise, stories of leaders, kings and saints. Instead, the Prince - a member of royalty - tells us about Laxmi's life as a hijra. Not only does the Prince write a chapter of the book, it is also stated that the text was co-authored by Pooja Pande. Pande is a writer and editor, who had a book published before working with Laxmi on this book. Although Laxmi is the most famous of any hijra author, both her collaboration with an already published author and editor, as well as an upper-caste, upper-class Prince who is also known in the West from having been on both *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, will have served to make her book more attractive to both publishing houses and potential readers alike.

In establishing the unexpected, shared authorship of these stories, the texts and their respective authors are subverting something about both autobiography and the act of storytelling. Whilst it is difficult to know how much collaboration there was in each individual case, it seems that in each of these instances the co-authors (Dayanita Singh, Revathi and her hijra storytellers, and Prince Manvendra) seem to provide both access to the publishing industry, and a sense of legitimacy to their readers. One is a famous photographer who caters largely to an elite audience and who can afford to attend galleries and purchase art; one is an already published author; and one is a member of the nobility: all 'trustworthy' in the eyes of an audience predisposed to distrust and have misgivings about the hijra community.

Life Writing and Autobiography: Contexts and Definitions of the Genre

While the broad definition of autobiography is simply a nonfictional account of someone's life written by the person themself, the historical context of autobiography makes the term a contentious one. In their book, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith state that in the West, different forms of

self-referential writing have existed since at least Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions,* dated to approximately 397-400 AD. However, it was in the Enlightenment period of the late eighteenth century that the term autobiography began to take on its contemporary definition, stylistic features, and socio-political significance as a genre. Smith and Watson state: "Autobiography […] became the term for a particular generic practice that emerged in the Enlightenment and subsequently became definitive for life writing in the West" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 2). Smith and Watson critique the use of "autobiography" to describe all self life writing due to its association with the Western canonisation largely of upper-class male writers:

> Early twentieth-century theorists installed this master narrative of "the sovereign self" as an institution of literature and culture, and identified a canon of representative self life writings. Implicit in this canonization, however, is the assumption that many other kinds of life writings produced at the same time have lesser value and were not "true" autobiography—the slave narrative, narratives of women's domestic lives, coming-of-age and travel narratives, among others. (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 3)

I therefore use the term life writing, both as an umbrella term for various autobiographical subgenres, but also because the term signifies a step away from the Eurocentric and often elitist term "autobiography", whose "politics is one of exclusion" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 3). I discuss later how Dalit life writing was also an inspiration for using this term. Smith and Watson also state that Western autobiography of this kind prioritises legibility and coherence, which is not the aim of many other authors, such as the authors of my primary texts. This theme of legibility and coherence in life writing, and particularly in my primary texts, is one which I will return to predominantly in my chapters "Identity, Experience, and Literary Form" and "Everyday Violence: Gendered Violence and Creating Agency through Writing". Whilst a certain level of coherence is necessary for any reader to understand a text, non-Indian and non-hijra readers should be mindful when reading these texts that some level of illegibility might simply mean that they are not the intended readership for these texts. Demanding legibility and coherence from these authors is akin to imposing one's own world view on the authors. Hijras have been notoriously private and wary of letting strangers into gharanas and have developed their own language (hijra Farsi

and their clapping system)[19] to purposefully disguise and themselves from outsiders. In this vein, a non-hijra reader should not expect full clarity when reading these texts, as hijras have typically not aspired to being legible in their behaviours, language, or writing beyond their own close-knit community, often for their own safety.

In India, the concept of autobiography is also entangled with a sense of privilege, with chiefly, if not exclusively, the British ruling classes, or upper-caste and upper-class Indian men, able to write and disseminate their life narratives. In her 2016 article, "Dialectics and Caste: Rethinking Dalit Life-Writings in the Vernacular, Comparing Dalit Narratives", Sreya Chatterjee discusses the idea of "autobiography from below" (Sreya Chatterjee 396) and its role in resisting the "dominant Anglophone and postcolonial literary and cultural modes focused on the ubiquitous middle-class citizen-subject" (Sreya Chatterjee 379). Chatterjee locates autobiography in India throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as something only accessible to Anglophone speakers and writers, be they either British colonisers in India or politically favoured upper caste Indian men. Chatterjee discusses the use of traditional indigenous art forms in Dalit literature, helping to locate the authors within their individual cultures – and obviously outside of mainstream middle and upper caste Indian cultures. She states, "Dalit […] literature owed much to earlier 'popular' forms of indigenous writing including lawani (ballads), powada (panegyric poetry), and tamasha (folk dramas) which were "not [previously] considered respectable literature" (Sreya Chatterjee 381).

Although my primary texts do not overtly use these forms of indigenous writing, the authors (and contributors) do include songs and stories from religion and myth in their storytelling, constantly reminding their readers of how these activities are intrinsic to both their lifestyles and their identity as hijras. This helps to locate them within their specific cultural spaces, just as indigenous art forms help locate Dalits in their unique cultural positionality in India's caste system. In *Our Lives*, the hijra storytellers often reference both traditional songs of their gharana and popular songs (often from Bollywood films), which both helps to locate them within the hijra culture that references Hindu myth and stories, as well as cementing their position as entertainers who make a living from singing and dancing at badhai celebrations. Throughout *Red Lipstick,* Laxmi also references Hindu myth and hijras' proximity to, and inclusion in, these traditional religious and cultural stories. In *Myself Mona Ahmed*, Mona writes about (and Singh photographs) scenes of badhai celebrations and

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[19] I discuss these languages and their linguistic features in Chapter One.

includes dance and song in these, and she also writes about hijras' place of significance in Hindu myth. All of these instances specifically pinpoint the authors' location within their hijra culture, within their communities (or ex-communities), and outside mainstream Indian society despite their inevitable entanglement and cross-over with that culture.

<u>Emergence of Hijra Life-Writing Genres: What Makes a Hijra Life Story?</u>
Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, India has seen an increase in personal non-fictions from gay and lesbian communities. For example, Aparajeeta Duttachoudhury and Rukie Hartman's 2015 *Moving Truth(s): Queer and Transgender Desi Writings on Family,* Minal Hajratwala's 2012 *Out!: Stories from the New Queer India* (published by Queer Ink India, one of India's few presses specialising in LGBTQ+ literature), and Ashwini Sukthankar's 1999 *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India.* This interest from publishers in allowing and encouraging LGBTQ+ life writing to be released suggests that a readership and a market exists for these texts in India, and potentially beyond. From the growing popularity and acceptance of this genre, hijra life writing works have also emerged, as a separate, distinct but related genre.

I also see the hijra life writing genre as building on Dalit life writing, which began to emerge as a genre in the 1960s. The term Dalit is the reclaimed name used by those outside traditional understandings of caste in Hinduism, historically being termed "Untouchables".[20] The notion of untouchability originated from the type of job a person might do. Sanitation work, butchery, and tannery are examples of jobs traditionally done by those touted as 'untouchable'. People doing these jobs have been referred to as untouchable due to the alleged polluting and unclean nature of their jobs, often becoming outcastes in their societies. Officially dubbed "Scheduled Castes" by the Indian government, Dalits have been the focus of some positive discrimination and affirmative-action policies implemented by the

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[20] The caste system is traditionally seen as having four varnas, or classes. These are Brahmin (traditionally Hindu priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (traditionally rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and landowners) and Shudras (labourers and unskilled workers). Untouchables or Dalits lie outside of the traditional caste systems and are therefore "avarna" (casteless) who are thus classified because they were seen as unclean due to the jobs they had been designated.

government, and discrimination against Dalits is also now illegal under Indian law.[21] However, anti-Dalit sentiment in India is not uncommon, and the reclamation of the term 'Dalit' by Dalits themselves has been seen as an attempt to create unity between various lower-caste groups and consolidate a political stance against the discrimination they face. James G. Lochtefield states that the popularisation of the term reflects a "growing awareness of the situation, and their greater assertiveness in demanding their legal and constitutional rights" (Lotchefield 720). Indeed, the popularisation of the term can be traced to the militant activist group the Dalit Panthers, who were active in the 1960s and 1970s (Kaminsky and Long 156).

The practice of contemporary Dalit life writing can be traced to the same period, with the genre often being seen as a form of protest literature against caste-based discrimination and oppression, and a way to spread awareness about marginalised communities' living conditions and social injustice (Satyanarayana and Tharu 21).[22] Dalit literature is now seen as part of a strong tradition of "autobiography from below" (Sreya Chatterjee 396), which I believe has given rise to an environment in which other marginalised groups, like hijras, are able to write their own life stories. However, while this recognition and popularity of life writing "from below" might play a role in publishers championing marginalised voices, as I stated earlier in this chapter, the specific authors whose work I analyse in this thesis are not marginalised in the same way as most members of their hijra communities due to their pre-existing fame and popularity.

Dalit autobiography is almost exclusively referred to as life writing, rather than the more traditional "autobiography" or "memoir", which are terms more typically associated with upper-class and upper-caste life writing. This allows for a diverse use of forms and perspectives to be sought out; whether the work is poetic, dramatic, about the individual's experience, about another member of their community, or the community as a whole, or whether the author frames the text as fictional or an act of social activism, the text still

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[21] See M. Ravidran's 2020 article "Fighting Caste Discrimination is about Changing Attitudes" for further analysis of law, positive discrimination, and attitudes towards the caste system in modern India.

[22] Other scholars see Dalit literature as originating in the 11th century with poets such as Madara Chennaiah, a cobbler or Dohara Kakkaiah, a tanner. Dalit literature from the period 1960-present is sometimes called "New Dalit Literature" or referenced as a revival. However, most references to Dalit life writing allude to the period 1960-present.

belongs to the genre of "Dalit life writing". The term also, despite being used to reclaim a way for Dalits to tell their life stories, also creates distance between Dalit writing autobiographies written by privileged upper-caste authors, and emphasises the distinct class and caste history of Dalit writing. Dalit life writing also often has a specific social justice mission whereby the authors attempt to raise awareness about the impoverished conditions many Dalits' are forced to live in. This social justice agenda might also tell us something about what the hijra authors attempt to achieve through their writing.

My own use of the umbrella term "life writing" when speaking about hijra texts is inspired by Dalits' use of the term and has several functions. First, it encompasses different genres and sub-genres of writing, allowing me to analyse a variety of texts that take on different stylistic and formal qualities, usually cutting across different genres. For example, I would categorise *Our Lives Our Words: Writing Aravani Lifestories* as a form of evocative autoethnography[23] because Revathi, an insider in hijra communities, groups together stories orally communicated to her by other hijras. By doing this, she is able to convey to the reader the common oppressions and difficulties many hijras face. Meanwhile, *Myself Mona Ahmed* is co-authored by Mona Ahmed and her friend and photographer, Dayanita Singh. While Singh's presence in the book is undeniable – she casts herself as Mona's mother figure and seems omnipresent, as we see Mona through the lens of Singh's camera on every page – yet the book is presented as Mona's story; Singh has played an editorial and curatorial role, rather than a directly storytelling one – albeit the curation and framing of her photographs tells a story and conveys a secondary interpretation of Mona's life in its own right. This book does not fit neatly into one sub-genre, subverting both expectations of genre and form, with elements of autobiography, biography, and a mix of photography, captions, and epistolary text in the form of emails from Mona to the book's publisher. Meanwhile, Laxmi's *Red Lipstick* appears more traditionally autobiographical. That is, until the chapter written by her friend, Prince Mandrevendra Singh Gohil of Rajpipla, the first openly gay member of India's royalty, as detailed earlier. Therefore, the text could be categorised as a collaborative autobiography,

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[23] This term is borrowed from Thalia M. Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan's *Critical Approaches to Life Writing in Qualitative Research*. They use this term to mean a research method which investigates cultural themes and practices done by an "insider" of the group. The word evocative is used in juxtaposition to the traditional, scientific "analytic autoethnography", meaning the research is presented in a more literary form and may not be dissimilar to a novel, or short story collection (Mulvihill and Swaminathan 53).

with the chapter written by Prince Mandrevendra serving to authenticate Laxmi's stories about their relationship, whilst also providing a commentary on his own life and the differences between his experience as an upper-caste, upper-class gay man and Laxmi's experience as an upper-caste, middle-class hijra. His chapter also provides a fascinating subversion of traditional hagiological forms of life writing in which regular people tell stories of leaders, kings and saints. Instead, the Prince - a member of a royal family - tells us about Laxmi's life as a hijra. These books all take on differing and fascinating forms but can all be discussed under the term "life writing".

Another reason the term "life writing" appeals to me is due to the difficulty in labelling a particular text as just one sub-genre. Many of these boundaries seem, to me, synthetic and somewhat arbitrary, with many texts moving freely between these categories or challenging our expectations despite their apparent conformity to a specific sub-genre; it might be limiting for me to frame them as such. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, the term "autobiography" is associated with a particular practice of life writing in the West which emerged during the Enlightenment period (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 2). It therefore necessarily has connotations of male-ness, cis-ness, straightness, whiteness, wealth, and political power. When a person is specifically writing *against* these very notions, it would be inaccurate to label their work as "autobiography".

Key Literary Terms

Above, I discussed autobiography as a genre and how this differs from life writing. When I use the term genre, and even sub-genre, I refer to the set of conventions and tropes, which informs the reader of the attributes of the story. This might be a story-telling choice by the author, or it might show that the author is taking a political stance and wants to be associated with a historical literary movement. For example, those writing in India and writing under, and being marketed as, life writing, might show that their political affiliations are socialist, or they might be political activists, as life writing is associated with Dalit life writing. In some ways, my primary texts being marketed as "hijra life writing" is somewhat misleading, as it implies that their text will have their gender identity as the underlying theme. Although this is true to an extent, as one cannot truly escape their identity when they write about themselves, the texts largely focus on their human relationships, their hobbies, and their living conditions, rather than going into any detail about their thoughts and feelings on gender. They also defy the readers' expectations of how hijras live: none except a few of Revathi's contributors live in gharanas, very few mention engaging in sex work, and only Laxmi shows the "typical"

hijra debauched humour in her writing.[24] In some ways, this is what attracted me to these particular texts: they show the authors as human beings, rather than conforming to a mould of what their readers might expect. Indeed, in Caren Kaplan's "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects" (1992), she argues that the most meaningful feminist autobiographies fight against the conformist nature of "genre". She quotes Derrida in "The Law of Genre", when she states

> As soon as the word "genre" is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: "Do", "Do not" says "genre," the word "genre," the figure, the voice, or the law of genre… Thus, as soon as a genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impunity, anomaly or monstrosity. (Derrida 56-7)

Therefore, my use of the term hijra life writing as a "genre" is not my attempt to constrict how the authors write, but rather a useful tool in grouping their works together because they share the same gender identity, and many of the life experiences associated with this.

   Aside from using the names of genres and subgenres under umbrella of life writing, I also use terms to describe the ways in which the authors tell their stories which need defining. I often use the term "form", and I use this to mean the general structure of the text. While the texts all contain prose, they use them in varying ways. *Myself Mona Ahmed* uses largely photography to show various snapshots from Mona's life, and the series of photographs are broken up by emails written by Mona lasting between one and five pages. *Our Lives* is broken up into short sections written by different contributors, in almost vignette form, whilst *Red Lipstick* has a more typical written form but is split into different sections, with their titles relating to different mythological and popular culture characters. These different forms vary how the authors' stories are digested by their readers, with the short vignettes of *Our Lives* being punchy and often shocking, especially when they feature scenes on intense

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[24] Hijras are typically known for having a bawdy sense of humour. Kira Hall's 2019 article, "Middle Class Timelines: Ethnic Humor and Sexual Modernity in Delhi", explores this in more depth. Hall states that normative society often finds hijras' lewd jokes "uncomfortable" (Hall 492) (in her study, she frames hijras as shouting these jokes from the roadside).

violence, whilst the photographic scenes in *Myself Mona Ahmed* are often able to show the whimsy of an extended dance scene through five or so photographs of the same scene. The question of form is one which I analyse in depth in my first chapter.

I use "style" to mean the linguistic and grammatical choices and idiosyncrasies of the authors' particular way of writing. Their particular style is used to evoke a particular mood or feeling. For example, the hijras in Revathi's text often tell their stories in very simple language, often mixing in Tamil terms, and using short sentences. This results in a succinct and often shocking style when the hijras describe traumatic incidents. Meanwhile, Laxmi often uses humour and witticisms which results in comic style, however this can sometimes become black humour when she makes jokes about, for example, abuse she suffered as a child. Mona also has a fairly straightforward style, but she also writes emotively, using affective and nostalgic language about her loved ones. Literary "style" in autobiography, at least in much literary theory, is also bound up in the question of how the author presents the story of their life to their reader: is there an element of self-awareness that what they write in an *interpretation* of themselves, or do they present the text as absolute fact, and an intermediary between the reader and the author's reality? While the texts I analyse in this thesis are of course *representations* of the authors and their lives, the question of them being fact or fiction is not one I dwell on; while they are interpretations and representations, this does not make the texts any less "true" to the author, and to treat them purely as historical documents whereby I question the veracity of what is said is to lessen the literary value of the texts. I also do not think it is helpful or constructive to accuse the authors of dishonesty (even in the context of their literary work), particularly in the context of how precarious hijra communities' relationship with wider society is. Whilst I do not dwell on this question, it is important to note that this is a key sector of autobiography theory.

A Word (or Feeling) on Affect in Life Writing Narratives
While affect theory has been examined by the likes of Sarah Ahmed (2004), Kathleen Stewart (2007), and Lauren Berlant (2011) who are concerned with the sociological and cultural, and by Heather Love (2007), Rachel Greenwald Smith (2015), and Stephen Ahern (2019) who look to the literary sphere, fewer scholars have looked specifically to life writing to understand how affect is used to represent authors' real lives in literature, and how they use affect as a tool to convey experience and identity.

In her 2016 article, "Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle", Suzanne Keen explains that modern life writing texts often rely on reader empathy to create a narrativity, or narrative

drive, hinging on "curiosity, surprise, and suspense" (Keen 13). Whilst reader empathy and authors' use of affective language are not the same thing, they can certainly be related, and moreover, the author themselves using affect as part of their storytelling methodology must be read by an empathetic reader in order to be understood in its entirety (or as authentically as possible). Although affect goes beyond just linguistic and literary communication with the reader and is something in excess of just the words on the page, it is also only through this contemplation of the literature and its narrative devices that affect can be expressed and understood. However, Keen writes that it is through a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between author and audience that affect is wrought because "represented emotions need real, embodied audiences in order to exist" (Keen 14). This understanding of affect being wrought through a symbiotic relationship has been key in understanding my own experience of reading these texts.

Beyond understanding affect as being reliant on the relationship between authors and reader, I utilise the terms affect and affective not merely to mean the link between emotion and physical, bodily sensation (such as sweating as a result of feeling fear), but as a more responsive and active consequence of the authors' treatment in the world. Because of hijras' gender (and cultural) identity, they are often othered, disrespected, and even abused by those belonging to wider heteronormative society. In my primary texts, we see the authors' affective responses to being mistreated and abused. My use of affect theory stems mainly from theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Clare Hemmings. Ahmed and Hemmings focus on the affective being of feminist identity, and the idea that feminists "becom[e] conscious" through "misery, rage, passion, pleasure" (Hemmings 150), often because of how they are treated as women (and often women at the intersection of race, class, age, disability, and other markers of identity).

This idea of feminist consciousness resulting from affective response is one which I lean on in my understanding of hijra affect. In my primary texts, the authors and contributors often represent their hijra consciousness being awoken as a result of treated badly by their family, schoolteachers, and others in their communities. This bad treatment often leads to the authors writing about their experiences with defiance, recklessness, and dark humour. We can see these attitudes reflected in common understandings of hijras as being bawdy, shocking, and even aggressive. For example, Farsi and the hijra clap language (which I discuss further in Chapter One) is often characterised in fiction and sociological studies as aggressive (or at least assertive) with loud claps being thought by non-hijras as being a warning or a pre-cursor to violence. However, when we look to the origins of these secretive languages, they were

borne out of the fear of arrest and incarceration under colonial rule. This feeling of fear, rather than merely resulting in an affect like sweating, has resulted in learning and action for a community: the creation of a new language to protect hijra communities from the policing eyes of heteronormative society. This language both protects hijra communities by allowing privacy (as the language is unintelligible to non-hijras), but also because it is perceived as threatening and admonitory, and so warns people away from hijra individuals and communities. This link between emotion, sensation, and action (especially as a community) is one we see throughout the life writing texts. Understanding affect as a concept which is at once intangible (emotion and consciousness), palpable (sensation), and responsive (taking action, often as a community, based on these emotions and sensations) allows us to understand hijra affect as a particular epistemology based in the particularities of experiencing the world as a hijra.

In her 2014 article, "Discarded Histories and Queer Affects", Dina Georgis looks to Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*[25] to understand how affective language can be a useful tool in communicating things which have previously been uncommunicable publicly, and often appear as an excessive overflowing of emotion. She writes, "Queerness, [appears] not as a name but as the unthought-of history or what has been cut off, overlooked, or foreclosed, [and] returns in excess of language" (Georgis 155). Georgis locates queer affect in the "forgotten loss that returns in the form of a surprise" (Georgis 160), which in her examination of *Autobiography of Red* is perverseness and abjectness, but in my texts is the self-identified celebration of a hidden culture, desire, joy, community *as well as* previously undiscussed feelings of abjection, strangeness, and violence. These feelings are written with emotion (as I state above in this chapter), but this proclivity for intense and emotional storytelling is difficult to quantify: in some senses it is my own emotional reaction to the authors' affective writing which has created this hierarchy of importance in analysing the themes of these texts.

This focus on affect in the texts is closely related to understanding the authors' interest in materiality and embodiment, which is something I draw particular attention to in Chapter Four, where I look to the authors' descriptions of their practice of dance as an embodied practice. While much of the research done on queer affect and the "affective turn" in queer literature tends to focus on negative affect – "feeling down [and] feeling backward"

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[25] *Autobiography of Red* (1999) in an unconventional, poetic recreation of the myth of Geryon and the Tenth Labor of Herakles. In Carson's recreation, Geryon is red-winged monster, a victim of sexual abuse, and has a queer love affair with Herakles.

(Liu 1) – I find that it is most productive to look to positive affect in these primary texts as these are often the most intense and frequently described by the authors, often through their frequent use of positive and joyful adjectives. Indeed, in the spaces opened by both heightened emotional language and unconventional and collage forms, the authors' hijra identities assemble themselves through the previously unspoken and unwritten. Taking agency of their own stories allows hijra identity, as it is portrayed in the texts and felt by the authors, to be fluid and personal, rather than prescriptive and enforced.

Hijras and the Body: Noting the Absence

In much legal discourse and even many academic narratives, the body of hijras often takes up a large part of defining and discussing who hijras are, and how to differentiate them from other gender non-conforming communities and individuals in India, or how they conform or do not conform to Western understandings of trans identities. However, even the law is clear in saying that hijras do not have to undergo surgery in order to be considered hijras. The 2014 NALSA ruling states, "among Hijras, there are emasculated (castrated, nirvana) men,[26] non-emasculated men (not castrated/akva/akka) and inter-sexed persons (hermaphrodites)" (K.S. Radhakrishnan 9).[27] Although the use of the term "men" here seems to be an odd one, it nonetheless shows that hijras do not have to undergo nirvan to be considered hijras.

While in this thesis I will occasionally make reference to both gender affirming surgeries (in a medicalised setting) and nirvan rituals, I only do so when the authors themselves frame these events as important and meaningful to themselves or their communities. Whether someone has undergone surgery or nirvan is largely inconsequential to whether somebody defines themselves as a hijra, although there is some discussion in the texts about some hijra communities having the nirvan ritual as a prerequisite for joining their

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[26] Nirvan or nirvana is the traditional hijra rite of castration after joining the gharana. Hijras who have undergone this process are sometime referred to as nirvana hijras. Many hijras now opt for a more medicalised gender affirming surgery, and some choose not to undergo either of these processes.

[27] The NALSA bill goes on to state, "the term "transgender", in contemporary usage, has become an umbrella term that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including but not limited to pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative transsexual people, who strongly identify with the gender opposite to their biological sex; male and female" (K.S. Radhakrishnan 10).

community. Anthropological and sociological studies of hijras and hijra culture have largely focused on the (surgically transitioned) body and the ritual of nirvan as what bonds hijras into gharana communities. These studies often choose to focus on otherness and social exclusion as the thing which ties individuals to the gharana as a necessity for safety and wellbeing.[28] However, in their autobiographical work, the authors whose work I analyse rarely write specifically about gender-affirming surgery or traditional nirvan rituals. When they do, they often choose to focus on the musical and ritualised activities that take place within the ceremony. Indeed, music and dance seem to be the foremost thing which bonds members of the gharana together, and what helps to create a specific and recognisable hijra identity. Looking at the theme of dance within the texts also allows me to look closely at the hijras' relationship with wider society in the context of their dance performances, and their audiences' reactions to and interactions with hijras and their culture.

While I do not look at nirvan rituals and surgery in great detail because these are often not discussed in significant ways by the authors, I also do not dwell upon these topics because I do not believe it is helpful in understanding the hijra community. In Kira Hall's "Intertexual Sexualities", she writes

> many hijras undergo penile and testicle castration, attributing their conspicuous
> lack of male or female genitalia to a biological determination that disallows sexual
> pleasure as well as sexual potency. Indeed, popular texts in psychology and
> journalism theorise this very lack as motivating an excessive engagement with
> foul language, interpreting hijras' use of sexual obscenity as a vocal reflex of
> physical frustration provoked by impotence. (Hall 126)

Indeed, this stereotyping of hijras as criminal and sexually frustrated (or conversely, sexually promiscuous), and this being inextricably linked with their body, is exactly the type of prejudice that I attempt to negate in this thesis.

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[28] See, for example, Serena Nanda's 2010 work "Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Story". Although Nanda's text does include broader discussions of hijra history and culture, much of her analysis and description of hijra identity hinges on gharana members having undergone nirvan.

<u>Positionality and Ethical Questions</u>

My own positionality in the context of my research is one of an outsider. I am a British woman, who is white and cis-gender, and I have little knowledge of Bhasha languages (aside from what the research for this project has taught me). And, whilst I have tried to retain a self-reflexive mindset while working on this thesis, ultimately there will be biases and prejudices which I may have inadvertently overlooked or that have in any case shaped the reading of my case studies and their contexts. My interest in postcolonial literature as a tool of resistance and struggle, as well as my trans inclusive feminism, have fuelled this research. I by no means believe my work should be the conclusive academic text on hijra life writing, and hope that many more hijra-authored texts will emerge over the coming years, as well as both academic and non-academic reviews and analyses of them. However, while academic pursuits on this topic remain scarce, I believe that it is better for me to use the relative privileges and liberties afforded to me to do this work, rather than to focus my energies on a topic which I believe to be less important, less relevant, or less meaningful than this one. I hope to show my solidarity and support, and hope that this kind of research helps direct others with an interest in these topics towards the voices of those who *are* the main authorities on this topic - hijras themselves and the gender-queer community in India more broadly.

Aside from questions about whether I am the right person to be conducting this research, the main ethical questions are around the authors' inability to contribute actively to the conversation about their own literary works, and my comments on their lives. My work is necessarily making assumptions about them and the meanings they create through their life writing texts, as is any work based in textual analysis. I had initially hoped this project would include interviews with the authors, but unfortunately, I was not able to pursue this line of research. Ultimately, the authors have published these texts for a readership to consume and analyse, which is what I have done in this thesis. I have pursued the analysis and interpretation of these texts and the research around them in good faith. Some may argue that the power dynamics at play, with a Western cis researcher using texts by gender non-conforming authors from the global South, is a warped recreation of postcolonial, academic relationships of the past. However, I hope by centring the voices of the voices of the authors themselves, I go some way in negating this assertion.

Identity, Experience, and Literary Form

In this chapter, I seek to examine how the authors of my primary texts utilise unique and inventive literary forms to tell their life stories. I consider how the authors represent their hijra identities not just in terms of *what* they say, but *how* they choose to say it. For example, in Laxmi's text we see her draw snippets from traditional Hindu myths into her storytelling, creating a puzzle for her reader to untangle: why does she choose these particular quotes and stories, and are these reflective of her understanding of hijra identity as something ancient and culturally specific? How does she use these ancient stories to legitimise hijra identity? These, as well as analyses of my other primary texts, are questions I ask throughout this chapter.

Looking to hijra life writing to understand how the authors utilise literary form, genre, and style also informs and expands how scholars have previously understood how these function in queer life writing more broadly, both within and outside of India. As I discuss in this chapter, queer life writing is often seen to be, at turns, reclamational (Kaplan (1998)), fractured (Poletti (2015)), or unintelligible to heteronormative audiences (Vipond (2019)). I discuss how and why these texts can be read through these various lenses, but also how they also help to create a new and unique genre of their own.

Part of my rationale for choosing these particular texts to analyse from the hijra life writing genre is due to their stylistic innovation. Indeed, two of the authors whose work I analyse here have written previous autobiographical texts which are less inventive in their form and style – Laxmi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) and Revathi's *The Truth about Me* (2010). Whilst in this chapter I analyse the potentialities and possibilities for storytelling and narrating a life story using innovative literary forms, one reason why the authors might have been allowed such creative freedom is due to their existing celebrity status. Because they are already well-known and lauded for their autobiographical work, they may well have been afforded more creative freedom from their editors and publishers in their later works because they are more well-established as authors and as public figures. With regards to *Myself Mona Ahmed*, although it is Mona's only written text, Dayanita Singh, her co-writer and photographer, had already published one art book (Zakir Hussain: A Photo Essay (1986)), making her an established figure in the art (and literary) world, with her status as an artist allowing flexibility in creating her texts.

As well as looking to authorial choices like literary form and style, I also consider linguistic identity in the texts. Because of the wider trends of the publishing industry in India

(which often publishes texts in the author's chosen written language and English as a secondary option (Mahale n.p.)), it is difficult to say whether the authors choose to write in English because it is the norm, or because they (or their publishers) were targeting a global audience. In this chapter, I consider both options and attempt to understand how hijra life writing texts are marketed in India. I also analyse the complex position of English as both a colonial language, a lingua franca, and a language which some see as emancipatory and full of potentialities.

Experience and the Creation of Hijra Identity in Life Writing Texts

My three primary texts, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Pooja Pande's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016), Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed's *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) and A. Revathi's edited collected *Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Lifestories* (2010), all tell the life stories of their hijra authors (Laxmi, Mona, and Revathi and her contributors). The authors do so through unconventional and varying narrative and literary forms, which I see as symbolic of both their own identities, and life experiences. In their text, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state, "while the experience represented in an autobiographical narrative seems merely personal, it is anything but that. Mediated through memory and language, 'experience' is already an interpretation of the past and our place in a culturally and historically specific present" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 31). The authors "read" and analyse their own pasts in relation to their gender and identity as hijras, especially when they look at and analyse their childhoods. Much of their discussion and retelling of childhood anecdotes relate to their gender identity and how others perceived this difference. Particularly in Revathi's edited collection, many of the hijras speak of violence and abuse, especially during their childhoods, and for many of them these were formative experiences. These violent experiences have impacted the way in which the hijras view the world, the society in which they live, how they see themselves and their relationship to their own gender identity, and indeed how they recount these experiences in their own writing.

In her seminal work, *Living a Feminist Life* (2016), Sara Ahmed discusses how the process of realising her identity as a feminist often aligns with a realisation and memory of feeling wrongness (due to being subject to misogynist violence and harassment). She writes,

Feminism often begins with intensity: you are aroused by what you come up against. You register something in the sharpness of an impression. […] Over time,

with experience, you sense that something is wrong or you have a feeling of being wronged. You sense an injustice. […] Feminism can begin with the body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around. Thing don't seem right. (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 22)

She discusses how the act of remembering these moments and processes allows a deeper understanding of the self, and the self-in-the-world. I see this description of becoming a feminist as providing an understanding of feminist affect. This sense of having an affective hijra identity is present in my primary texts through the authors' discussion and remembrance of their own pasts. This sense of feeling wrong/ed is apparent throughout my primary texts, with the authors and contributors, with them describing past experiences of fear, hurt, and anger. For example, see in Revathi's edited collection many of the hijras writing "We felt hurt. Some of us would get angry and beat our hands, or lift our up our dress[es]"[29] (Revathi 1084), "Sometimes I cried out of dismay. […] I felt hurt" (Revathi 1106), "I felt ashamed" (Revathi 209), "I couldn't express the agony I felt" (Revathi 496). These expressions of hurt, shame, and anger are all responses to being abused and harassed by members of mainstream society.

Sara Ahmed also writes about the process of connecting memories: "you allow a memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness or even clarity; you can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 22). Here, Ahmed describes the collage effect of memory, and how this collage allows for a fuller picture to be drawn despite the obvious gaps in knowledge. She later writes, "Shattering: scattering. What is shattered is so often scattered, strewn all over the place. A history that is down, heavy, is also messy, strewn. The fragments: an assembly. In pieces. Becoming army" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 186). What Ahmed conveys here is a sense of various memories of feeling wrong/ed being pieced together to form an identity, in this case of becoming a feminist. Ahmed shows how a feminist identity can be formed through a person, and specifically a woman, coming up against things, and she gives a sense

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[29] Hijras lifting up their dresses to expose their genitals is a common image in much writing about hijras. This is often done an act of rebellion and defiance, in order to shock onlookers who have insulted or wronged them (see Kira Hall's *Hijra/Hijrin: Language and Gender Identity* (Hall 34)).

of confrontation being key to forming the self more solidly, as it is pushed against by external factors. Whilst Ahmed uses the imagery of broken things to describe the memories of these confrontations ("shattering", "scattering" "fragments", "in pieces"), her argument culminates in seeing these memories come together to form "an army" or "an assembly". In other words, these disparate memories come together to form a whole life experience; an identity; a way of seeing the world and understanding the self in conjunction with the world. These poetic lines illustrate simultaneously the violence, power, and fallibility of telling a story about one's identity or life story.

In my primary texts, this sense of coming to an identity is conveyed in a similar way to Ahmed's description. The authors use fragmentary memories to collage a picture of their lives, and their journey towards realising and embracing their gender identities. Often, as described in Ahmed's text, this is realised through the feeling of being wrong/ed. As I discus in Chapter Two, "Everyday Violence", the authors recount episodes of violence they have experienced (most often as children), and they frequently cite their perceived difference as the reason for this, with either the authors themselves or the perpetrators of the violence often alluding to the authors' femininity as motivation for the violence. For example, Mona writes about her father: "[m]y father was a very angry man, and he always beat me, saying, 'Why [are you] walking just like a girl? Why are you talking like a girl?'" (Singh and Ahmed 47), Similarly, Revathi's contributor Rajam writes about her father's disappointment at her femininity: "Can't you see? Our son is behaving like a girl. We already have eight daughters. With him like this, there would be nine [...] How can we survive with a boy like him?" (Revathi 272). This abuse seems not just because the authors appear feminine but because the perpetrators see this queer femininity as wrong, in turn making the authors themselves feel both that they are wrong in being this way, becoming wronged by the perpetrators as well. When the authors push back against this wrong-doing, either in the moment or in the act of writing, they create space for themselves to exist as their true gender.

Although I frame these texts as identity-led works of life writing, categorising them primarily as *hijra* life writing texts (i.e. works written by hijras about their own lives), this is not necessarily how the authors frame their own narratives. In Laxmi's text, although her gender identity is written about extensively and informs many of her decisions and experiences, she does not frame her life story as being primarily about her hijra identity from the outset. For example, the title of her text, *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life,* does not specifically mention her hijra identity, or even allude to it. It does, however, indicate that a traditional and conventional mode of femininity will be inhabited and projected by Laxmi.

The image of "Red Lipstick" indicates both traditional femininity, and, alongside her subtitle, "The Men in My Life", an element of feminine seduction. Combined with the cover imagery, which shows a minimalistic illustration of Laxmi's recognisable face (at least to those who are already familiar with her aesthetic) with her distinctive wavy hair, nose stud, bindi, beauty mark, and red lipstick, the text is ostensibly about Laxmi's life and experience of her own femininity, and how this might relate to her romantic and sexual exploits.

Similarly, the title of Mona's text gives no indication that her gender or hijra identity will be a central theme of her life writing text. Entitled *Myself Mona Ahmed*, with no subtitle, the cover gives very little indication of what the text focuses on. The cover shows a photograph of Mona dancing (she is not immediately recognisable as a hijra), and the authorship is referenced solely as Dayanita Singh, the book's editor and the photographer who captured the portraits of Mona and her community presented in the text. This indicates that the text is largely expected to be sold to consumers as a photography book, written and photographed by a renowned photographer, rather than anyone with a particular interest in Mona specifically, or hijra life writing more generally. Although Mona is known in her local area as a hijra, she is not necessarily presented as a hijra on the cover imagery, and the title of the text also does not indicate her gender identity.

However, Revathi's text is overtly one in which the author(s) writing is led by their hijra identity, and Revathi aims to help her fellow hijras tell their stories, and specifically stories about how their hijra identity has affected them. Her text is entitled *Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Life Stories,* with "Aravani" being the Tamil word for hijra. Revathi's text coveys that stories told about hijras by hijras are significantly lacking, and therefore emphasises that this is a text which centres hijras' lives ("Our Lives"), but is also told by the hijras themselves ("Our Words"), as well as being collated, researched, and published by Revathi, who is also a hijra.

Writing with Affect: Feeling and Hijra Affect in the Texts

As part of their literary styles, the authors also employ affect as a tool to convey experience and identity. While I focus primarily on positive affect (pleasure, joy, and solidarity) in the texts, I do complicate the question of positive versus negative affect (and their positioning as absolute opposites), because both affect itself and the authors' understanding (and writing) of emotion, sensation, and action is complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory (as feelings themselves often are). I do, however, also designate a chapter to violence in the authors' lives. While acknowledging pain, unbelonging, and isolation, in this chapter I also

make space for the authors' complex feelings of simultaneous gender euphoria, joy, and love. This refusal to adhere to clarity and an acceptance of disorder, and often even of emotional turmoil, is both reflective of human emotionality itself, but also of the authors' step away from traditional (Western, Eurocentric, and Enlightenment-style) autobiography.

Although writing with affect allows the reader too to feel and sense emotion through their reading, I want to be careful about framing this as an empathic response through which a reader can somehow come to feel as their author feels, and to understand in an embodied sense exactly how the author lives and feels. In "On Good Listening, Postcritique, and Ta-Nehisi Coates' Affective Testimony", Tobia Skivern warns against "appropriation, […] blind spots, [and] projections" (Tobias 219), however, he looks to Lorrain Code (as well as postcolonial scholars like Spivak and Bhabha) to understand that "the fact that we cannot completely understand the Other should not stop us from trying […] but rather make us try harder, by paying attention, tuning in, keeping all senses open, and cultivating […] good listening" (Skivern 220). This is an idea and line of thinking which I have employed in my research, but I also believe it is important to listen to *what* the authors are saying and writing, as well as *how* they speak or write, which in this case is utilising affect in their writing to depict their hijra identities. Indeed, Skivern states that by employing *only* a formal analysis (rather than an affective one), we lose a deeper understanding of the texts: "[because] our engagements with literature are felt and visceral, and what we learn by studying literary criticism is precisely the ability to lose this viscerality, to detach ourselves from the text and achieve a critical stance of dispassionate scrutiny" (Skivern 221).

In *Our Lives*, we see that many of the hijra contributors live happy and contented lives with their husbands or partners, and the deep love and care they feel for them radiate from the pages of the text. Rajam, for example, writes at length about the kindness, care, and sincerity of her husband. She writes, "I love his character. He has amazingly good habits. He behaves with me as a husband and treats me as his wife. He has never considered me as a hijra […] We live in a rented house. We have been married for three years now" (Revathi 733). This unembellished description of their life together speaks to the satisfaction Rajam feels about her life. Although Rajam writes of her happiness, she also hints to the fact that she perhaps has complex feelings about her gender identity when she writes, "he has never considered me a hijra", almost as if being treated badly is a prerequisite for being a hijra, and that his kindness towards her is indicative of him not viewing her as a hijra. The love she has for her husband comes to the fore once more in an unusually roused section where Rajam writes about her husband being seriously ill, and fears he could die. She writes, "I was his very life;

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his very world. I wanted to hold on to him till the end. 'Oh God! Keep him safe. I will spend my lifetime at your feet!' I begged" (Revathi 747). In this section, we feel Rajam's intense pain as she cries out to God himself to save her husband, promising to prostrate herself before him if he saves Rajam's husband. Her unusual use of exclamation marks (which are very rarely used in this collection) add to this sense of passionate emotion being felt by her, and a sense that she is compelled to speak aloud to ask for safety.

In *Red Lipstick*, although Laxmi expresses love and joy (which I write about in Chapters Three and Four, in relation to her family bonds and her passion for dance), perhaps the most raw emotion she expresses is rage and vengeance. She writes about the sexual abuse she experienced as a child at the hand of a distant cousin, which I write about at length in Chapter One. Her rage at her abuser is at times expressed vengefully, "the guy who abused me is no longer alive – he died of HIV, a very painful, dreadful death; it was his karma" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 171), expressing her gladness at his pain and suffering. However, on the same page, she also articulates her belief in her own sense of agency and purpose, writing, "I can't just be a victim, I am a celebration, I feel, and that's the narrative I choose for my story" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 171).

In some senses, in *Myself Mona Ahmed* it is often easier to sense Mona's affect through Dayanita Singh's photographs. Perhaps the most impromptu affect we see from Mona is her small interactions with her young daughter, Ayesha. In Figure 1, we can see an intimate scene in which Mona and Ayesha are spending time together in Mona's bedroom in the gharana. Mona seems to be placing a dummy in Ayesha's mouth with her own mouth. The physical closeness of mother and daughter, as well as the psychological closeness of this action creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity. Mona captions this photograph "Ayesha, a part of me, my heart, my life" (Singh and Ahmed 54). Here, we understand not just a sense of physical and emotional closeness, but we understand that Mona feels an unbreakable bond with her daughter. Mona giving the dummy to her daughter with her own mouth signals a sense of Mona's willing servitude to Ayesha; Mona's sense of purpose is portrayed throughout the text as being a mother above all else. Her happiest moments are shown through providing for her daughter: offering food, throwing a party, taking her to school, giving her toys to play with, and giving her a dummy. The photographs allow us to see these

everyday moments of maternal affect, filled with love, tenderness, and willing servitude, which Mona might otherwise not have mentioned in her writing.

Figure 1. (Singh and Ahmed 54).

Linguistic Identity and Literary Form

Also relevant to discussing the authors' identities are their geographical and linguistic backgrounds. A key discussion needed when close reading my primary texts, as well as any non-Anglophone text in India,[30] is about translation and language. My authors are all from different parts of India: Laxmi is from Thane (near Mumbai), and her first language is Marathi[31] (and she also speaks Hindi); Mona is from Old Delhi, and although we are never told what languages she speaks, she often disperses Urdu words throughout her otherwise majority-English text, and her background as a Muslim Indian makes it likely that her first

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[30] Or a text from another English-speaking country. Although English is an official language in India, only around 5% of people speak and read English fluently, and these are usually people from upper-class and upper-caste backgrounds (Sadana 14).

[31] We can see her use of her native Marathi more in her debut life writing text, Me Hijra, Me Laxmi (where the titular "Me" is Marathi for "I am" (Seervai n.p.).

language, learnt through her family, is Urdu (although it is likely she also speaks Hindi due to her geographic and cultural location in Delhi). Finally, Revathi is from Tamil Nadu (and now lives in Bangalore), and primarily speaks Tamil. Whilst *Our Lives* has been translated from the Tamil, the other two texts were written in English, despite English not being the authors' first language. However, the texts still include terms that non-Hindi or non-Tamil speakers would not understand, with no English translations given.[32] Although this might be to relay the text in the way that the authors intended, as I will discuss later, it also may be a choice by the publisher. As Lawrence Venuti states in, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998), "to compensate for an implicature in the foreign text, a translator may add footnotes or incorporate the supplementary material in the body of the translation, but either choice adheres to a different maxim of quantity that addresses a different constituency: adding footnotes to the translation can narrow the […] audience to a cultural elite since footnotes are an academic convention" (Venuti 22). This understanding of footnotes as an "academic convention" might be the reason why the authors and publishers have not included translations in their British and European editions of the books. However, as I discuss next, I do not believe that a European audience was necessarily the intended target audience for these texts.

While it is possible that the authors and publishers meant for the texts to be consumed by Western, English-speaking (and English-reading) audiences, it seems unlikely that this linguistic choice was primarily made with native-English speakers (or a global audience) in mind.[33] While Revathi's text is not available in its hard copy in the United Kingdom (only as

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[32] By this, I mean that someone with no familiarity with Hindi, Tamil, and Urdu would not understand these terms without the help of translation.

[33] Although sales figures by country are not publicly available, we can see that on their respective Amazon pages, the books have no reviews from the UK, and nearly all reviews both on Amazon and Goodreads are from India. See these webpages for reference: "Dayanita Singh: Myself Mona Ahmed". *Amazon*, Nov. 2024, https://www.amazon.co.uk/Dayanita-Singh-Myself-Mona-Ahmed, "Myself Mona Ahmed". *Goodreads*, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2624562-myself-mona-ahmed, "Our Lives Our Words: Telling Aravani Life Stories". *Goodreads*, Nov. 2024, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12847865-our-lives-our-words, "Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Lifestories". *Amazon*, Nov. 2024, https://www.amazon.co.uk/Our-Lives-Words-Telling-Lifestories, "Red Lipstick: The Men in

an e-book), Laxmi's and Mona's are. However, if Mona's text is primarily marketed as a photography book written by Dayanita Singh, then its target audience is likely to be her existing customer base, made up of Indian art fans.[34] Laxmi's text is marketed as a celebrity memoir, with her celebrity status primarily known in India, and therefore most likely to be bought and read by an Indian audience. So then, if the primary audience of all of these texts is an Indian audience, why are they written in English when only 5% of the Indian population are fluent in English? Although it is not unusual for books to be published in a number of languages in India (usually Hindi and English), as Revathi's text is, it is slightly more unusual for a text to only be published in English, like Mona's and Laxmi's are. Whilst it is likely, as I stated above, that Mona's text was produced chiefly as a text meant for Dayanita Singh's existing audience, who are likely to be wealthy, upper-class, English speakers, the reason for Laxmi's is perhaps less clear. A possible reason for this is to direct her text towards the upper-class LGBTQ+ Indian community as an educational tool, whom she names as being exclusive and anti-hijra in her text, or perhaps to emphasise her own upper-class, upper-caste status. However, as Lawrence Venuti states, often publishing houses based in the West (e.g. Penguin, who published Laxmi's text, and Scalo, the Zurich-based company who published Mona's text) maintain a grip on publishing in previously colonised countries. He states, "in India and anglophone African countries, where the colonial language has been designated official or else *become the language of publishing*, transnational publishers maintain a neocolonial grip on local English-speaking minorities" (Venuti 163). Venuti states that this grip is largely maintained by distributing popular genres like action and spy novels written in English, however publishers might choose any text, like autobiographies written by native authors, to distribute in English if they believe it will be popular with English-speaking minorities.

My Life". *Goodreads*, Nov. 2024, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/31538619-red-lipstick, "Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life". *Amazon*, https://www.amazon.co.uk/Red-Lipstick-Men-My-Life/dp/0143425935. Please see "Works Cited" for full URLs.

[34] Dayanita Singh has written/created fourteen photography books, and although she has shown her photography globally, a majority of her shows and public appearances take place in India, for Indian audiences. The price of her books also makes it exclusively available for wealthier consumers to buy – *Myself Mona Ahmed* is available to buy for approximately £100 in the United Kingdom (and similar prices in India) (see above Amazon link).

Venuti goes further in his analysis of author-reader or publisher-audience relationships in translated works, and argues that the very act of translating, and how a text is translated, can provide a self-selecting audience which is therefore predetermined by their appetite for translated works. He states,

> In translating, the interpretation of the foreign text and the address to an audience are mutually determining, although in any given translation one of these determinants may outweigh the other: the projected audience may decisively shape the translator's interpretation, or the translator's interpretation may decisively define the audience. (Venuti 61)

While the only text which is translated from its original language is Revathi's, the choice of translating the text from the hijras' native Tamil into English (and not into the more widely-spoken Hindi) makes the readership self-selecting; the translator's work may also have been shaped by the publisher's intention to target native English speakers, as well as English-speaking Indian readers. While Laxmi's and Mona's works take a strictly personal tone, some parts of Revathi's text seem to strike the reader as specifically political and based in activist work. Her text has specific chapters entitled "Activism" and "Change", which discuss the contributors' work with NGOs and political activism. The text also ends with Vanitha's statement for her hopes for hijras' future wellbeing and her understanding6 that there is a difficult road ahead. She states, "This is just the beginning. We have miles to go" (Revathi 1121). Because upper-caste and -class Indians tend to be those who both speak English, and have political power, and a Western audience might be more inclined to take an interest in activist-led work, Revathi might have chosen to frame her text as one which is concerned primarily with this activist work.

The reason that the authors choose to write in English is a complex one, and one which is not explicitly written about in either existing scholarship or the books' promotional media. For Laxmi, English is seen as a signifier of social hierarchy. Although Laxmi seems comfortable with speaking and writing in English – not only has she written two books in English, but she has also given multiple speeches in English and sometimes posts on her social media accounts in English – it is not her first language, nor the language she uses in everyday life to converse with friends and family. Instead, she speaks Hindi and Marathi. Indeed, she makes clear in *Red Lipstick* that she views her knowledge of English as non-fluent, having learnt words and phrases slowly from a friend of her parents, as a child

(Narayan Tripathi and Pande 52). Besides learning English from a family friend, she also describes how one of the things which attracted her to a boy as a young teenager was his knowledge of English. She states, "the other perk of spending time with him – I picked up a lot of cool English words and phrases because Rahul was a convent school lad" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 53).[35] It is clear that, at least from younger Laxmi's perspective, knowledge of English is a status symbol; something which made Rahul, and by association Laxmi, chic and attractive. Laxmi represents speaking English as aspirational; something which she wants to know more about. This is something which is discussed in Rashmi Sadana's first chapter of her 2012 text *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*, in which she examines the ever-increasing presence of English in popular magazines, in translations of popular Indian fictions, and Indian fiction written in English. With regards to magazines aimed at young Hindi-speaking Indians, she states, "[t]he aim of editors in such a mixing of the languages [Hindi and English] was to reach 'aspirational readers'—defined as people aged eighteen to thirty-five who wanted to live their lives partly in English and be part of the consumer revolution" (Sadana 5). The "consumer revolution" relates to the aspirational nature of modern capitalism in India and elsewhere. For example, this references the buying of material possessions – associated with the colonising, consumer-focussed West – and is representative of people's desire to be economically and socially upwardly mobile. Although Laxmi does not mention a desire to change her economic status through learning English, she later presents English as a route to being accepted in elite spaces. Laxmi's penchant for the Anglo-sphere aligns with her right-wing upper-caste Hindutva politics, with members of this group also seemingly being the target-audience of her book.

Laxmi contrasts her knowledge of English with her descriptions of friends who speak fluent English. She describes meeting a member of the Humsafar Outreach programme,[36] Atharv, stating, "I was absolutely floored by his intelligence […] one of the smartest, sharpest intellectuals I know" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 23). She goes on to describe his ability to get LGBTQIA+ issues noticed and allow them to gain traction in upper-class and upper-caste circles due to his fluency in English. She writes, "[b]ecause he is well educated and can speak fluent English, Artharv can successfully hobnob with the elite" (Narayan

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[35] Convent schools in India are run by Christian missionaries, and lessons are often taught in English (Raftery 1218).

[36] The Humsafar Trust is an NGO which provides advocacy and healthcare for LGBTQ+ communities in India.

Tripathi and Pande 23). Particularly interesting is Laxmi's tendency to use quintessential English slang – such as "hobnob" - when she writes about fluent English speakers she admires, as if their ability to speak English is so essential to who they are that her language must transform to express this, or that the very memory of Artharv's fluency reawakens Laxmi's own desire for upper-class and -caste linguistic proficiency. I also wonder if this phrase signifies that Laxmi values a particular kind of English: one that is upper-class and slightly old-fashioned. Although now many young people are learning more modern iterations of the language, it is possible that in Laxmi's childhood in the 1970s, the English slang belonging to the upper castes was more reminiscent of older English slang. Mona, on the other hand, is not only aware of her non-native status as an English speaker and writer, but is proud of the authenticity of this. She writes in one of her emails to the book's editor, "[This] is the first time I am telling my story, because I know you will write it the way I want and will not add spice [to the story] to sell [copies of the book]. Also that you will not change my English to High English. It is fine like this" (Singh and Ahmed 66). Indeed, Mona sometimes writes in slightly broken English, with sentences often sounding staccato or unfinished, and she frequently uses slang terms which sound slightly unusual to British readers, for example, her use of the phrase "homo sex" (Singh and Ahmed 66) instead of "gay sex" or "homosexual sex". Although Mona is eager to have her less fluent English be apparent to readers, because she sees it as more authentic, Laxmi instead sees her relationship with speaking English as inherently tied to class and caste, and her ability to inhabit elite spaces.

In *English Heart,* Sadana discusses the viewpoint held by some Indian theorists and critics, that "bhasha writers have a more organic relationship to whichever more authentically Indian language they write in because they are part of a living and thriving society in which they may literally dip their pens before writing" (Sadana 161). I wonder if this debate becomes more problematic when we consider memoir. If 90% of Indians do not speak English, and none of the authors speak English as their first, or primary, language, how do the texts convey the authors in a way that feels authentic to them? If the reader is supposed to be reading their personal, intimate life story, how do we understand this when there are so many barriers to hearing their voice in a familiar tongue? Bringing this discussion back to the idea of collage and montage allows us, then, to see this language choice not as something other, or something inauthentic, but rather as a layering of different pieces of an identity. The authors might not speak English in their everyday conversations – or at all in the case of Revathi's contributors – but English plays a role in their lives, because it plays a role in Indian society

as a whole. Indeed, the authors' ability to imitate and reanimate the interactions they have had with other people, possibly in different languages, is a key part of understanding their life stories.

Despite writing in English, however, all of the authors occasionally use their own vernacular, which would not necessarily be intelligible to Western (non-bhasha speaking) readers. The authors all use words from other languages, but do so to differing extents. While Laxmi writes whole phrases and quotations in Hindi, which I will discuss later, the other authors tend to use more isolated words or phrases. Mona infrequently uses Urdu words but scatters them throughout her writing, for example, using words like "gajras" [flower bracelets] (Singh and Ahmed 28), "ustad" (skilled musician or musical teacher) (48), "akhada" (gym) (49), "goondas" [hooligans] (53), and many more. Although some of the terms are more culturally specific terms like "ustad", which do not have a direct translation, it seems that sometimes she just chooses to use the Urdu term rather than English, such as "goondas", perhaps because the term has cultural, linguistic, or is of personally specific relevance to her. Revathi uses Tamil in a similar way in her text, except she never provides an English translation for the Tamil words and phrases she uses, such as "dargah" [shrine] (Revathi 1014), dasi [a Hindu woman of low status/servant] (Revathi 836), "nani" [older female relative] (Revathi 910).

Although this mix of languages might not strictly be considered Patois, the mix of English and Indian languages is only accessible to those with the same linguistic, cultural, or geographical origin as the authors. In her essay, "Of Mangoes and Maroons: Language, History, and the Multicultural Subject of Michelle Cliffs's *Abeng*", Françoise Lionnet discusses the formal qualities of postcolonial autobiography, and specifically Michelle Cliff's autobiographical *Abeng*. Lionnet discusses the use of Patois in Cliff's book at length and relates the use of Creole to seeing the self as part of a community or collective, and its use in telling a personal story. Lionnet states

> This retrieval of the collective, and of the collectively repressed dimension
> of the cultural self, is mediated by the recognition that writing is an act of
> language that refigures the real. Cliff's apparently disconnected narrative
> moves generate interruptions and suspensions that allow her to take
> possession of all the threads in her multicultural background and to
> articulate a form of multivalent subjectivity capable of resisting shifting
> networks of power. By appropriating the repressed otherness of patois, she

writes across the margins while questioning the very notion of marginality,

since her position demonstrates that marks of difference and otherness are

ambiguous and shifting. (Lionnet 340)

Although Cliff does use Patois, most of the book is understandable to readers of standard English, with some Patois terms being used; these are presumably those which cannot be translated without losing much of their original meaning. However, whilst the meaning of these terms remains intact and understandable to Patois speakers, non-Patois speakers are excluded, and are left with only half a story. To these readers, the story may seem too fragmented to understand as a whole, but to the author, this is the most meaningful way to tell their life story. Although in the hijra life writing texts, there is not an extensive use of non-English language, there are key terms which are not translated from the Hindi, Tamil, or Urdu. In Laxmi's earlier work, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015), a glossary of key terms is provided, in *Red Lipstick* there is not. This lack of translation for certain terms increases the *appearance* of fragmentation (at least to a reader who does not understand Hindi and Tamil). However, this might be a more truthful way for the authors to express themselves and their experiences, while allowing them to articulate various parts of their identity and culture through language. Although writers like Lawrence Venuti believe that the use of this kind of Patois is never simply because the author thinks this is the most organic way to represent themselves and their experiences – "a literary text, then, can never simply express the author's intended meaning in a personal style. It rather puts to work collective forms in which the author may indeed have a psychological investment" (Venuti 10) – ultimately, this subconscious rendering of experience and identity ends up being more realistic anyway, as it is representative of the culture the author inhabits.

Although wanting to convey a realistic sense of the authors' cultural and linguistic background is one possible reason for use this kind of Patois in their texts, another might be the economic, political, and cultural consequences of doing this for the publisher. As I previously discussed, seemingly the intended audience for at least Laxmi's and Mona's texts is the English-speaking minority within India. This kind of Patois works well for the specific intended audience, with readers feeling as though they have a shared culture (at least linguistically), with the authors. However, it is also a choice made on the publishing industry's behalf to promote their position within Eurocentric and neo-colonial industry. Lawrence Venuti writes that translating or writing in English in previously colonised

countries has often become the norm in order to promote the country's global economic and political status, and the status of the publishing industry in that country. He writes,

> Translation is uniquely revealing of the asymmetries that have structured international affairs for centuries. In many "developing" […] it has been compulsory, imposed first by the introduction of colonial languages among regional vernaculars and later, after decolonization, by the need to traffic in the hegemonic lingua francas to preserve political autonomy and promote economic growth. Here translation is a cultural practice that is deeply implicated in relations of domination and dependence, equally capable of maintaining or disrupting them. (Venuti 158)

So, although the fact that these texts have been translated or written in English has a specific meaning and relevance, it is also part of how the Indian publishing industry, as well as the larger global publishing industry, functions.

English as a Lingua Franca in India

When asking the intention of the authors' choice to write or publish their life writing texts in English, and who their intended audience is, we must consider the position of English as a lingua franca in India. While Hindi was posited as the national language after India's independence, only forty percent of the Indian population speak Hindi as a first, second, or third language. While English is spoken as a *first* language by only 0.02 percent of the population, its reputation as a lingua franca means that approximately ten percent of the population speak English in total, which is the highest percentage of total speakers of any language in India apart from Hindi (with Bengali being the next highest at approximately nine percent) ("C-17 Population by Bilingualism and Trilingualism").

In their article, "English as a Lingua Franca in Multilingual India" (2019), Ishwarya N. Iyer and Sridher Ramachandran state that "the political priority (and need) for each state [after independence] was to safeguard and develop its own regional language and thus its cultural literacy" (Ramachandran and Iyer 37), which therefore led to a lack of adoption of Hindi in many schools (as well as workplaces and homes). Because successive post-independence governments could not agree on a policy which promoted Hindi as a universal Indian language to be taught in schools, many continued to teach in English (either as a primary or secondary language) long after colonial rule ended (Ramachandran and Iyer 38).

In 1966, the education commission recommended that secondary school age students should learn three languages: their native/local language, Hindi or English (the "official" state languages), and one other modern Indian language, a foreign modern language, or a classical language. Although this was not government policy, it was widely adopted in schools, and the privileging of English alongside Hindi (and this system's encouragement of English as a second language for any native Hindi speakers) meant that English continues to be widely spoken, if not as a first or native language, then as a second or third language. This meant that English was socially privileged alongside Hindi as state languages which most school children were expected to learn, to a conversational (if not fluent) level. Ramachandran and Iyer also state that a good grasp of English is often seen as a quality which makes people more employable in the Indian job market (and, of course, internationally), and that "denying English education to elementary school children was widening the rich-poor gap" (Ramachandran and Iyer 39). Moreover, English has become "essential" in areas such as academia, entertainment, media, and business (Omidvar and Ravindranath 40).

In this publishing industry specifically, India both has a deep and long history of publishing literature in English, but in the modern day, "India is emerging as the fastest growing market for English language books in the world. All projections indicate that print books would continue to grow in high double digits in India" (Mahale n.p. (2024)) and "the Indian publishing industry is said to be growing by 30% per annum, with over 16,000 publishers publishing 90,000 new books per year in 24 languages, including in English" (Gonsalves 431). Some authors choose to publish in English not just because it is a common tongue in India, and is a common practice to do so, but because of its emancipatory potential. Although much has been written about how translation is and has historically been a tool of colonisation and domination over colonial subjects, Rashmi Sadana (2012) describes how some Dalit activists actually champion the use of English as a common language because they feel that compared with Hindi, it is free from the weight of Brahminical oppression and provides a more neutral basis with which to communicate between and amongst different religions and castes (Sadana 23). Despite English being a colonial language, for some people, such as Dalits, it can aid emancipation from the incarceration of Hindi and Hindutva ideals.

Outside of translation, there has also been a history of Indian authors writing in English (as a first, second, or third language) since the eighteenth century. In her article about contemporary Indian publishing in English, Roanna Gonsalves sees three reasons for the rise and popularity of Indian writing in English over the last few decades. She writes,

> [firstly], the publication and enormous success of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's*
> *Children* […] followed by the success of other prize-winning Indian authors (all
> first published by one of the Big 5 outside of India); a growing Indian diaspora
> [and] the rise of postcolonial studies in the US and UK academies; and the entry
> of Penguin, the first of the Big 5, into India [have contributed to this popularity].
> (Gonsalves 431)

The interest in Indian writing in English is both for consumers outside of India, but also for their large multilingual native population. Gonsalves goes on to write, "India's growing English speaking aspirational lower and middle classes include a large number of people who are illiterate even in their own mother tongues, yet many try to ensure that their children receive an education in English […] [This is] linked to rising literacy and upward social mobility is the surge in the number of Indians writing fiction in English" (Gonsalves 431). We can therefore see the monopoly of English writing in the publishing industry (both as translated witing and as texts originally written in English) as a hangover from colonialism, a result of government policy, and as a source of emancipatory potential for some writers.

Hijra Farsi/Hijra Clap Languages

Although above I have examined the location of English in India, hijras also have their own unique language which arises occasionally in my primary texts. The authors' use of hijra Farsi in their life writing texts, not to be confused with the modern Persian language, also shows how they locate themselves within a specific hijra culture. There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a severe lack of literature about hijra Farsi (also called hijra Gupti) as a language, as most of the existing scholarship emphasises hijra Farsi as a useful and necessary code language to help communities hide from, for example, the police and other distrusted groups. In Muhammad Sheeraz and Ayaz Afsar's study of hijra Farsi in South Asia (mostly focussing on modern Pakistan), they state that whilst Farsi is used as a tool for "privacy and secrecy", it is also used as "a tool for solidarity, […] a tool for [unifying] identity, […] a skill for earning livelihood, [and] a weapon for social revenge" (Sheeraz and Afsar 71). However, Sheeraz and Afsar also emphasise the need for hijras to communicate secretively to protect themselves from people who might wish them harm, and to hide their potentially illegal activities. They state, "[some] practices that hijras adopt (such as prostitution, pick-pocketing, dancing, castration) are [or have historically been] strongly condemned and strictly banned in Pakistani [and Indian] society. So, hijras do them secretly. To keep their secrets, they need

Farsi, which also works as a code at times, for keeping social distance" (Sheeraz and Afsar 72).

Although older research suggests that Farsi is simply a code-language (which aligns with the idea that the language is only used for secrecy), and contains but a few words and phrases for this usage, newer scholarship has emerged which shows that Farsi is in fact a complete and unique language in its own right. Neelam Nazir et al. state that "Hijra Farsi is indeed a language and not simply a collection of secret code-words […] the language contains its own unique vocabulary. It has its own syntax that differs from other mainstream languages, the language of the hijras has nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and other parts of speech, with verbs used to complete a sentence" (Nazir et al. 3070).

Perhaps because of this need for secrecy amongst hijra communities, the life writing texts do not include references to, or use the language of, hijra Farsi per se. They do however, write and show some of the paralinguistic features of hijra Farsi, such as clapping and facial expressions. According to Nazir et al., hijra clapping is the most important paralinguistic feature of Farsi, and is extremely recognisable. They write that this style of clapping is very loud and done by creating a large hollow space between the hands, and is used in a variety of contexts, usually for emphasis:

> They used a clap before starting and after ending the sentence. If they have to
> stress on something while communicating, they clap loudly than usual, e.g.,
> during their fights with each other they do not indulge physically but rather they
> clap loudly in front of the other hijras. It is considered as the matter of great insult
> if some junior hijra clap in front of the senior and this act is considered
> punishable. (Nazir et al. 3075)

Although we cannot hear these claps in the texts, Mona is photographed gesturing animatedly with her peers in several of the photographs. For example, in one of the earliest photographs in the text, Mona is photographed at a party for her daughter's birthday. She gestures towards someone or something out of frame, and her facial expression is one of chastisement or perhaps anger. Another partygoer next to her also gestures in the same direction, albeit with a more neutral expression. Although we might assume that something has gone wrong with the party preparations, which Mona tells us repeatedly were very expensive, her caption to the photograph negates this assumption. She writes, "My first year of happiness in my life was with Ayesha […] I made every arrangement possible for Ayesha's birthday" (Singh and

Ahmed 20–22). This linguistic opposition to the photography (happiness rather than anger), along with the other celebratory photographs where Mona dances and sings with her peers, suggest that this photograph does not display Mona angrily gesturing, but rather performing her hijra identity through Farsi for some of her peers, whom she has not seen in a long time (see Figure 2). This understanding of hijra Farsi being used to strengthen kinship bonds or as "a tool for solidarity, […] a tool for [unifying] identity" (Sheeraz and Afsar 71) is not something we see often in the texts because of the private nature of the language, but it is present nonetheless.

Figure 2. (Singh and Ahmed 22).

Innovative Literary Forms, Indian Post-Colonial Identity, and the Collage Aesthetic

As I briefly mentioned in my introductory chapter, the authors utilise innovative literary forms to express their queer, hijra identities through their writing. The authors variously use a mixture of images and text, inhabit different voices when they write (writing from their own childhood and adolescent perspectives, as well as their adult perspectives), invite others to

co-narrate their stories, and their narratives often surprisingly jump around in time and space.[37]

While *Myself Mona Ahmed*'s multimedia presentation, along with the ambiguous nature of the text's authorship, strikes the reader immediately because the juxtaposition between the photographs and text was so apparent, the collage aesthetic of *Red Lipstick* and *Our Lives, Our Words* becomes apparent much later in the reading process. Although I label these texts as works of literary collage, which have the appearance or illusion of fragmentation, in actuality, these elements of collage, such as using different languages, literary forms, and even the rapidly changing and repeating subject matter, offer a more convincing way of viewing a life. Rather than the fixed, objective, and easily delineated boundaries that more traditional autobiography offers, these primary texts challenge these traditional modes of telling a life story.

Indeed, in Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, they state that some scholars locate alternative, non-linear, and dissident autobiographical form as one which allows subaltern subjects to tell their story in new and necessary ways. They state, "How might subjects come to voice outside, or despite, the constraints of Western models of identity […] Some call for narrative modes that are neither linear nor developmental but that attend to specificities of […] cultural practices"" (Watson and Smith 28). Smith and Watson's argument compliments Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by arguing that subaltern subjects can indeed speak and be heard, but often use unexpected methods, forms, and narratives to do so. In Smith's essay "Autobiographical Manifestos" from the same volume, she argues that a fragmentary style of life writing, or autobiography, subverts the Western autobiographical tradition in which the author aims to construct a coherent and legible subject. She states,

> fragmentation [is] a means to counter the centrifugal power of the old unitary self
> of western rationalism. Promoting the endless possibilities of self-fragmentation,
> the politics of fragmentation reveals the cultural constructedness of any coherent,
> stable, and universal subject. (Smith 434)

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[37] I use the term "collage aesthetic" rather than, for example, "fragmentary aesthetic" to also emphasise the artistic literary intention behind the text, rather than inferring a sense of brokenness or lack, as "fragmentary" might do.

Smith concludes that writing one's life story in a fragmented manner is ultimately an emancipatory practice which allows the author to deviate from norms and expectations of the autobiographical genre. She sees this freedom as allowing for greater authenticity from the author, and concludes that a fragmentary form allows for, "blurred boundaries, crossed borderlands of multiplicity, differences and divergences, political possibilities and pitfalls […] They offer fascinating performances of the revolutionary subject" (Smith 439). This freedom to create a more complex and nuanced picture of oneself is key to the hijra life writing texts I analyse.

Although the collage aesthetic is more apparent in *Myself Mona Ahmed,* the fragmented aesthetic and feeling of Laxmi's *Red Lipstick* also resembles collage. The book is broken up into parts, and although this in itself is not unusual, the physicality of its fragmentary nature is. The parts that are broken up by black pages and can be seen from the edges of the book as stripes running throughout it. These pages, signalling the length of each part, are not equally dispersed throughout, with parts ranging from eighty pages long to more obviously fragmented eight-page sections. The length- defining black pages subvert the norm of black-on-white, with white font being used for the part's title. This colour shock acts in a more overtly visual way than typical chapter or part markers, and adds to the collage effect of the book. The book's form, too, acts to provide juxtaposing points of view, with Laxmi's life being narrated by, not only her friend, Prince Manvendra, but also her own multiple personas (such as her childhood point of view), and Hindu mythological and religious figures, such as Brahma. Even Laxmi's name is a sort of collage. The name Laxmi is taken from the Goddess Laxmi, but her middle name, Nayaran, signifies the name "Laxmi-Narayana", the name used when the Goddess Laxmi and her husband, Vishnu, are worshipped together. In this way, her name demonstrates the suturing and subsequent incorporation of her female and male identities. In retelling these ancient mythologic and religious stories, Laxmi and other hijras locate their identity as equally ancient and claim belonging in modern Indian society by proving that their identity and found family stretched back to medieval times, thereby legitimising their identity by making it traceable and giving them a sense of cultural ancestry which is available to cis and non-queer members of society. These perspectives offer multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways of knowing the self, or from the reader's view, the subject. Laxmi also engages with her audience and critics, responding to some harsh criticism she had to her first book, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015). Interestingly, the major criticism was due to the critics doubting the story's truth. One critic, Row Kavi, titles his review "Fables and Half-Truths: Autobiography of a Hijra", clearly signalling his contempt and doubt about

the truthfulness of Laxmi's book. Perhaps it is in part due to Laxmi's use of myth and fable which signals to this critic that the "facts" of Laxmi's life might also be fictionalised. Indeed, Row Kavi likens to reading Laxmi's autobiographical text to "reading the Grimm Fairy Tales […] where the prince somehow dances with Cinderella before she runs down the staircase to disappear into the night" (Row Kavi n.p.), demonstrating his suspicions about a narrative bolstered by folk tales and myths.

In *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi uses fragments of Hindi in her writing, often as direct quotes from the people in her life, or quotes from religious texts. In her second chapter, entitled "The Creator" (referring to Brahma or Agni), she inserts quotes about Brahma between her own anecdotes. One such quote is from a John Stuart Blackie poem,[38] whilst the following quotes are from the Vivekachudamani.[39] These quotes add an element of the traditional cut-and-paste aesthetic that the text otherwise lacks, as they are italicised and centred in the middle of the page; signifying their difference to Laxmi's own writing. They seem not to act as subtitles per-se, and they seemingly bear little relation to the anecdotes Laxmi follows them with. Although the Blackie quote, taken from the poem *Trimurti*, is given in English ("Heaven, and Earth, and Living Nature/Are but Masks of Brahma"), the Vivekachudamani quote is not: "Brahma satyan/Jagat mithya".[40] However, when examined closely, it seems that the anecdotes Laxmi tells in this section do correspond with the quotes. Both quotes relate to the oneness of Brahma, and how every person and every object in the world is ultimately a part of Brahma; everything is interconnected and it is the fault of humans for building up arbitrary boundaries between us and the things and people around us. After the Blackie quote, Laxmi writes about the nature of masculinity and femininity – an ongoing theme through the text –

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[38] John Stuart Blackie was a nineteenth century Scottish scholar; it is not clear why Laxmi is familiar with this quote, except perhaps to further align herself with British scholarly learning, which she indicates is the epitome of education. However, the quote is taken from Blackie's poem *Trimurti* which discusses Hindu deities and their relationship with the natural world.

[39] The Vivekachudamani is a Hindu text, commonly described as a teaching manual. It takes the form of a poem and describes interactions and dialogue between a religious teacher and student, with teaching about the oneness of Brahma being one of the central themes.

[40] This roughly translates to "Brahman is the only truth, the world is unreal", and teaches that every individual human mind is ultimately a part of Brahma, and that humans are part of a bigger whole.

and the unclear boundaries between gender; telling us that humans should be careful about creating division when, ultimately, we are all unified by being part of creation, and in turn, a part of Brahma.

Laxmi also jumps between time periods, creating juxtaposition between the stories she tells. In her second chapter, she begins by describing her family dynamic before her own birth. She tells us about the difficult relationship her mother had with her father's family. After a lengthy discussion about her and her mother's love for her father from before her birth to her early childhood (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 15–22), she quickly moves on to talk about her relationship with the "well educated" Atharv in the late 1990s (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 22–23). It seems Laxmi links these two anecdotes as representations of two men who have been especially significant for Laxmi. She says of her father, "Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi, my father, was, I believe, the perfect man, because he created all three genders: my sister, Rukmini, a woman; my younger brother Shashi, a man; and me" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 16). She says of Atharv, "Artharv Nair is *the* person behind Laxmi" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 22). So, in the chapter devoted to Brahma, the creator, Laxmi pays homage to the two men who created her identity – her father and Artharv, the man who introduced her to LGBTQIA+ activist circles. She herself becomes a collage of the people who have contributed to her becoming who she is today.

Mona Ahmed's book shows the reader snapshots of her life from a twenty-year period; we move in quick succession from her partying with her hijra family, to taking her daughter to school, to blessing a baby's birth, to moonlight walks to the mosque, to her new home in a Muslim graveyard. The changes are dizzying. The changes have taken place over a span of ten years, but the reader sees these changes unfolding within a few minutes of each other, making the gradual life changes she experiences seem immediate and extreme. However, dispersed among these images are longer-form pieces of writing, in which Mona looks back on her life and philosophises on the meaning of life. These intimate and complex pieces give pause in the otherwise bewildering journey through her life but simultaneously add an overt collage effect to the book, leaving it somewhere between a scrapbook and a multi-media diary. Mona's captions, which accompany the photographs, often offer contradictory meanings to what someone viewing the photographs might understand from the image alone. This too, in its juxtaposition, offers a collage of form and meaning. In her book, *Collage and Literature,* Scarlett Higgins states that collage is about unexpected encounters and associations between images and texts (Higgins 8). However, what Higgins fails to explain is to whom these encounters are unexpected; they are certainly not unexpected to the

author. In Higgins' own analysis of Black music, poetry, and literature, she seems to centre the presumably white reader in highlighting feelings of shock, maladroitness, and confusion. For the authors, these encounters perfectly align with their own embodied experience of living in a contradictory and confusing world. Indeed, this aligns with the hijra authors' experience of living in the world too. Hijras are at once lauded for being omnipotent demi-gods who have the power to bless nuptials and new life, whilst also being maligned for their gender, class, caste and for their lifestyles; to be considered a source of ancient and other-worldly power, and yet stuck within a base, telluric, and oppressive system where they are politically and socially disempowered is indeed contradictory. This is a lived experience in which complexity and contradiction is not just a fact of life, but is *the* defining characteristic of their lives.

These unexpected encounters between image and text become particularly apparent in *Mona Ahmed*, in photographs where Mona is dancing for Singh. In the photographs, Mona seems happy, energetic and excited. However, in her captions, she states that this was an act to convince her friend, Dayanita Singh, that she was happy despite feeling deeply depressed. The juxtaposition between the text and the photographs allows the reader to see Mona's experiences both from her perspective and from Singh's perspective. In Revathi's *Our Lives*, sixteen different hijras speak about events and anecdotes from various periods of their lives. Revathi has arranged these stories by theme, taking snippets from each hijra and placing similar stories together. Again, although not as obviously collaged as the photographs and writing in *Mona Ahmed,* these stories have been divided and put back together in a way that might make more sense to the reader. Organising these stories thematically (with chapters being grouped into themes such as "Cultural Practices", "Hijra Mothers, and "Activism"), also forges relationships between what the hijras have experienced despite the hijras not discussing these events as a group, which may have resulted in a more cohesive story with more organically found similarities. It becomes clear that, for example, because of their gender identity, many of these hijras have had similar experiences. However, the change of tone and change in the types of stories these hijras are telling are still occasionally jarring. In the first section, entitled "Childhood and Schooling", Sundari finishes her story with details of sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of one of her school teachers and bullying from her peers, which culminated in her feeling suicidal. She states, "Sometimes I used to feel like jumping off the terrace of the hostel" (Revathi 268). The following story begins with Rajam talking about her love of dance and the joy this practice brings her. The juxtaposition between these two stories is not only jarring for the reader, but creates a collage with the various

experiences the hijras speak about. It also gives the reader a well-rounded picture and reminds them that the hijras are not a monolith and do not write or speak analogously. However, the fragmentation in this book acts in a different way to the other books. The question of using fragmentation as an artistic or formal choice is not applicable to those telling the stories, but rather Revathi, who edits the collection.

Collage as Queerness: Form as Symbolic of Identity

Typically, collage connotes the use of various materials which are stuck to or drawn, painted or otherwise put on a surface (such as paper or canvas) to create a larger image or artwork. Collage became an important part of modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century alongside the rise in popularity of Cubism and artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, but the term has since been widely used to describe works of literature, music, fashion, and architecture. In her book, *Collage and Literature,* Scarlett Higgins states that collage is about unexpected encounters and associations between images and texts (Higgins 8), and many scholars have cited the importance of juxtaposition of various forms, materials, contexts, and authorial voice to create texts with obvious fractures between its various parts which are "glued" together to form one cohesive whole. Recently, some scholarship has examined the relationship between a collage aesthetic – in both art and literature – and queer identities. Contemporary scholarly work such as Jack Ball's 2021 PhD thesis, *Collage as Queer Methodology: The Pleasures and Politics of Trans and Queer Photographic Representations*, which looks at his own queer identity and representation of this in his, and other queer artists', artwork, have begun looking at collage and associated aesthetics in a less prescriptive manner. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam states that the collage method is one which is inherently subversive, anti-establishment, and queer. Because collage – in its classic cut-and-paste form – can be done by anyone, it can be both high and low art, and can represent disruption and excess. The excess of collage can make it seem distasteful, gaudy or even performative to some viewers. To take multiple forms and contexts and mix colours and textures is to deliberately and subversively confuse the sense of a thing's "essence", creates art which is non-linear, and is able to hold multiple, overlapping, sometimes contradicting layers, materials, images, ideas and realities.

Indeed, some of the hijras who have authored life writing texts might also be seen as gaudy and distasteful. Particularly associated with their passion for dance, Laxmi and Mona both report having been told they are too erotic or farcical. Laxmi writes about one interaction she had with a friend, who sent her child to Laxmi's dance class. She writes, "She

[Chhaya] would get furious with me or being too hijrotic, as I call it – a blend of hijra and erotic of course!" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 37). Her use of the portmanteau "hijrotic", blending the words hijra and erotic, indicates a particular behaviour associated with hijras which we see reflected in much of the sociological and literary writing about them.[41] By claiming this controversial identity, Laxmi once more claims her identity as a sexual being, defiantly asserting that her identity can be whatever she wants it to be, and making a proud, queerly affirming reclamation of everything that normative society has used to demean her and weaponise against her and the wider hijra community.

In his chapter entitled "Monologue: Laxmi, My Sister", Prince Mahendra discusses Laxmi's occasionally questionable behaviour. He states, "her I-am-something behaviour can be detrimental at times. We always say that too much ego is not a good thing and it's something she needs to be mindful of as she becomes more popular and gains more respect. I have heard too many stories of how she keeps people waiting" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 139). Considering how proud Laxmi is, and how she vehemently she defends her reputation elsewhere in the text, it is somewhat surprising that she allows the Prince to write about her like this. However, one explanation is that the Prince adds a certain legitimacy to Laxmi's writing; both because he is an "acceptable" face of the LGBTQ+ community in India, who by association, makes Laxmi more palatable to the mainstream, but also because her allowance of the Prince's negative opinions of her serve to negate the fact that she will not allow anyone to criticise her. Whilst she fervently defends herself against so-called baseless "slander", she will withstand genuine and constructive criticism, even allowing these critics space to air their grievances in her own autobiography.

Furthermore, Laxmi states that she transcends typical, binary understandings of gender and is able to feel both masculine and feminine genders simultaneously. She writes,

> I can access both states of being – and I can also go beyond. In my strongest
> moments, I feel what a man feels, the power games they like to play. And when

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[41] This understanding of hijras being gaudy and extravagant is often commented on. For example, one newspaper article about hijras begin thus: "You see them every day. Clad in sarees or some other cheap, gaudy outfits, walking in groups along busy thoroughfares, in less affluent neighbourhoods, and marketplaces. And you expect them to approach the commuters, residents and grocers for money, sometimes using vile techniques" (Bay n.p. (2019)).

I'm shining in my femininity, driving men crazy, I feel more like a woman than even the most womanly of women one could imagine. Like Cleopatra, or Umrao Jann – both ultimate symbols of femininity. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 9)

Although her conceptualisations of gender seem to convey heteronormative expectations of gender embodiment, with masculinity being associated with power and femininity being associated with being found sexually attractive by men, Laxmi's also conveys her own ability to transcend, or perhaps exceed, binary understandings of gender.

The discussion of identity and its non-binary nature is also apparent in Mona's text. The intimate and complex textual moments in Mona's text, which are found amongst the photographs, give pause in the otherwise bewildering visual journey through her life but simultaneously add an overt collage effect to the book, leaving it somewhere between a family photo album and a multi-media diary. Mona Ahmed also refuses to show a clean and legible "before and after" of her physical transition to appease the appetite of voyeuristic cis-heterosexual or normative readers. We only see photographs of Mona after she has lived openly as a hijra for some time, with the physical markers of her gender, like her dress and hair, already established. Mona only writes about her physical transition once, pondering how undergoing the nirvan operation has impacted her life, and even these comments are not uncomplicated. Mona explains that rather than the euphoria she expected to feel after the operation, instead, in the days after, overwhelmingly she felt emotionally numb. This contrasts the pain she experienced in the aftermath of the operation when other hijras "took some hot mustard oils and applied them on my wounds" as part of the healing process (Singh and Ahmed 51). She then writes about her conflicting feelings in the months after nirvan. She says she felt regret about the lifestyle she had chosen for herself –as she felt she would live in the hijra gharana for the rest of her life after nirvirnum - which would consist of "go[ing] from house to house to beg and bless the public" (Singh and Ahmed 51). And yet, she also felt a deep sense of contentment at the changes her body went through. She writes, "my body like a beautiful woman's. Skin became softer; body hair vanished; little breasts appeared, and my voice changed" (Singh and Ahmed 52). This conflict between the personal contentment she feels at her body and her sadness and sometimes anger she feels at her community (which for many hijras is an important source of camaraderie and friendship) creates inconsistency and contradiction in her writing. This conflict seems not to be about her body and gender, but about the choices she made to conform to typical hijra bodily and cultural expectations.

This messiness, or refusal to show an easy, linear timeline (in both body and mind), for her reader to follow is how Martin F. Manalansan sees representations of queer lives in life writing. In his article, "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives", Manalansan conceptualises a one-bedroom apartment shared by six queer Latinx people as a queer archive. He argues that a queer archive is one which resists the heteronormative desire to order space, time, and bodies. Instead, the queer archive utilises mess by "funking up [...] spoiling and cluttering of the neat normative configurations and patterns that seek to calcify lives and experiences" (Manalansan 99). He also suggests that mess, with its negative connotations that can also be queerly, affirmationally reclaimed, is inherently associated with women, gender non-conforming, and queer people. He uses the phrase "so-and-so is a hot mess!" which, when applied to certain female celebrities, connotes both a sense of repulsion and attraction which "occupies a frictive dimension that runs simultaneously within crisscrossing grids of 'positive' and 'negative' messes" (Manalansan 99). This non-linear nature of my authors' life writing texts, alongside their queer hijra identities which are at once *both* male and female, but also neither of these two things, creates an identity, and a form of recounting their experiences which is nuanced, sometimes paradoxical, and, despite its fixed literary form, always in flux.

This sense of the body, and also the female/non-binary experience, always being in flux, is something which many queer and trans feminist theorists and writers have explored in their work (for example, Donna Harraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016)). More than this, though, is the belief that the mutability of the body is intrinsically linked to the mind; and by attempting to sever "the body" - as an object in its own right - from "the mind", we are in fact adhering to the very ideological patriarchal bondage from which "the body" is trying to escape. In this vein, viewing the primary texts through the context of writing the self and the body through lived experience (embodiment), the collaged nature of the texts actually allows a more realistic view into the authors' realities; where a reader of traditional Western autobiography might see "mess", others (including the authors) might rather see a more well-rounded and personal way of writing the self, which is based in their actual experience of living in the world. More than this though, this "mess" and embodied eroticism becomes amplified and more extravagant as a uniquely queer form of self-reclamation.[42]

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[42] I explore themes of identity, embodiment, and eroticism further in Chapter Four in examinations of dance in the texts.

In *Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects* (1992), Karen Caplan argues that dissident and hybrid autobiographical forms provide politically liberating opportunities for self-expression for women, people of colour, and queer people because they allow authors to divert from culturally available and approved methods of autobiographical writing. In a similar vein to Karen Caplan's notion of "Outlaw Genres" is Yogita Goyal's analysis of what she calls "Runaway Genres". Goyal describes how using pieces of various and divergent stories to create a single narrative is a refusal to embed oneself in a traditional archive. She uses examples of literature (Coleson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*) as well as non-fictional Black histories. Although obviously different from culturally specific hijra histories, this version of a Black history archive has been created by the authors, or archivists, because they have not seen a version of their cultural history presented in an authentic way. And yet, Goyal goes on to say that these authors refuse to adhere to a reader's expectations about what an authentic narrative might be for their readers. Because Colson Whitehead uses so many different stories in his text, it becomes a collage of stories which come together to tell a larger history about Black identities. Goyal states that Whitehead collates "far-flung experiences in a single narrative, his collage aesthetic indicates his disinclination to recover a stable sense of an authentic history; rather his deliberate anachronisms and transhistorical juxtapositions yield a subtler sense of commingled counterhistories" (Goyal 282).

This is not unlike the comparison Derek Walcott made in his 1992 Nobel prize speech, in which he likens a literary collage to a broken vase which has been repaired; the cracks subsequently add to the aesthetic of the vase. He states, "[b]reak a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape" (Walcott n.p.). While Walcott likens fragments being put together with glue, I wonder if in the case of the life writing texts I am using for my project, the collages' edges could be likened to scar tissue. The various parts of the books are bonded together, often through blank spaces in which unspeakable and undocumentable things have occurred. As I discuss in the next chapter, the blank spaces which connect the various fragments are sometimes a result of violence episodes which have shaped the authors' lives, histories, and communities, and have subsequently led them to create an autobiographical text which does not present a stable sense of history. The result is a fragmented text which the reader is invited to decipher without the contexts being provided.

Conclusion: Form, Freedom, and Agency

In this chapter I have sought to understand how the authors utilise unique and innovative literary forms and styles, as well as their use of language, to write their life narrative, and to discuss and convey aspects of their identities and experiences. Whilst the authors have been afforded more creative freedoms in their life writing texts due to their positions as either celebrities, recognised and respected authors, activists, or artists, they use these freedoms to express sentiments which have previously not been expressed in more conventional hijra narratives. Whilst these forms and styles can be seen as representative of the authors' unique and specific gender (as well as cultural) identities, they are also writing to a certain audience, and attempting to signify something through their use of literary devices to this audience.

I have looked to the practicalities and practices of the publishing industry to understand how the texts have been marketed, who their chosen audiences are, and how the authors represent their identities to these audiences. Laxmi performs her hijra identity as something which is uniquely Indian, and uniquely Hindu, which to some extent reflects her penchant for Hindutva politics and her performance of Indian-ness which extends her appeal to this political readership. However, Laxmi also presents herself as a celebrity who has global reach, and enjoys international fame, and her celebrity tell-all style of writing reflects this too. Whilst Mona's co-writer also has international reach, with her publisher being based in Zurich, and her art being shown internationally, Mona herself is only known more locally. While Revathi is a well-known activist, she chooses to champion the voices of a group of hijras who would otherwise not have had their stories shared nationally or internationally as many of them are not able to read and write, and do not have connections to the publishing industry.

The authors present their identities as individually unique, and challenge the notion that hijra identity is fixed and universal for all people who identify as hijras. While must of the existing scholarship shows hijra identity as unchanging from essentially colonial times (they lived in gharanas, perform at badhai celebrations, and sometimes engage in sex work), the authors show how differently they experience the world and how their feelings about gender differ. Their experience of the world is often dependent on caste and class, religion, and in the authors' access to celebrity status and wealth. This understanding of identity and experience as unique to an individual is something we only see through life writing texts, as many sociological studies gather these experiences as data, rather than understanding this through an emotional and personal lens.

Chapter Two

Everyday Violence: Gendered Violence and Creating Agency through Writing

In this chapter I look to my primary texts to understand how violence and its after-effects are represented by the authors. Many of the authors and contributors experience physical, sexual, or emotional interpersonal violence, and present it as a gendered issue, often with perpetrators explicitly blaming their victims' hijra identity as the reason for their violence.[43] However, although the authors often frame violence as a gendered issue, some show certain types of violence, such as intimate partner violence (IPV) as *inherently* gendered and only occurring as a result of their hijra identity. In the authors' representations, the inherent nature of this gendered violence can in fact serve to legitimise the authors' gender identity, because they are experiencing this violence only because they are a woman. The authors also write about the structural violence[44] they experience as a result of their hijra identity. For example, the authors and their peers are subject to lesser health outcomes, lower housing quality, and fewer protections from the law because of their gender.

One surprising aspect of violence in the texts is the complex way it is communicated by the authors: Laxmi can be facetious, playful, and even comedic when describing the abuse she suffers in her relationship; many of Revathi's contributors are nonchalant or flippant; and Mona is often defiant. In some senses the authors refuse to adhere to narratives in which they are represented only as victims. They often refuse to show themselves sympathy or care, and do not ask their readers for empathy. Instead, the authors present themselves as agents of their own destinies. Many of Revathi's contributors show themselves defying the odds of their childhoods, and breaking free of cycles of violence: leading happy, fulfilled lives with jobs they enjoy, husbands or partners they love, and children they care for. Ostensibly, Mona lives a sad and often lonely life in the graveyard. Yet she insists over and over again that she lives the life she wants and finds freedom in her solitude, being free to do as she pleases. Laxmi

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[43] Interpersonal violence is characterised by perpetrators being partner, family, community, or even a stranger, and the types of violence are those such as hitting, rape, kidnapping, domestic violence, sexual harassment, as well as emotional abuse (Jinee 1011).

[44] Systemic or structural violence is characterised by suffering induced by economic and political forces, such as extreme poverty, unjust healthcare policy, slum demolition (Jinee 1011). The term "structural violence" was first coined by Johan Galtung in his 1969 article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research", where he used the term to mean "violence where there is no [direct/personal] actor" (Galtung 170), which is often built-in to political policy.

represents herself as both perpetrator and victim, freeing herself from the shackles of victimhood by seeking revenge on her abusers. By manoeuvring their narratives in this way to show, by turns, joy, defiance, or violence (committed by the authors themselves), the authors refuse to be seen as only victims.

Beyond these redemption-type narratives, the authors also frame the violence they experience as somewhat mundane. It is not unexpected or life-defining, but rather just another part of their everyday lives (and for many hijras, it is indeed an expected part of their lives, as statistics below show). Alongside these mundane occurrences of violence are the other emotional trappings of their everyday lives: they feel anger, joy, and sadness, and these feelings are not necessarily separate from the violence they experience, but instead bound up together in the simultaneous complexity and mundanity of their lives. So, while many scholarly studies point to the tragedy of gendered violence against hijras (see Thompson et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2017)), these life writing texts represent experiencing violence as something altogether more complicated than just tragedy.

Gendered Violence against Hijras in Modern India

In my three primary texts, the authors and contributors write expansively about abuse and violence they have faced at the hands of, in turn, their biological family, teachers and mentors, sexual and romantic partners, police officers, their hijra gurus and gharana peers, and the systemic violence they face from written laws and policies, as well as entrenched societal norms which govern the treatment of hijras in modern Indian society. The ways in which violence is used as a tool by the powerful (both politically powerful, i.e. the government, both in modern India and in historic colonial India, and personally powerful, in the case of gender-based domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and violence enacted by strangers, where this power usually derives from gender, caste, class, economic privilege etc.) are layered and complex. These examples of violence take place on both national levels and interpersonal levels, and the reiterations and effects of this violence are discussed by the authors and contributors throughout these hijra life writing texts. Although violence against women (which especially impacts trans women), is not an India-specific issue, the particular

social, political, historical, and cultural position of hijras makes them especially likely to experience both interpersonal and systemic violence.[45]

Whilst few studies have investigated how hijras are specifically affected by physical, sexual, and other kinds of violence related to wider structural gender-based violence, there are some studies which investigate how broader LGBTQ+ communities in India have been targeted in this way. In their 2017 study, "Harassment and Violence Among Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM)[46] and Hijras After Reinstatement of India's 'Sodomy' Law'", Li et al investigate how harassment and violence can trickle down from government mandates and legal rulings to interpersonal and individual acts of violence. While the study largely reports on MSM individuals, the authors do include seven hijra individuals in their study. In this study, the participants reported that the perpetrators of the violence they suffered were mainly sexual partners and police officers (something we also see represented in my life writing texts, as I will demonstrate in this chapter) (Li et al. 326). Li et al state that the reinstatement of Section 377 in 2013, which criminalised non peno-vaginal sex, commonly termed "gay" sex, coincided with, and was most likely responsible for, both increased violence against MSM and hijras, reduced access to healthcare relating to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and made it less likely for victims to report harassment and abuse because they "feared disclosure of their sexuality, punitive action, and harassment by authorities under IPC Sec. 377" (Li et al. 328).[47] They also state that this trend is one that has been seen in other countries with anti-LGBTQ+ laws such as Russia and Uganda (Li et al. 325). A broader study undertaken in the United States in 2020 shows that this is a global trend for gender non-conforming individuals. Peitzmeier et al find that "transgender individuals experience unique vulnerabilities to intimate partner violence (IPV) and may experience a disproportionate IPV burden compared with cisgender (nontransgender) individuals" (Peitzmeier et al. 1).

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[45] This hijra-specific experience of violence is well documented. See Mal Sibsankar's "The Hijras of India" (2018) and Anirban Majumder at al.'s "An Observational Study of the Quality of Life Among Gender Incongruent Individuals" (2020).

[46] MSM is a popular acronym in South Asia (as well as other locations) which means "men who have sex with men". MSM-H is sometimes used to mean "men who have sex with men, and hijras", often in medical settings as they are often at risk from contracting the same kinds of sexually transmitted diseases, amongst other health issues.

[47] Please refer back to introductory chapter for more information on these laws and rulings.

My primary texts were either published or being written during the enforcement of Section 377 – in Mona's case (published in 2001), under the original ruling, and for Laxmi and Revathi and her contributors, during the reinstatement of Section 377 (published in 2020 and 2016 respectively). The authors have likely experienced violence as a result this ruling, as well an increased interest and scrutiny from wider society, which has led to an upswing in violence and harassment, continuing even after the decriminalisation of non-peno-vaginal sex in 2018. Although few sources exist to verify this continued violence against hijras within the Indian context specifically, one article focussing on Bangladeshi hijras does.[48] In this study, the authors had a high number of participants (346) who largely reported experiencing economic, educational, political, employment, health, and civil right violations despite the official recognition of a third gender (Amanullah et al. 1). Amanullah et al also discuss that a high proportion of hijras taking part in their study faced exclusion, exploitation, harassment, or abandonment by both their families and others (Amanullah et al. 10).

Violence against minority groups like hijras and other members of the LGBTQ+ community, as scholarship suggests, is experienced widely within India. However, by listening to the voices of hijras themselves through their life writing texts, we can piece together how this systemic violence set out in policy and law, and used as a tool of the powerful against the structurally marginalised, is reflected and enforced in the violence experienced in hijras' interpersonal relationships. This relationship between interpersonal and structural violence is one that is often cited in feminist literature, and shows direct causality between systemic and structural violence against women and the interpersonal violence they experience within their homes, social environments, and other everyday spaces. For example, in Stephanie Montesanti and Wilfreda E. Thurston's 2015 article on violence against women in the United States, they explicitly state, "[gendered] structural or systemic violence can lead to interpersonal violence against women" (Montesanti and Thurston 5). They argue that women experience reduced social support, education, and conditions in employment environments because of stereotyping and bias against women, and this in turn contributes to women experiencing higher levels of interpersonal violence because women have less agency and ability to access help or authority figures who can assist them (because they have less access to and agency in environments such as school and work) (Montesanti and Thurston 6). They go on to state,

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[48] Bangladesh officially recognised hijras as their own gender identity in 2013, despite the Sunni fatwa forbidding gender "re-assignment" (Amanullah et al. 2).

The different forms of violence—symbolic, structural and interpersonal—are not mutually exclusive, rather they relate to one another as they manifest in the lives of women. Structural violence is marked by deeply unequal access to the determinants of health (e.g., housing, good quality health care, and unemployment), which then create conditions where interpersonal violence can happen and which shape gendered forms of violence for women in vulnerable social positions. (Montesanti and Thurston 9)

Although Montesanti and Thurston focus on health outcomes for women (who suffer both systemic and interpersonal abuse), the link they create between these structural oppressions and personal oppressions is clear. This link between the personal, everyday violence and the systemic, structural violence hijras face is something I explore throughout this chapter. My primary texts illustrate new and important dimensions of violence against women, and especially hijras, and show us complex understandings of themselves as victims, as well as how they cognise and perceive the perpetrators of this violence. They also have complex and nuanced representations of victim narratives, agency, and blame, as well as complicating the emotional understanding of violence as one that is multi-faceted.

Gender-Based Violence as Represented in Literary Texts

Because hijra life writing is an emerging genre, the literary representations of violence experienced by hijras currently available are in the form of novels, and other fictionalised accounts of hijra life. In fictional works featuring hijras, they are often framed as victims, but perhaps most often, as perpetrators of violence (especially sexual violence). This stereotyping of hijras as both sexually promiscuous and sexually violent in fiction is something which often arises as a trope.

For example, in Hari Kunzru's 2003 *The Impressionist*, a hijra character (referred to as both Pran and Rukhsana) is depicted at first as being a cis-gender male, hypersexual rapist who dehumanises his perceived inferiors, such as a lower class and caste servant girl who Pran plans to rape. Later in the text when Pran is enslaved, Pran is reduced to a highly objectified sexual possession.[49] In Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (1999), the hijra protagonist, Bhagmati, both experiences violence, not least in her tempestuous relationship

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[49] Pran is taken prisoner and forced to dress and behave as a hijra.

with the narrator whom she refers to as her slave-master (which is indicative of the violence and power imbalance in their relationship), and frames herself and other hijras as the perpetrators of violence. In one flashback scene, Singh shows a British woman seeking safety from the violence of the Indian mutiny of 1857 who is tricked by a hijra into accepting help, and is then gangraped by the hijra, their employer (a state official), and the official's friends. This framing of hijras as violent and criminal individuals (or, as Sarah Newport terms them, "manipulative extortionists" (Newport 136)) is something which arises both in fictional texts, but also in typical narratives about hijras, in for example, Indian law.

As Newport states in *Writing Otherness*, in many novels, hijra protagonists are presented as sexual deviants who are always affected by sexual violence (either as a victim or perpetrator). She states,

> the protagonists are […] presented negatively as hyper-masculine and unable to construct functional relationships with others around them, particularly women, either because they are sexually aggressive [like Pran in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*] or because they have witnessed sexual violence and are afraid of their masculine sexuality as a result [like Zam in *Habibi*]. (Newport 125)

Newport often draws attention to how hijras are associated with masculinity and masculine-coded violent crimes, which works to undermine the characters' gender identity as trans women and hijras. Not only associated with the masculine, they are also associated with sexual deviancy. Newport states hijras "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" (Newport 141).

Outside of fiction, there are few literary sources which can provide insight into how violence affects hijras (both as victims and perpetrators). However, within Indian law, trans individuals are specifically referenced as being prone to the impacts of gender-based violence. In "The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill" (2014), it is explicitly stated that "The appropriate Government and local authorities shall take all appropriate administrative, social, educations and other measures to protect transgender persons, both within and outside the home, from all forms of abuse, violence and exploitation" (Sabha 4), demonstrating that hijras are known to be likely targets of gender-based violence and other crimes. One excellent source which analyses violence experienced by hijras both today and during the colonial era,

and which analyses colonial literature (in the form of archival sources) is Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India.* Hinchy frames the violence modern-day hijras experience as directly related to the violence committed by the colonial state in the 1800s and 1900s, observing that they experienced

> harassment, sexual abuse and physical violence in their encounters with police. There [is] a pattern to these incidents of police abuse: [hijras] were arrested by police and taken to police stations, where they were forced to remove their clothing and to dance naked, and when they refused, were beaten and in several cases raped. (Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900* 260)

This nuanced and productive research makes clear that hijras are far mor likely to be the victim of violent crimes than the perpetrators. However, myths still remain about the supposedly inherent criminality of hijra communities.

One potentially useful way to understand how gender-based violence is represented in life writing, is to look at how gender-based violence is written about in Dalit life writing. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the politics of Dalit life writing, and the act of "writing back", as well as uncovering previously unspoken and unwritten feelings and experiences relating to Dalit life and their treatment by wider society, has many similarities with how hijras write about their lives. In her analysis of pre-millennium Dalit women's life writing, Roma Dey writes "autobiographies by Dalit men do not give space to Dalit women, who only have a guest appearance and are represented as […] self sacrificing mother[s] or mothers patiently enduring pain and suffering, but [are] very rarely […] agents for change" (Dey 2). However, as the Dalit life writing movement grew stronger (roughly since the millennium), Dalit women's writing has begun to come to the fore. Because of their unique intersection of gender and caste (as well as other individual identity markers), Dalit women's life writing exposes much of what Dalit men's life writing conceals about the material living conditions which are specific to Dalit women, not least that of gender-based violence. This unique position of Dalit women in the movement is explained thus by Dalit poet Challapalli Swaroopa Rani: "If there is any soul in this country who is subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitation, it is the dalit woman […] she is oppressed by the caste system, on the other side she is subjected to gender oppression and class exploitation. She is a dalit among dalits" (Rani 21–22). This intersection of caste and gender is also explored in

modern analyses of Dalit women's autobiography, with Anindita Shome and Somjeeta Pandey describing it as follows:

> Along with the burden of poverty, Dalit women have had to endure extreme forms of discrimination by upper caste men and women through the prevalent practices of humiliation and inhuman treatment of the lower caste individuals, and oppression at the hands of Dalit men through acts of domestic violence and abuse. (Shome and Pandey 34)

Shome and Pandey illustrate that the violence faced by Dalit women, as represented in their life writing texts, is not only perpetrated on the basis of caste by upper caste perpetrators, but also by their own communities and families. In Dalit women's life writing, this type of Dalit-on-Dalit violence is often perpetrated on the basis of shame and the perceived protection of the community's honour. For example, in the autobiographical *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2009), Urmila Pawar writes about an incident whereby a widow was found to be pregnant, and other women from her village beat the pregnant widow until she miscarried. Pawar concludes this horrific story by writing, "the villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery [and] had protected the villages' honour!" (Pawar and Pandit 156–60). Shome and Pandey observe that domestic violence is present in Dalit women's life writing too. Pawar writes, "incidents of domestic violence were prevalent in several Dalit homes […]. [Women were] beaten up not just by [their] husband[s] […] but if she was suspected of committing any mistake, she was humiliated in front of the Panchayat,[50] and publicly beaten up by distant relatives as well" (Pawar and Pandit 41). This sense of inter-community, as well as family, violence committed on the basis of feelings of shame and protection of the community's honour is something which is reflected in hijras life writing texts also. Pawar frames this fear of lack of honour as reflective of fear of falling social-standing and the understanding that the consequences of low (and possibly falling) social status can bring.

Domestic Power Dynamics: Familial Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence
In my primary texts, the most common interpersonal violence the authors experience takes place within the domestic sphere: from sexual or romantic partners and from family members. Many studies on domestic violence in India and in many other countries, and

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[50] Village council.

against both gender non-conforming people and cis-gendered women, cite the hidden nature of the private domestic sphere as providing a protective space for the abuser to commit acts of violence with impunity. For example, in a 2020 study of domestic violence in India, the authors found domestic violence "a major contributor to the global burden of ill health in terms of female morbidity leading to psychological trauma and depression, injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, suicide, and murder" (Bhattacharya et al. 5229). Not only is domestic violence a common experience for women and girls, with devastating consequences, but it is also located as a hidden problem, with Bhattacharya et al. stating that, of the women they interviewed, approximately a third would never seek, or receive, help (Bhattacharya et al. 5229). An important aspect of understanding the discussion of violence in these life writing texts is that the authors bring the realities of living with violence to light, where it would otherwise stay hidden. Indeed, in *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), Cvetkovich states, "the most common post-traumatic stress disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life. The real conditions of women's lives are hidden in the sphere of the personal, in private life" (Cvetkovitch 30). Therefore, by writing and disseminating their stories of suffering violence within the home and within familial and romantic relationships, the authors take agency of their own lives, and break the taboo of speaking about the violence they have suffered under the concealment of the domestic sphere.

In *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi records the various types of violence she has suffered at the hand of men. During her childhood, this was sexual abuse by male family members, and from her mentor she experiences public shaming over her gender identity. However, perhaps the most unexpected story she tells is of her apparently happy relationship with her current boyfriend Viki - "in Viki I have found a centre for my world" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 180). However, even in this relationship, Laxmi endures abuse. She writes,

> Occasionally, when Viki has answered my phone, he's been nasty to
> people, abusive even. As a result I have lost friends and acquaintances.
> There's an unnecessary aggression to him, which I guess is natural for his
> age. It's what led to an ugly encounter between us also. We were on a
> holiday in the hills and Viki was driving and we were having an argument,
> as always! […] And then suddenly, in a flash, Viki hit me with the back of
> his hand – he works out and is very strong – it was a powerful blow. I was
> stunned into silence and absolutely shocked at this behaviour, but I think
> Viki was too. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 185)

Laxmi maintains a facetious tone throughout this passage, using exclamation marks: "we were having an argument, as always!", to emphasise that this type of behaviour is to be expected from men and "always" happens. She again writes an aside to tell us how strong Viki is, and that he "works out", to emphasise his impressive masculinity. She concludes this episode by saying, "He'll live and learn, and I am willing to give him time" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 185). Throughout this chapter of the text, Laxmi continues to excuse Viki by writing things like "I guess [it's] natural for his age". It seems that although Laxmi is aware of how damaging physical abuse can be – like the abuse she suffered in her childhood, which she understands to have long-lasting effects on her mental health as I discuss later in this chapter – she is able to forgive Viki because he is able to provide her with the loving relationship, at least as Laxmi views it, that she has always desired. Laxmi writes that her previous relationships with various boyfriends and lovers were relatively short-lived though frequent. Viki seems to be one of the few long-term, and to some extent, stable, relationships (other than familial and platonic) she has been in, and it seems that this façade of stability blinds Laxmi to the true nature of Viki's treatment of her. However, despite her depiction of violence within the relationship, Laxmi's descriptions of her relationship are largely positive, showing how even in the midst of such terrible violence, the author often presents her reader with a multifaceted and complex understanding of violence, and how it functions as a tool of masculinity.

Later in the same chapter, Laxmi makes it clear that these elements of sacrifice and weakness are, to her, an inherent part womanhood, especially in relation to her male romantic partner. In turn, her understanding of maleness is that which is physically powerful, commanding, and often violent. We can understand that through Viki's physical abuse, Laxmi's understanding of gender dynamics in romantic relationship are legitimised, and reciprocally, Viki's behaviour towards her is legitimised because it makes her feel more secure in her femininity. Laxmi writes,

> I am experiencing [abuse] with Viki because he brings out the woman in me – I
> can do anything to keep my man happy and that is a very powerful feeling, it can
> drive you to extremes. I understand it now – how, to keep her husband happy, the
> woman will go to any lengths. How she'll sacrifice. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande
> 187–88)

Not only does Laxmi say that submitting to violence makes her more feminine, but also contrarily it gives *her* power. Laxmi also switches from using the first-person "I" when she speaks of her own experience with Viki, to the third-person when she talks about womanhood in general when she writes "the woman will go to any lengths. How she'll sacrifice" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 188). It seems, therefore, that she equates her own femininity *and* womanhood in general with sacrifice and surrendering one's own wants and needs to meet the wants and needs of one's romantic male partner. Laxmi's own understanding of femininity and womanhood are necessarily intertwined with, if not outright violence, then an imbalanced power dynamic in which the man's masculinity is primarily manifested through his emotional and physical power over his female partner (and therefore the female partner's womanhood is necessarily established through an emotional and physical submission to her male partner).

In *Our Lives,* however, we hear about the hijras' physical and sexual abuses from childhood. Although, for the most part, the type of abuse the hijras face is in the form of bullying and microaggressions, the bullying these hijras experience becomes more serious when people in powerful positions realise that these young people are completely isolated and without friends, and they can therefore act with impunity. For example, Sundari experiences similar bullying to the other hijras, however, it is when one of her teachers picks up on this that her abuse becomes more serious, and the teacher preys on her isolation. She states: "The sports master caught onto this point and forcefully had sex with me" (Revathi 264). It is because of Sundari's lack of support from her peers and from other adults that her teacher abuses her: he is safe in the knowledge that she has nobody to confide in. Later, when she moves out of her parents' house in order to live openly as a hijra, the warden of the hostel she lives in is able to take advantage of her isolated situation and is able to keep her in conditions akin to slavery. She says, "The warden at the hostel came to know that I was a hijra. He would order me to wash clothes, and reduced my quota of food. All of that was unbearable. Sometimes I used to feel like jumping off the terrace of the hostel" (Revathi 169–70). It is only through her telling of this story for publication in *Our Lives* that these acts of violence are ever brought into the open.

For other hijras, it is their family members who are physically violent. Sundari states it is her father who physically abused her:

> At home they scolded me […] and burnt my leg—left and right, and
> my thighs. You can still see eight scars on my legs. My father was a
> mechanic. He would pierce me with the screwdriver in his hand. I am

not trying to blame my parents. I can only blame God Almighty for

having created me thus. Not a single day passed in my life without my

complaining to God for not having created me as either a male or

female. (Revathi 257)

Throughout telling these incredibly violent anecdotes, the contributors to Revathi's text do not place blame on their abusers. In Sundari's case she seems not to even find her father responsible for her abuse. Although she describes him as committing the brutally violent act, she blames both herself and "God Almighty" for having made her a hijra. She therefore suggests that she herself is culpable for the violence she endures because of her gender identity. In this sense, Sundari's story reflects a cultural context and normative values around gender roles, family relations, and shame which reveals a caste-specific culture in which fear of social demise leads to violence in the home, as we saw in Dalit women's writing earlier in the chapter. Sundari does not linger on these violent moments in the text. She quickly moves on from a description of being burnt to immediately adding that her father would pierce her with a screwdriver; a shocking image. This onslaught of violent images – which continues throughout Sundari's story of her childhood – is harrowing to read, and highlights the constant abuse she faced as a child.

In Laxmi and Sundari's representations of familial and intimate partner violence, their understanding of culpability and responsibility is not clear-cut. Both absolve their abusers of guilt – Laxmi admits Viki's tendency towards violence but explains that this is a "normal" part of female-male romantic relationships, and is in fact a way to fulfil and strengthen gender roles within their relationship, while Sundari absolves her father and blames her own gender identity, and god's role in assigning this to her, for the violence she endures. Whilst the authors are exposing these previously hidden acts of violence, they stop short of condemning their abusers outright. This question of blame is something I return to in the next section.

Childhood Abuse: The Spectre of Violence Past

Several of the authors and contributors write about the violence they endured as children because of their gender identity, or perceived gender identity. As I described above, much of this violence came from family members and took place within the domestic space of the home, where the abuse they suffered was largely hidden. However, the authors and

contributors also discuss the abuse they suffered at school, in the form of bullying by their peers and teachers, as well as sexual abuse from teachers.

One of the more unusual anecdotes told in Revathi's collection is from Ranjita, who describes a loving and accepting home life where her family is shown as tolerant of the ways she expressed her gender difference. She recounts, "I consciously remember wearing kajal, bindhi, two plaits and flowers and going to school. I studied at the Ponnurangam Middle School. I used to fetch water and grind masalas and do similar chores at home" (Revathi 187). Indeed, Ranjitha also states that her parents had no issue with the way she dressed, accessorised, or her preference for doing "feminine" chores. It is only when she encounters bullying at school, and later at home, that the way she perceived herself changed. Ranjitha goes on to say, "The teasing grew too much. I quit school and stayed home doing domestic chores" (Revathi 194). Because the abuse she endured became too emotionally taxing, Ranjitha then did not have access to education, which in turn, because of the likely socio-economic outcomes of a lack of schooling, means that it will be more likely that she will continue to experience abuse in, for example, romantic relationships (Montesanti and Thurston 7).[51] Through these stories of childhood violence in the home and school environments, we can see how the cyclical nature of systemic and interpersonal violence continues to affect hijras throughout their lives.[52]

Indeed, bullying from peers at school is a theme throughout the text, with the hijras being touted as "other" and outsiders, leading the way for adults to take advantage of them, knowing they are isolated and vulnerable. For example, Aruna experiences bullying from a chemistry teacher who makes a joke about Aruna being like an alloy metal, rather than a "pure" metal. She states,

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[51] In their study, Monesanti and Thurston review selected papers which conclude that women with a lower education level are more likely to experience domestic violence. Often this is due to a lack of trust in institutions which can help women experiencing abuse (e.g. the police or charities). However, Montesanti and Thurston write that this is just one possible theory.

[52] As noted above, many studies show the relationship between systemic violence and interpersonal violence. They also reveal the cyclical nature of violence throughout a lifetime. For example, one study of domestic violence in India found that of the men who are perpetrators of IPV, one third experienced their fathers abusing their mothers, and 48% were abused by their parents (Sinha et al. 231).

> [o]ne day in our chemistry class the teacher was taking a class on metals. He said, "Iron is a metal. It will be heavy. An alloy will look like iron, but it won't be as heavy as that. It does not have a proper form. It will not have a specific shape. You know an example of an alloy would be this boy sitting here," and pointed at me. "He appears to be male; but his behaviour is like a female's," he continued. The whole class broke into laughter. I felt ashamed. (Revathi 209)

It seems ironic that what the teacher views as a major failing for Aruna – her inability to conform to "a specific shape", or gender – is what she eventually comes to value as part of her hijra identity; she allows herself to inhabit an in-between space which engenders both masculinity and femininity. Again, we see how school – a place which is supposed to provide a safe environment for children, and where teachers should provide support and care for their students – becomes a location where students instead experience abuse, and how this is specifically related to their perceived gender identity.

Towards the end of *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi describes an episode of horrific sexual abuse she suffered as a young child. The abuse took place at a family wedding, where many members of her extended family were present, including the distant teenage cousin who sexually abused her. The section in which Laxmi details the abuses she suffered is subtitled, "And from the Remains Emerges the One Who Stands Tall". In typical Laxmi fashion, she remains defiant despite the harrowing details she describes. She begins, in her third-person narration, "can a six-year-old understand abuse? Comprehend the violence done to him? Can he ever really understand he has been forced?" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 166). To begin with, this seems somewhat enigmatic as the reader does not know who Laxmi is referring to. However, our confusion quickly turns to shock as Laxmi switches to her first-person narration and it becomes clear that she was the victim of this abuse:

> The first time I was abused was in our hometown […] where I had gone along [with] my family, to attend a wedding. *I* was a six-year-old boy who was weak, ill and feminine in *his* demeanour, and that's what made me vulnerable. He was my first cousin- my father's elder brother's son, twenty-one years old. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 167)

By switching between using a first-person and third-person voice to narrate this violent episode, she is able to both tell the reader about this violence similar to how it would have

felt to her younger self, but also to hold the story at a distance. Laxmi is able to remember this event as if it happened to someone else.

Sexual violence is also present in *Our Lives Our Words* when one of the hijras, Roja, is nearing the end of her time in primary school. The headmaster of her school invites her to stay behind to speak with him at the end of the school day. She states "There were no other teachers or students in the building. He took me to a room… held my face and kissed me; he also had sex with me" (Revathi 156). Roja conveys this extremely nonchalantly, despite the severity of a grown man raping her when she was approximately ten or eleven years old. The casualness with which she relays the story indicates that sexual violence is not something which shocks Roja – either due to her own ongoing experiences of sexual violence, or an awareness of this being commonplace for hijras. However her use of an ellipsis indicates that she does need time to tell her story because it is an emotionally difficult one to tell, or that she is not able to say everything she wants to because telling this story is too difficult. Roja also frames herself as someone complicit in this violence. The headmaster's abuse continues when Roja continues to visit him after school hours. She states, "Although it was repulsive on the one hand, I could not resist my desire to meet him" (Revathi 156). Much like Laxmi, Roja is made vulnerable by her position as a child who does not have the emotional intelligence to understand this as abuse. Because her abuser seemingly gives her a choice – "if you like and want this, come back on the 19th of next month" (Revathi 157) – Roja feels responsible for her own abuse, because she returns to her abuser. Rather than seeing this as consequence of manipulation from her abuser, she instead blames her ten-year old self for choosing to continue her so-called relationship with the headmaster.

The question of victim responsibility and blame is one that arises often in studies of childhood abuse. The likelihood of childhood abuse victims blaming themselves for the violence they endured is well established in the sociological and psychological literature in this field. In her seminal text about childhood sexual abuse, Penny Parks states that victims of childhood abuse are likely, as adults, to be "guilt-ridden, self-sabotaging, sexually dysfunctioning, on-going victims" (Parks 13). Indeed, in their study, Rebecca L. Babcock and Anne P. DePrince state that "child abuse perpetrated by a close other, such as a parent, is linked to a wide range of detrimental effects, including an increased risk of self-blame [and people] who experienced severe [intimate partner abuse] during the target incident also indicated higher levels of self-blame" (Babcock and DePrince 526). This analysis also makes sense when read alongside Laxmi's understanding of her current relationship in

which she experiences intimate partner violence and both blames herself, and explains that it is a natural part of experiencing womanhood.

Everyday Violence: Systemic Oppression and Historic Violence

In their texts, Laxmi, Mona, and Revathi and her contributors do not write in much depth about the historical and systemic violence enacted by the state on hijras. However, by reading between the lines of what they say, and looking to their material living conditions, including their ability to find employment and housing, we can see how this systemic and structural violence impacts them in their everyday lives. By looking to these texts, and reading them through the lens of understanding violence against hijras, we are able to see both the detail and nuance of presentations of violence in the authors' real live. The authors connect how structural violence and interpersonal violence affect their lives, but also present violence as ever-changing and evolving. They connect the structural violence they face today with the violence they faced under British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As I described in the introduction to this thesis, and I go on to explain further in my later chapter, "Queering the Family Unit: Inside Hijra Gharanas", the colonisation of India by Britain had profound impacts on hijra communities in the region. However, I have not so far mentioned Partition (1947) or independence from Britian which are significant events in Indian history, and have had significant impacts on hijra communities.

Overwhelmingly, in popular Indian fiction, Partition – the fragmentation of the Indian subcontinent by building borders – is spoken about as *the* intergenerational and cultural trauma felt by all Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis; it is both a nationally and a personally-felt act of violence, with many people having experienced Partition-related violence themselves. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed briefly touches on the impact that Partition had on her Muslim family who moved from India to Pakistan. She states, "I think of Partition, how a country was broken up in the afterlife of colonialism; how borders became open wounds; how an infection can spread. Family stories were passed down about Partition […]. A national break can be interwoven with a life story" (Ahmed 192). Ahmed describes the fragmentation caused by Partition as a wound, causing an infection which subsequently spreads through the generations of the affected families or communities. Although Partition and the dissolution of the British Raj are not written about in depth in my primary texts, the authors indicate an understanding of how culturally significant these events were. Mona Ahmed is the most explicit in her reference to it when comparing the oppression of Indian people under the British Raj with how hijras are oppressed in current day India. She

questions, "We fought for our freedom from the British for so many years, and what have we got now?" (Singh and Ahmed 119). For Mona, colonialism may have ended for India in 1948, but the colonising ideals and ideas imposed on gender nonconforming people, such as hijras, are still very much part of her life today.

Although Partition directly or indirectly impacts all Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian citizens, many histories tell the story of the nation, rather than individual citizens. The appropriation of personal traumas to create national narratives which purposefully alienate, and often attempt to completely erase, marginalised groups is something that has occurred in India. Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Jana Party (BJP), and political discourse in India more widely, has become increasingly right-wing, nationalistic, and dependent on Hindutva ideology. In *Untouchable Fictions,* Jatin Gajarwala investigates the relationship between the 1947 Partition of India and the violence experienced by Dalit communities, and the vast difference between the narrative of national violence presented by the state and the personal violence actually felt by Dalits and other marginalised peoples in the wake of Partition, as represented in Dalit life writing. Gajarwala argues that while Partition was responsible for personal and communal violence, it is not in the all-encompassing psychological ways we might think or the ways oft-cited in political discourse and popular fictional works which centre on intangible questions of national identity. Using the case of Dalit communities and families, Gajawala does not reference violence fuelled by religious difference or wider political instability in border regions, but instead focuses on the more tangible, trickle-down effects of these national traumas. Using Mohandas Naimishraya's autobiographical *Apna Gav* as an example text, Gajawala extrapolates that the wider political event of Partition as a national event is deprivileged in the context of Dalit life. Instead, personal stories of violence and suffering become legible. Gajawala states, "in this text, Partition isn't completely elided but is read—not just primarily, but solely—in terms of its exacerbation of the problems of hunger and clean water […] the shrinking levels of flour in the canisters, the dried-up canal, the worsening quality of meals" (Gajarawala 188). Although this gives focus to personal stories, which are often overlooked in the shadow of the sheer scale of the national violence, it also locates Dalit communities as excluded from the traditional narratives of Partition violence.

In its current iteration, the narrative of the nation, which looks at the so-called "bigger picture", emphasises the huge numbers of refugees moving between the newly created states of Pakistan and Bangladesh to and from India (approximately 12-15 million people), and the subsequent, often sectarian, violence which led to the deaths of approximately 2 million

people (Mohanram 921). However, these narratives do not serve to explain the losses that individuals, families, and communities experienced during and after Partition. As Susan Sontag states in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003),

> strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory […]. All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory [also collective grief and trauma] is not remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story of how it happened. (Sontag, *Pain of Others* 74)

Here Sontag explains that "collective memory" – what I termed above as the "narrative of a nation" – is not able to provide healing or remembrance to the affected individuals, families, or communities because all it serves to do is highlight what is important and what is not, and often ruling political parties choose to highlight whichever narrative best serves them. So, unlike the so-called "poster-ready"[53] images associated with Partition (such as scenes of extreme sectarian violence), the images and recollections of how Partition and colonialism are presented to us in *Myself Mona Ahmed* are unfamiliar. They are not associated with the collective memories of Partition (the narratives of the nation), and instead offer a personal, material insight into how the history of British colonialism and the subsequent splicing up of an entire subcontinent has shaped people's lives today. How does Mona show us how her life, as a Muslim Indian hijra, is shaped by enduring colonial-era attitudes to nonconforming gender and religious difference, and how does this differ from the "narrative of the nation"?

When Mona remarks "We fought for our freedom from the British for so many years, and what have we got now?" (Singh and Ahmed 119), she is speaking to a wider discussion about the progress and tolerance of Indian society since independence, and how these relate to her gender identity, her caste, her class, and her Muslim identity. She compares the

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[53] "Poster-ready" is a term Sontag uses to refer to visual "sound bites" which have been subsumed into pop-culture and common memory, such as the mushroom cloud of an A-bomb, Martin Luther King Junior speaking at the Lincoln Memorial, the first astronaut to walk on the moon, and various photographs which contribute to the collective remembering of Nazi concentration camps (Sontag, *Pain of Others* 75). In the context of Partition, these images are often of huge swathes of the population moving between the newly formed nations of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, as well as scenes of sectarian violence.

apparent "broadmind[edness]" of the West, where according to Mona trans people are easily accepted ("even if [someone has] a sex change operation, society still accepts them" (Singh and Ahmed 119)), with the "narrowminded[ness]" of modern day India: "Our culture should be tolerant and not so closed. This is no progress, I feel […]. What happened to us? Instead of becoming a more modern India, we are becoming a very close-minded people. This is very sad for India" (Singh and Ahmed 119). Although Mona initially specifically refers to the struggles with trans and hijra acceptance, she later writes about women's rights more generally, and ends this section of writing with a reflection about democracy and religious violence more broadly, asking, "What democracy is this? They break a mosque and want to build a temple […] This is not the democracy we fought for […] We people are powerless. This cannot be called democracy" (Singh and Ahmed 119). By linking all of these societal issues - the acceptance of trans and hijra individuals, the rights of women (and particularly what they are allowed to wear), and the problems of creating and enacting a fair democracy in which everyone's voices are heard - Mona creates a narrative in which systemic violence (a lack of democracy) and interpersonal violence (Muslim on Hindu violence) are linked, particularly in the context of the postcolonial state of India and its democratisation process. While Mona does not make a clear argument about how these topics are related, and discusses all of these complex issues over the course of just one page, she makes clear that she feels that the government rulings about religion and women, the government's refusal to include all gender-variant people, as well as religious minorities, in their version of democracy, leads to a society and individuals who are intolerant and violent. For example, she points to sectarian violence (this time violence against Christians) in India when she says, "If Christians talk of their religion, we burn them alive" (Singh and Ahmed 119). This many-layered and complex understanding of violence shows that because of Mona's low standing in society (because of her hijra identity, as well as her Muslim, low-caste, and homeless status) she faces the threat of violence from all levels.

Fighting Back: Finding Agency after Violence

In the texts, the authors find different ways of recovering from their abuse, or fighting back against their abusers – and often in unexpected ways. Laxmi's method of coping with the trauma inflicted on her as a child is to use sexual power to take revenge on both her abusers, and men in general. She states that when she was older, she found the cousin who sexually abused her, saying, "I forced him to have sex with me – I just caught him and flung him on to my bed and then I walked out halfway, leaving him powerless. […] Sex became my personal

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power tool […] I took revenge" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 171). In this section, Laxmi comfortably inhabits the first-person voice and seems comforted in her ability to take control. She goes on, "[t]o see a hunk of a man helpless, with absolutely no control o[f] himself – to strip him naked, to order him to strip naked – is a very powerful thing" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 172). Although this rape scene is uncomfortable to read from our protagonist, we understand that it is Laxmi's desire to make her abusers powerless and in her control which drives her to do this; perhaps she is aiming to rebuild that part of herself – her strength - which she felt was lost when she was abused. Here, it is clear that Laxmi equates, or at least strongly associates, violence, control, and power. While there has been an abundance of theory which suggests that violence and power are not the same thing (perhaps most famously in Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (1970)),[54] we can understand that to the victims of violence, violence certainly appears and feels like power (both when used against them and when weaponised against their perpetrators).[55]

Unlike Laxmi, however, Mona finds resistance to violence in vulnerability. After she is beaten by the other hijras from her old gharana (see Figure 3), she seeks out Dayanita Singh to record the bruises and marks on her body, as she says, "make a record of my pain" (Singh and Ahmed 106). She finds strength in Dayanita helping her through this difficult time, and relies on her love and friendship to heal, rather than relying on revenge to make herself feel better. Whilst both Mona and Laxmi have experienced consistent violence through their lives, which is shown to us throughout their respective texts, Laxmi begins to exercise violence as a result, whereas Mona finds agency through attempting to record and disseminate her story.

Many of the authors and contributors also work or volunteer for activist organisations, which help victims of violence. However, it seems that these spaces are not free from violence for hijras either. Towards the end of the *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi writes a chapter entitled "The Destroyer: The Transformer" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 157), in which she describes microaggressions (and explicit aggressions) in LGBTQ+ spaces. This section focuses on several acts of violence Laxmi has endured, which later caused her to become vengeful – referencing the chapter title. She takes issue with the LGBTQIA+ communities in India who

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[54] Arendt famously states in this seminal text that "power and violence are opposites" (Arendt 56)

[55] See Martha McMaughey, "The Fighting Spirit: Women's Self-Defense Training and the Discourse of Sexed Embodiment" (1998) and Bat-Ami Bar On's *The Subject of Violence: Arendtean Exercises in Understanding* (2002) for non-Indian contexts.

insist that hijras are part of a wider group called MSM (men who have sex with men), because she believes this is an act of diminishing hijra identity by labelling hijras as "men". Ashok Row Kavi, whom Laxmi calls her mentor, also insists that Laxmi belongs to the MSM group, and is even disparaging about her using the word hijra to describe her gender identity. She states, "I have always been emphatic in making this difference clear – MSM is a behavioural aspect, I do not belong to that group. I am a community, I am a hijra, a different being altogether. I am definitely not a man" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 162). It seems here that Laxmi is drawing a conscious divide between what she calls "behavioural aspects" – what we might think of as sexuality – and gender identity, whereas her mentor sees her attraction to men as the key to her gender/sexuality. It is clear that Laxmi views Ashok's lack of support as something deeply upsetting when he negatively reviewed her first autobiographical text, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015). She states, "It was shocking to me that a person of that calibre could behave like that. He was my mentor, how could he just turn into a vicious enemy. I felt so hurt because I have never attacked anyone on a public forum and I never will – you just don't do that" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 164). Laxmi also discusses the pain of having her mentor turn against her, telling her she was not suitable for working in activist circles. She, however, perseveres, saying "I proved him wrong by working in all capacities in every sphere of this movement, from women's policies to gay and lesbian rights to the problems of sex workers – I did it all, I was everywhere" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande

Figure 3. (Singh and Ahmed 106).

163). Laxmi chooses to stay determined and resolute in her work, even in the face of abuse, creating agency for herself by choosing her own path.

Conclusion: Breaking Taboos and Creating Agency

That gender-based and hijra-targeted violence is a theme throughout these diverse examples of hijra life writing is perhaps not surprising considering the wider epidemic of both gender-based violence (against women and girls) and the prevalence of violence against trans people taking place globally, as I briefly discuss in the introduction to this chapter. Because the violence hijras experience has been taking place for so long (beginning with the enslavement of eunuchs in Mughal courts and continuing through the colonial laws of the British Raj), and is so multifaceted, it seems to be a near impossible problem to solve. However, in the texts, we see how the authors take agency by telling and disseminating their stories. To my mind, part of the reason why it is so important for these hijras to record their own stories, in their own words, is to shed light on the hidden violence they still endure in modern India. In this way, the authors create their own archive, to make a record of the violence they have been victim to. Indeed, this is a phenomenon that Ann Cvetkovitch draws attention to in *An Archive of Feelings*. Although discussing this in the context of the West, she states that queer people have faced a silencing of their voices and erasure of their individual and communal experiences by an oppressive dominant heteronormative culture. Subsequently, queer experiences and histories cannot be located in mainstream archival spaces. Instead, she argues, a queer archive can be constructed primarily by drawing on "memory and personal experience […] as a forum for personal histories that are also social and cultural ones" (Cvetkovitch 26).

Drawing on memory and personal experience is what the authors do in their texts to tell their stories and discuss their personal experiences of violence. This idea of personal, alongside social and cultural, experiences is key to approaching life writing in a queer Indian context too, because the authors locate their personal stories within wider frameworks of family, caste and gharana communities, but also in opposition to – as well as living alongside – the oppressive dominant, heteronormative Indian culture. For the authors to tell their own stories, and their experiences of trauma, is to resist the ways in which national histories and narratives erase tensions and violence which do not contribute to a story of national (Hindutva) cohesion. Just as Cvetkovich's book aims to "illuminate the forms of violence that are forgotten or covered over by the amnesiac powers of national culture" (Cvetkovitch 16), the hijra authors also illuminate the forms of violence done to them, which may be obscured

by and from wider society. Perhaps even more likely to be forgotten or covered over in national discourses are everyday and widespread violences like microaggressions; after all, it is only by tracing these experiences that a pattern emerges. It is only by listening to hijra voices and their individual experiences that forgotten forms of violence can be remembered by wider society.

Achieving visibility of hijras' suffering, however, has not been the sole aim of this chapter. Although visibility can indeed create change and act as a starting point for activism, violent episodes which affect people in their real lives should not have to form the basis of a willingness to change. Indeed, this is something which Cvetkovich also draws attention to in the epilogue of *An Archive of Feelings.* "Does someone have to die in order for it to matter?" (Cvetkovitch 278). For me, the question could equally be, "does someone have to be hurt, or experience violence, in order for it to matter?". Ultimately, often the violence these authors have faced – both interpersonal and systemic – is compounded by the multiple intersecting oppressions they face, through identifying as hijras *and* being, alternatively, Muslim, sex-positive, low-caste, working-class, or suffering from mental illness. Working towards a less violent and less heteronormative society is one thing, but working towards a society in which all people are accepted and welcomed to take part is another.

Of all the themes I discuss in this thesis, looking to the authors' representations of violence can provide perhaps the most compelling argument for the need to address the systemic and institutional inequalities and violence enforced and upheld by the Indian government. This is felt in the material living conditions like housing, healthcare, education, and employment, it is also just one part of the hijra authors' life stories. I maintain that it is perhaps equally important to understand elements of the authors' lives, which provide different perspectives on hijra life and culture, as it is represented in life writing texts. It is not my aim for readers to view these authors solely through the lens of tragedy and violence, but to understand these matters within the context of multifaceted lives: sometimes tragic, but sometimes joyful, fulfilled, powerful, and talented individuals and communities. It is also important to mention that, if domestic violence (within romantic relationships, as well as familial, and gharana relationships) and violence against hijras more generally (because they are an ostracised minority group) is marked by silence and concealment, then speaking, or writing, publicly about this violence is both breaking the taboo of speaking about interpersonal violence. It also breaks the power that abusers have over the authors as individuals, and the power they have over hijras as a minority group.

Chapter Three

Queering the Family Unit: Inside Hijra Gharanas

This chapter examines the significance of the gharana (household) and the nuances between different hijras' experiences of this way of living, as they are represented in my primary life writing texts. Typically, in the existing sociological and historical scholarship on hijra communities, the gharana (hijra household or community) is presented as the natural successor in living situation to the private zenana of the Mughal courts, where eunuchs often lived and worked (Hinchy 2020; Hinchy 2021; Nanda 2010). Although these types of historical and sociological sources are a useful starting point to understand why and how gharanas came to exist, and how the policing of hijra identity under colonial rule created an atmosphere under which hijra identity and kinship bonds must be hidden, my primary texts show a more complicated and uncommonly represented picture of how hijras create and maintain kinship bonds and family units. In this chapter I seek to understand how hijras locate their culture within hijra gharanas (and why some of the authors divert from this commonly held assumption), and how the gharana provides a family network for those who do not have biological family. However, I also ask how the authors understand these familial relationships: are they relationship which provide love and solidarity, are they a necessity for creating a life which is economically viable, or are they the only option for some hijras who have been abandoned or badly treated by their biological families?

While in many cases, the authors and contributors do indeed write about being or having been part of gharanas, finding comfort and kinship within them, and under the tutelage of their guru, many do not stay in their gharanas for life. Some of the authors present the gharana as a space in which rules and regulations are valued above the hijras' individual welfare and wellbeing, some have personal differences with their peers and gurus, whilst some leave to pursue economic or romantic trajectories. Another aspect of family and kinship shown in the texts is biological family. Whilst in many existing studies, the biological family home is framed as a space which excludes hijras (because they are rejected by their family due to their gender identity), or family members are shown to be the perpetrators of violence, my primary texts show the possibility of different narratives. Furthermore, some hijras do live in gharanas and form kinship bonds there whilst simultaneously maintaining relationships with their biological families. Looking to life writing texts through the lens of understanding kinship bonds allows for a much more nuanced view than previously presented in other studies, and frames kinship as more multifaceted and varied. We see the authors frame biological family, gharana peership, adopted children, romantic partners, as well as

non-human relationships as all forms of kinship which they create and maintain through various environments, including and excluding gharanas.

<u>Constructing the Hijra Household: Historic Hijra Families and Traditional Cultural Bonding</u>
The gharana is where many hijras live and work, and many think of their gharana peers as family members, calling their gurus (leaders) "mother", their guru's guru "grandmother", and their fellow chelas (disciples or followers) "sister". However, despite these often close and often affectionate relationships, in many gharanas there is also a strict hierarchy based on power and an economic chain of command, with gurus often dictating what jobs and duties chelas can perform. The following diagram shows a typical gharana hierarchy, and also indicates which jobs members of the gharana typically hold due to their status (see Figure 4). In *Our Lives, Our Words*, one hijra speaks to Revathi about how her gharana employs a system of official adoption (though not legal) for any new hijra to the household, and she tells us briefly how this fits in with the larger scale of hijra gharanas. She tells us that there are seven key "houses" in Mumbai which all have many gharana subsidiaries. She explains, "In Mumbai, the hijras have seven houses. They decide among themselves who should adopt whom. That method is called reethu. All the seven Nayaks, the heads of each household, sit together and decide on the adoption of chelas, or daughters" (Revathi 845).
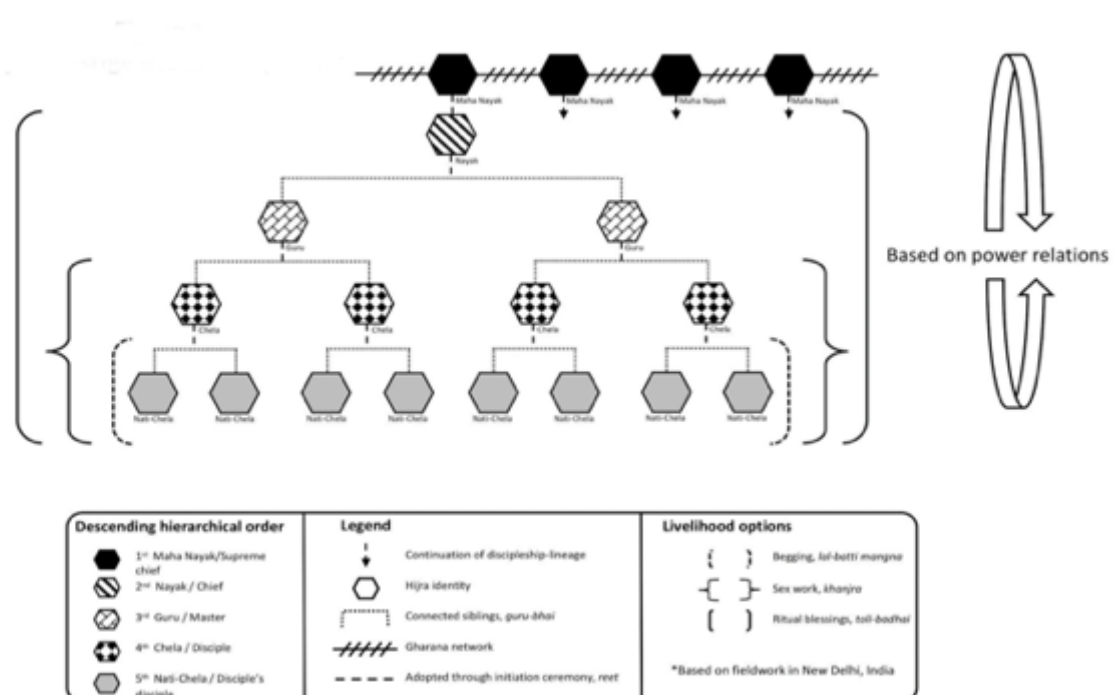

Figure 4. Diagram taken from "Understanding Caste" (Goel 17).

In her chapter, "Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Story", Serena Nanda concisely sums up the typical construction of the hijra gharana. She states,

> the most important element of hijra social organization is the guru-chela relationship. The hijra guru is both mentor and parent; the chela's role is as a dependent and obedient child and student. Each recruit to the hijra community is sponsored by a guru, who pays the new member's initiation fee and takes responsibility for her material subsistence, receiving a portion of the chela's earnings in return. The gurus in each city form a jamat, or council of elders, who regulate the working conditions of the city, act as a dispute resolution forum, and serve as the authorizing body of community membership and exclusion. (Nanda 124)

This gharana structure of generations of guru-chela, based on both kinship bonding, economic alliance, and mentorship is apparent in all of the life writing texts I analyse, and many of the hijras enjoy the kinship and community provided by the gharana. However, in my primary texts, the authors' representations of gharanas are characterised by the regulations of the gharana, as well as its ability to exclude those who do not abide by these regulations, and this makes life difficult for many. Most notable in this respect are Laxmi and Mona's accounts of their stays in gharanas, who both find their gurus and fellow chelas to be unaccepting of certain behaviours.

The multigenerational nature of the gharana, unlike other aspects of gharana life, is much more akin to the norm of Indian society, which Diane Mines discusses in her wide-ranging study of modern Indian society. She states, "the vast majority of India's elders continue to live in multigenerational family homes: of persons aged sixty or older, just 4 percent in 2000 lived in single-person households, for instance, and just 7 percent as an elderly couple" (Mines 11). Although the multigenerational household is slowly becoming less common in India, it persists both in gharanas and within the wider population (Asher et al. 1). Indeed, in their introduction to *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings in Indian Literature*, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai discuss the long history of communal living and parenting in India. They take examples from ancient texts and songs, which show examples of group parenting, as well as co-parenting between multiple people of the same gender, and this is represented by stories of celestial beings. They write,

The songs present a recurrent vision of the universe as pervaded by natural forces functioning as parent figures, whose protection is sought by humans. These parent figures often are addressed as father and mother; very often, too, they are conceived as pairs of mothers or groups of mothers. Thus, Heaven and Earth (Dyaus and Prithvi) are ambiguously gendered and are sometimes addressed in the same hymn as Father and Mother, as twin mothers and as friends. (Vanita and Kidwai 14)

Vanita and Kidwai explain that this ambiguous gendering of the natural world, as well as gods and goddesses, are often used as evidence by hijras (and other queer parents) as evidence for their right to be parents, and show that multigenerational and communal living ("groups of mothers") are part of a long tradition in India.

In *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood,* Shelley M. Park provides a discussion of how queer motherhood resists neo-liberal and heteronormative ideals of "good" mothering and the traditional family unit as the optimal (and often portrayed to be the only) form of parenting within heteronormative cultures. Park states that the "patriarchal family unit [is] an institution through which 'abnormal' sexuality is regulated by the state" (Park 17). This understanding of the heteronormative family unit being an extension of the state's surveillance and control (ideological, economic etc.) is reflected in hijras' need to live in separate communities. This fits with Jessica Hinchy's analysis of the colonial state's fear of the hijra gharana in India, which concludes that hijra gharanas are both feared and surveilled by state apparatus. Because the heteronormative family structure does not exist in the gharana, intrapersonal surveillance and regulation of "abnormal" sexuality and gender cannot take place. In fact, often the opposite occurs, with so-called abnormal sexuality and gender practices being activity encouraged, making the gharana a space which threatens the values and practices of the state.

As discussed in previous chapters, hijras often locate their cultural origins and kinship ancestry in the Mughal courts of the sixteenth century, where eunuchs were often kept as slaves, although some also worked as trusted advisors, military soldiers, and in other respected roles. In her 2015 article, Jessica Hinchy explains that the origins of gharana kinship bonds can be found in the relationships formed by the eunuch slaves of the Mughal courts. She states,

child eunuchs formed intimate or affective relationships with both peers and authority figures. Relationships of discipleship and kinship were central to the processes of enslavement in north India; nevertheless, forming these relationships was a significant way in which children lessened the emotional impacts of enslavement, the severing of family ties and estrangement from their origins. (Hinchy, "Enslaved Childhoods" 382)

Although there is no evidence to suggest that hijra youths are enslaved by the gharana in the modern day, their newfound kinship bonds with their gharana members may serve to help with the loss of their biological family (who, as we see in the autobiographical texts, disown their hijra child, more often than not). Hinchy discusses how kinship bonds within the Mughal courts were important for eunuchs to create a family network within a relatively limited, hierarchical and structured setting. She writes,

One of the most important social bonds in the lives of [eunuchs] was that between the [eunuch] teacher (guru, pir, or murshid) and disciple (chela or murid). Genealogies of generations of [eunuch] gurus and chelas were recognized within Awadh [located in modern day Uttar Pradesh] society and gurus were a dominant presence in child eunuchs' lives. [They] also established formal adoptive kinship ties with non-biological kin which were socially recognized. (Hinchy, "Enslaved Childhoods" 385)

These formal adoptive kinship ties can be seen frequently in the life writing texts I analyse, both within and outside of the gharana, with some hijras informally adopting children and becoming mothers outside of the gharana.

In the colonial environment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hijras began to create their own households. In "Gender, Family, and the Policing", Jessica Hinchy states that although notions of patrilineal descent and traditional (British) family units were thought to be the appropriate model for kinship, hijra gharanas were not thought to provide a significant threat to the state or Indian society. She notes that "the colonial government did not closely regulate marriage practices, domestic arrangements, or the gendered organization of labour" (Hinchy, "Gender, Family, and Policing" 1669). However, as British state surveillance of Indian people increased due to a fear of anti-colonial sentiment, hijra gharanas became a site of significant interest to local and national authorities. One key piece of legislation which

relates to the surveillance of the gharana is the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (CTA), which ostensibly attempted to limit the movement of nomadic groups due to their perceived criminality. However, the CTA was edited to include a second part, which aimed to control the hijra population. This second part was entitled "Eunuchs", as hijras were then known, and included such policies as keeping a "register of eunuchs and their property", giving "penalt[ies] on registered eunuch[s] appearing in female clothes", and the having the "power to require information as to a registered eunuch's property" ("Criminal Tribes Act (1871)").

Although Part One of the CTA focuses on "resettling" nomadic tribes and subsuming them into the traditional Indian caste system, Part Two of the CTA specifically targeted hijras (or eunuchs, as they were then known) and their ability to dress in feminine clothes, perform dance in public, and welcome new initiates. Although all of these restrictions on hijra culture were harmful to community building, the ban on new initiates, which was often enforced under the guise of anti-kidnapping and anti-slavery laws and child welfare, meant that hijras were not allowed to pass along their cultural traditions to a new generation. Hinchy sums up the difference between Parts One and Two of the CTA as "assimilation versus elimination" (Hinchy, "Gender, Family, and Policing" 1681). This ban on hijras being able to take part in, and pass along, key parts of their culture effectively attempted to eradicate the hijra way of life, and to criminalise hijra identity altogether. Indeed, whilst Part One of the CTA attempted to make the so-called Criminal Tribes more productive and assailable members of society, Part Two aimed to "erase [h]ijras from public space through the prohibition of performance and feminine dress, and, in the long term, to gradually render them 'extinct' by interfering with Hijra discipleship and preventing castration (which the British incorrectly considered a prerequisite for Hijra-hood)" (Hinchy, "Gender, Family, and Policing" 1681). Indeed, the hijra gharana itself was thought to be a site of criminality by colonial powers, with the household being a space where kidnapped children were brought, prostitution was encouraged, and, of course, gender deviance was ubiquitous. Key to this chapter is the examination of hijra discipleship, what this means to the authors of my life writing texts, and how these key elements of hijra community and culture have been outlawed, criminalised, and commonly misunderstood by wider society.

Outside Gharana Kinships: Biological Family Ties

Many of the authors and contributors also write about their biological family's inability to accept, or come to terms with, their child's gender identity and their choice to become part of a hijra gharana. This idea is emphasised in the previous chapter, where I discuss the violence

many of the hijras' biological families enact on them due to their gender identity. The most obvious exception to this is Laxmi, who explains that she remains close with her family, and especially her parents, to this day. She writes tenderly about her relationship with her father, and remembers how, despite being a typical Brahmin man (who was in many ways politically right-wing and believed in Hindutva ideals), was accepting and loving towards Laxmi after she revealed her hijra identity.

In the first chapter of her *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi writes about both her biological family, and her experience of living in a hijra gharana. She puts particular emphasis on her relationship with her father, and introduces him as follows: "my father, was, I believe, the perfect man, because he created all three genders: my elder sister […] a woman, my younger brother […] a man; and me. He was the archetypal man […] strong, handsome, tall" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 16). This tells her reader about her belief in gender ideals which are based in normative stereotypes and tradition – "strong, handsome, tall". But she also frames him as almost God-like, as the creator of all living things, or all genders in this case. However, she also remembers him fondly as a caring man, even in her childhood, who often performed caring duties which would normally have been left for a child's mother to attend to. For example, she remembers,

> I was a very sickly child, falling ill often and suffering serious bouts of asthma […] It was my father who took the utmost pains in bringing me up and making sure I was fine. He did anything and everything he could, leaving no stone unturned in trying to find a solution to my medical problems. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 17)

Although this might strike the reader as a normal part of parenting – looking after an ill child – the love and care he provides does stand in stark contrast to how familial relationships are represented in my other primary texts, as we have seen in the previous chapter. These anecdotes culminate in Laxmi explaining how unusual it is in the context of Indian society for a man of her father's standing to be so understanding and caring, particularly towards a hijra child. She states, "There he was, a part of such an orthodox Brahmin family, patriarchal to the core, and there I was, his first born male child, his eldest son, oozing femininity. The world would taunt him about my sexuality, but he would simply ignore it" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 18). Here we see Laxmi explicitly stating that non-normative sexuality and gender challenges traditional, patriarchal family structures, and challenges her own family's

understanding of how family structures should work. Despite these challenges, her father surprises her by accepting her and loving her nonetheless.

However, Laxmi's family was not always completely understanding of her hijra identity. She writes occasional sentences which show a glimpse of how difficult her family dynamic could be during her childhood and in her adult life. For example, she tells us that her friends often refer to her as Raju when they are talking to her mother, which is the male name she was given at birth, and is one she no longer uses. She writes, "when he [her friend, Atharv] speaks to mummy, he'll immediately switch to calling me Raju (my childhood nickname), even though he always calls me Laxmi" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 34). Although Atharv might call Laxmi her old name from force of habit, it might also be representative of how Laxmi's family typically treat her. Although Laxmi describes her parents as accepting of her hijra identity, they might have struggled to accept her fully as a hijra, and their possible refusal of using her (feminine) name may be symptomatic of this. However, her and her mother clearly love each other deeply, and Laxmi writes at length about how much she worries for her mother, particularly after her father's death. She writes, "there is nobody else who cares that much about you, who worries about [you] – Are you fine? Did you sleep? Did you eat? Only parents think that way, they are your biggest assets" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 62). Despite her family's possible inability to fully embrace Laxmi's gender identity, she mothers Laxmi in a way she knows how to: by making sure her core needs are met.

The mutual care and love between Laxmi and her parents is contrasted starkly by many of the other hijras' accounts of their familial relationships. More commonly in my primary texts, the hijras describe the complete isolation from their family after revealing their hijra identity fully. For example, although Mona does not write about her biological family in much depth, she does mention that she was not allowed to attend her family's funerals. She writes, "I could not participate in the funeral of my mother, father, or sister, as I would have brought shame on them" (Singh and Ahmed 141). Not only is this deeply upsetting, but it is also somewhat ironic, considering that she lives in a graveyard but cannot attend a different graveyard to mourn the loss of her family. Similarly, Sudha Senthilkumar (one of contributors to *Our Lives*) speaks about the deep shame her family feels due to her gender identity. They do not want to be publicly associated with her, and she states that when she was ill, her male family members refused to visit her: "Even at the hospital, my father, brother or uncle never visited me. My mother, younger sister and a hijra took care of me. I was saved" (Revathi 295). Here, Sudha Senthilkumar emphasises the fact that she must rely on her female family

members, as well as an unnamed "hijra" to care for her. The fact that she shows a nameless hijra as being more caring than her biological family is indicative of how callous her male family members are. For many of the hijras who speak about their biological family's unaccepting reaction to their gender identity, this issue of their male family members being less accepting than their female family members seems to be largely to do with their seeing masculinity as a key indicator of strength, power, and an ability to pass on a family name and caste culture.[56] Similarly, Aruna's family simply do not understand that some people's gender does not match that which they are assigned at birth. She tells us that she kept her identity and her nirvan operation a secret from her family. The next time she sees her family, they do not understand that she is now a woman. She writes, "My family thought that I lived wearing woman's clothes during my absence from home. They did not realize that I had actually become a woman. They couldn't even imagine such a thing. Perhaps they thought that a man dies if he is castrated" (Revathi 345). This thought that someone might die if they undergo nirvan is demonstrative of a more fundamental lack of understanding, rather than just a lack of acceptance. Here, we see that Aruna's family see the removal of the penis as symbolic of emasculation and disempowerment.

Kokila, another contributor to Revathi's collection, shows her family being accepting of her wearing feminine clothes, but only when they feel that this will not cause embarrassment to the family. She writes,

> When I told my father that I was going to wear a saree and become an aravani, he
> took a promise from me. "We have our kith and kin around. You wear a saree or
> whatever when you are outside. But when you come home, please come in a lungi
> and a shirt. Or else, we would become the laughing stalk of all our relatives. They
> will bad mouth our family. Please!" he said. Now I have broken that promise. My
> father is no more. There is no one to lay down conditions. (Revathi 414)

Here, we see the contrasting restrictions lain down by her family, and the comparative freedom she feels now her father has died and cannot dictate how she behaves and dressed ("There is no one to lay down conditions"). It is Kokila's father, here, who has the power as

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[56] See Riya Mukerjee and Smita Jha's "Reconstructing Dalit Masculinities: A Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies" (2022) for an in-depth analysis of masculinity and family relations as they are represented in Dalit autobiography.

the patriarch of the family, to restrict his child's gender presentation. This is much like Sudha Senthilkumar's and Mona's family reactions; their inability to accept their children seems to be based on a fear of judgement from their peers and extended families, rather than an inherent feeling that hijras and their lifestyles are wrong.

However, not all the contributors to Revathi's collection represent their biological families as judgemental. For example, Vanitha provides a much more balanced view on how societal understandings of hijra life have changed. She writes that previous generations had always lived in gharanas: "In those days we were not educated. Hijras had to bear all kinds of sufferings. No one returned home once they had left. If they had done nirvanam, they never re-entered their homes. Most hijras ended their lives in places where they went to earn their livelihood" (Revathi 1119). Here, Vanitha is unequivocal about how, in the past, hijras would have no contact with their biological families after joining hijras gharanas and undergoing nirvan. However, Vanitha continues, "nowadays, there are hijras staying with their own families with or without having done nirvanam. Some leave home for 4-5 years, and rejoin their families after that. People never revealed themselves as hijras then. Now they are open about it" (Revathi 1119). Vanitha draws a stark comparison between "then" and "now", and demonstrates the comparative freedom and choice that many hijras now have. Because attitudes are slowly changing, along with laws about gender and sexuality, many hijras now have more options available to them. Whilst they can still live in gharana communities if they choose to, many now choose to live either with their biological families or somewhere altogether different.

Although the authors represent their relationships to their biological families as complex, and often fraught with difficulty, they also demonstrate that the kinship bonds, as well as living situations, of many hijras are far more multifarious than previously shown in much of the existing sociological literature. While in nearly all previous scholarly work biological families are presented as responsible for inflicting violence on hijras (Li et al. (2017), Thompson et al. (2019)), and have presented as gharanas as the only viable places providing homes and kinship (Goel (2021); Goel (2022); Hinchy (2021)), the hijra life writing texts present us with narratives in which hijras have been able to forge and maintain kinship bonds both within gharanas, and outside of them, including with their biological families.

Family Tensions: Frictions and Hostility in the Gharana

Laxmi illustrates a more complex relationship with her gharana than many of the other hijras who write about their gharanas, and guru-chela relationships. Laxmi tells us that the first time she learnt anything about hijra culture, she learnt about how central the gharana was to hijra life. A hijra told her about the concept of gharanas, "how your guru is like your parent, you are the chela, and it becomes your family" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 8). However, for Laxmi, the experience of living in the gharana was not as simple as that. She recalls the gharana's strict system of abiding by the rules set out by the more senior members, and how difficult this adjustment was for her. She writes, "I was trying to be myself while simultaneously attempting to live by the rules and regulations of the community, being monitored every second of my life by Lata guru. […] I was lonely and feeling absolutely claustrophobic in the hijra culture" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 25–26). She leaves to start working at a LGBTQ+ charity, and when she tells her guru about this, "she remarked on how loyal I had been to her, and claimed that he [her new work colleague, Atharv] had poisoned my mind against her" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 26). This demonstrates how difficult gharana life can be, particularly for more free-spirited or strong-willed individual like Laxmi; often it seems as though gharana life does not leave space for the individual's wishes. Through Laxmi's descriptions of the gharana space, we can see that this family space, like the heteronormative family home, is a fundamentally rule-bound and restrictive space. Although both these spaces are radically different, they both come with rules and potentiality for oppression. As I discuss further in Chapter Five, queer spaces are not necessarily always subversive spaces.

Mona also touches on how difficult the gharana environment can be. When she is still living with her gharana, she writes,

> [gharanas] have their own rules and do not listen to judges or the police. They have their own government. Those who do not obey them are thrown out of their community […] no one can understand what it is like to live in a family that is created because of being a eunuch. [Eight] people in one eunuch family, all different blood, different mind[s], different parents […] that is why they keep changing their families and going to different gurus. But for me, I have never gone away from Chaman's family. She is my guru and always will be. (Singh and Ahmed 65)

Again, this signals how strict the gharana rules can be, with any small discretion or contravention of the rules being reason for chelas to be punished, or even to be removed from the gharana (as exemplified in Goel (2022)). Particularly moving is Mona's dedication to her own gharana, and her belief that her relationship with her gharana, and especially her guru, Chaman, is lifelong. This is in overt contrast to her later feelings towards Chaman, who she blames for removing Ayesha from her life. When she is living in the burial ground, she writes, "This jungle is more peaceful than Chaman's palace. I cannot be a slave to anyone. I cannot take orders from anyone, ever. I do like advice from people. I want to do as I like. Whether it is good or bad" (Singh and Ahmed 143). Her use of the word "slave" is particularly damning and critical of the gharana as a family structure, and corresponds with Laxmi's opinion about her gharana. Mona also reveals that her relationship with guru Chaman was not the first to turn sour. She tells us that she also had a strained relationship with her prior (and first) guru – Duggi Mai – whose care she left because she did not like being made to beg for money, to create an income for her gharana. She states, "All gurus want to keep their students under control, so she had me thrown out of her group and I joined Chaman, because I did not like to go from house to house asking for money when children are born or marriages held" (Singh and Ahmed 102). This highlights the controlling and restrictive nature of some gharanas, just as Laxmi reports "feeling absolutely claustrophobic in the hijra culture" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 26). It seems that Mona was never able to find the solidarity and care she needed from other people, in any community or family setting. She writes, "I feel I have been so hurt by [society] that I have lost interest in living. In my parents' house, they did not let me live, school friends taunted me, so I came to the eunuchs' world, but after 40 years with them I still could not adjust" (Singh and Ahmed 107). Here we can see that despite many of the authors and contributors finding solace in their kinship with gharana members, biological family, and adopted children, these modes of kinship are still not available to all hijras.

Expulsion from the Gharana: Isolation and Vulnerability in *Myself Mona Ahmed*

One of the key themes recorded by Mona Ahmed and Dayanita Singh in *Myself Mona Ahmed* is Mona's sense of isolation and loneliness after being forced to leave her gharana. This isolation is long-term, as she has been ousted from her gharana and is therefore isolated from her peers, but her life has also been punctuated by moments of extreme distress, such as the kidnapping of her beloved daughter, Ayesha. Mona's isolation after being removed from the gharana also highlights the lack of support for those in her position (homeless, and without

family or friends to turn to), and we see others in the living graveyard suffering from severe mental health issues, indicating that they too live in the graveyard because they have nowhere else to go. This demonstrates a systemic problem whereby sufficient provisions are not made by the government to house and care for the unhoused.[57]

Although I use the term isolation, rather than abandonment, with regards to Mona (as this indicates the more long-term nature of her living situation), this isolation stems from her abandonment by her gharana. I frame Mona's expulsion from the gharana as an act of violence, not least because it is coupled with the kidnapping of her daughter, whom she only sees a handful of times after this event, but also because her guru has purposefully removed kinship, economic security, and housing from Mona's life. Without her gharana, Mona is forced into an unpredictable living situation in which she is practically homeless, although she makes the best of a bad situation by creating basic comfort (for example a bed and a community of sorts) in the graveyard. I see this act by her guru as one of violence and abuse of power which results in Mona's homelessness and eventual depression. In her introduction to the text, Mona sets the tone for the rest of the book. The first photograph (Figure 5), on the first page of the text (excluding the introduction), is of Mona sitting as an isolated figure in a barren landscape (which we later learn is the outskirts of the graveyard she lives in). Mona is the focal point of the picture, with her bright white sari highlighting her as the lone figure of the photograph in contrast with the darker landscape behind her. She has her head covered, with only her face appearing to the camera as she stares into the middle distance, with a searching expression. The photograph is captioned, "Sitting in the jungle, I am complaining to Allah that the little joy I got in my life from Ayesha was also snatched away from me" (Singh and Ahmed 4). The word "jungle" is one which Mona uses throughout the text, often to refer to her mental state rather than her physical surroundings. Clearly, in this image, Mona is not physically sitting in a jungle – rather, the location of the graveyard is liminal, urban

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[57] Provisions made for the unhoused in India has been reported in detail elsewhere. For example, Goel et al.'s "Urban Homeless Shelters in India" (2017) explores the totally inadequate conditions of urban homeless shelters across India. They report bedding and washrooms being unavailable, a lack of food, a refusal to allow women into shelters, no provision of drinking water, and conclude that provisions provide on both a national and state government level are "appalling" (Goel et al. 89). This lack of provisions is one possible reason why Mona feels the need to live in the graveyard: because no other provisions are made available to her.

space.[58] Throughout her text in her captions of the images, Mona refers to living in "the jungle" in moments when her mental health and material living conditions seem to be at their worst. Associated with wildness, danger, and isolation, Mona's use of the term seems to signal her own sense of bewilderment and desolation.

Figure 5. (Singh and Ahmed 4).

On the opposite page, we are introduced to the format of the book; whereby long sequences of photographs are interspersed with emails from Mona to the book's editor. We are given glimpses of the inner workings of Mona's mind from the emails she sends to the book's publisher, known to us as Mr Walter. In her first email to Mr Walter, mirroring the photograph, Mona states, "Today, I am alone. Today, there is no one to explain or help me understand. No one comes to meet me nor do I go to meet anyone" (Singh and Ahmed 5). From the emphasis on "today" in this statement, we are to understand that, although alone now, Mona seems not to have felt isolated in this way previously. Towards the end of this first page, it is revealed to us who Ayesha – whom she mentions in the photograph's caption – is. She states, "My daughter Ayesha has been with Chaman guru for two years now and has gone to Pakistan with the eunuchs. But nobody informed me. Chaman guru does not return Ayesha to me, because she feels Ayesha will not have a good future with me, I have to obey Chaman, because he is my guru" (Singh and Ahmed 6). From these introductory pages, we are presented with one of the primary violences of Mona's life – the kidnapping of her daughter by her hijra guru. From her first email, it becomes clear that Mona feels helpless in this situation due to the power dynamic between her and her guru, exemplified by the phrase "I

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[58] This sense of the graveyard being a liminal space is an idea I expand on in Chapter Five.

have to obey". Although previously, Mona felt protected and cared for in Chaman's gharana, Chaman's authority now means that Mona has no way to fight against the injustice of having her daughter taken away from her; due to the hierarchical nature of hijra gharanas the other hijras from the gharana do not speak out against this, or against Chaman.

The next time we hear Mona's voice in this extended epistolary form is forty pages later. To emphasise the difference between Mona's current isolation and her past connection with friends and family, particularly her daughter, the first eighty-five pages of the text are filled with pictures of past celebrations, and Mona taking an active part within the hijra community, as well as in the surrounding community, giving blessings at births and weddings in the surrounding houses. The most visually significant change in the text comes with Mona's ousting from the hijra gharana, after which she moves to the Mehendiyan graveyard of Old Delhi; the photographs change from recording mostly social events and celebrations, as well as intimate family moments between Mona and Ayesha, to showing Mona alone in the barren landscape of the Qabristan.[59] Although all the photographs are taken in black-and-white, the staging and composition of the photographs mean that the monochrome images seem to take on a different meaning. The early photographs are filled with people and movement. The group photographs are often blurry and seem unstaged due to this. Because of the glamourous aesthetic of the hijras – often wearing elaborate, colourful costumes and partywear, dancing, and having their makeup done by "Tikku, a eunuch and a great makeup artist in Bollywood" (Singh and Ahmed 32) (see Figure 6) – the monochrome of the photograph is staged to symbolise the glamour of old Bollywood films. However, after Mona moves to the graveyard, and without the celebratory environment of the gharana party, the black-and-white colouring of the photographs become symbolic of Mona's depression. Because the movement and joy has now disappeared from the photographs – the figurative colour of the images – the photographs now appear stark and cold.

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[59] A Qabristan is a burial ground, usually for Muslims (although Christian graveyards can also be called Qabristans in Hindi), and usually located next to or near a Mosque. In Urdu, Kabristan.
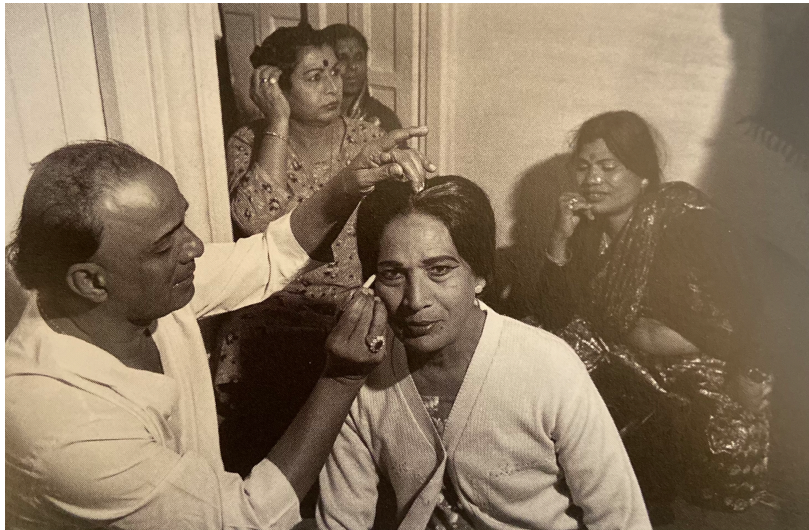
Figure 6. (Singh and Ahmed 32).

Indeed, as the text continues, we see Mona fall further into depression, and towards the end of the text she seems completely alone, with only Dayanita as company. In some of the final photographs in *Myself Mona Ahmed*, we see Mona seeking out receiving treatment for depression. In one photograph we see her with a doctor, and she captions the photograph "Dayanita took me to meet Homai Vyarawala, trying to give me some strength for myself, but she is not successful. Still, she keeps trying" (Singh and Ahmed 146). However, as the photographs continue towards the texts' culmination, we understand that Mona's depression is still blighting her. In the following photograph, we see Mona writing on some scraps of paper, and understand that this is perhaps a therapeutic exercise from the caption, "Trying to get well once again, we went to famous Dr. Bhagat […]. He is able to understand my pain and is still treating me" (Singh and Ahmed 145). Yet again, in the following photographs, we soon come to understand that these typical medical treatments have not helped Mona's depression when we see her receiving treatment again. In these final photographs, we see Mona first having a knife gently pressed to her cheek, and then having her eyes closed by a traditional medicine practitioner (see Figure 7). She captions these images, "In the jungles of Mewat in Rajasthan. I forced Dayanita to take me to this old woman, I thought she would heal me from my depression, But nothing changed" (Singh and Ahmed 155). Mona here literally enters the jungle, which we saw her motion metaphorically earlier in the text, which mirrors her mental state, as she feels lost, confused, and isolated from her friends, peers, and family. This photograph leaves her reader on an unhappy note, with her comment "nothing has changed". This contrasts her previous hopes that her life would change for the better, that she would be reunited with her daughter, and would find happiness. Whereas before, in the

photographs we saw Mona performing expressively for the camera, and her audience, in the final photograph of the book, **Mona** stands in the centre of the frame, looking forlorn. The background is somewhat desolate, as she stands on a dirt road in front of a crumbling building. Although there are passersby in the photograph, they look towards Singh and the camera, rather than at Mona. She seems completely alone, apart from the camaraderie Singh might provide (see Figure 8). Mona captions this final photograph, "There's peace in the jungle, but I still cannot find it in myself" (Singh and Ahmed 158). Here, Mona's own hopes, along with her readers', are shattered: we are left with the image and thought that Mona might never recover from her depression, and might never find contentment.

Figure 7 (Singh and Ahmed 155).

Figure 8 (Singh and Ahmed 158). 112

In most of the graveyard photographs, Mona is pictured as the sole subject of the scenes. For example, in the photograph on page twenty-five, although there is another figure to the right of the frame, they have their back to the camera. Mona appears in the centre of the composition, facing the camera, standing still and looking contemplative (Figure 9). The photograph is captioned, "Running to every mosque to seek peace of mind, but still not finding it" (Singh and Ahmed 125). This shows us a sense of Mona's desperation, and that she has exhausted all options, with her emphasis on having visited "every mosque". In a parallel of the earlier party scenes, where Mona is surrounded by her friends and family, in the graveyard Mona is instead surrounded by either strangers whom she views as either insane or dangerous, referring to them periodically as "half-minded" and "crazy" (Singh and Ahmed 138–39) - either way, clearly not people she wants to associate with. It is obvious that Mona feels like a social outcast – outcast even by her hijra gharana, who were themselves social outcasts in many respects – surrounded by the other women who inhabit the graveyard. Otherwise, she is surrounded by animals – either pets or animals ranging the graveyard, but is totally without human friendship.

Figure 9. (Singh and Ahmed 125).
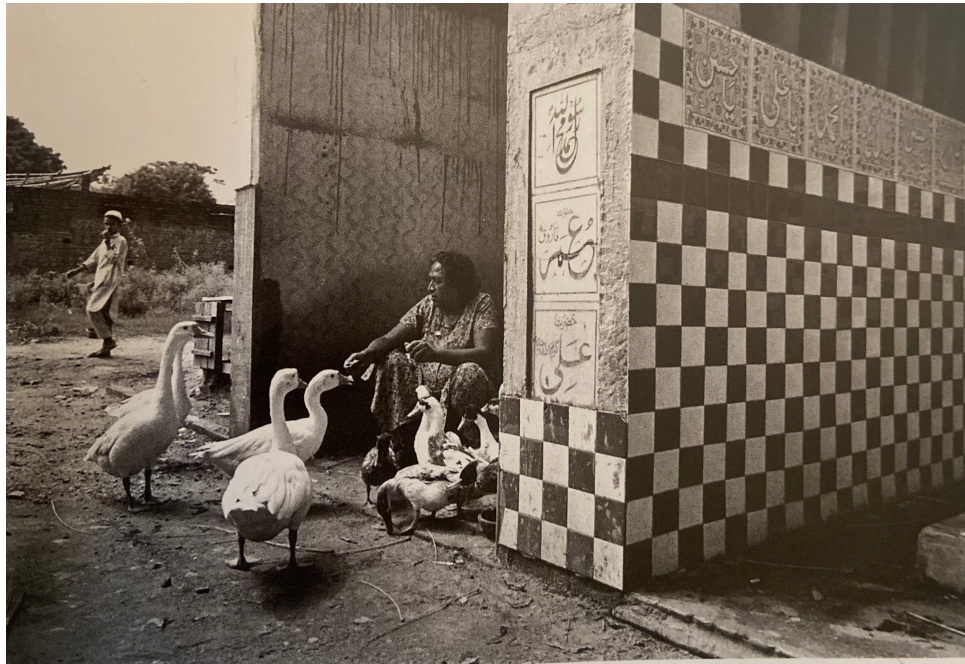
Figure 10. (Singh and Ahmed 145).

In one photograph, Mona sits in her home in the graveyard,[60] feeding geese and ducks (Singh and Ahmed 145). They surround her as she feeds them bread (Figure 10). This uncannily mirrors an earlier party scene where Mona presents a crowd consisting of friends, family, and other hijra communities who have gathered to celebrate Ayesha's birthday, with a birthday cake and other elaborate dishes (Singh and Ahmed 31). In this earlier scene (see Figure 11), although the centre-piece for the crowd is also food, it is an elaborately decorated cake in the shape of a ship – masts and ropes included – which Mona presents to Ayesha (and the crowd) as she lights the candles, rather than the small pieces of bread she feeds the birds. In this photograph, the gharana is full of people, some of whom are being pushed into back rooms in order to make space for the crowd. Mona is facing the camera, appearing happy to be photographed during the celebrations, whilst in the later photograph of her feeding the ducks, she is further away from the camera, with the shadow from her roof covering her face, hiding from the audience and becoming a smaller and more listless figure. Interestingly though, Mona's choice of companions in the graveyard photographs might be read as a

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[60] We are told that Mona has built this structure herself. While it provides some protection from outside elements, we can see from Figure 10 (amongst other photographs) that it does not provide security or amenities such as running water.

destabiliisation of anthropocentric family and relationship norms, with her kin now consisting of alternative family bonds with geese, dogs, and a monkey (which I discuss later in this chapter).

Figure 11. (Singh and Ahmed 31).

Creating a further contrast between earlier happiness and later loneliness, between Ayesha's party and the graveyards, is Mona's enduring love of dance and performance. Whilst in the early photographs Mona performs goofily for her friends at the party (Singh and Ahmed 41,), in the graveyard photographs, she performs only for the animals she has adopted as her kin; she can no longer perform exuberantly for an audience who values her skill as a dancer and entertainer, but she can command the attend of her animals. There are also many images of her dancing at badhai celebrations, with audiences made up of her peers, but also members of the public who have invited her to perform, as well as those watching her from the street, and other public spaces. In the later graveyard image, she instead performs for a cockerel (Figure 12). As she stands outside her home, the cockerel stands within the building, as the lone spectator (Singh and Ahmed 143). Although perhaps a light-hearted sentiment, the image, in contrast with the earlier one, emphasises Mona's isolation, not only from the rest of society, but also from her hijra family.

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Figure 12. (Singh and Ahmed 143).

Despite her isolation, Mona does seem to find a certain amount of freedom outside of the structured environment of the gharana and the control exerted by her guru, Chaman. She states, "I cannot be a slave to anyone. I cannot take orders from anyone, ever. I do not like advice from people. I want to do as I like. Whether it is good or bad" (Singh and Ahmed 142). It is after Mona's move away from Chaman and the hijra community that Dayanita Singh becomes an increasingly important figure in Mona's life, and the story she tells us. However, despite Mona's reliance on Singh, Singh is not a frequent visitor to Mona's graveyard home. In one of her emails to the book's editor, Mr. Walter, Mona describes her reliance on Singh's presence, saying, "I feel very alone when she leaves town. She always says, "Now I will stay in Delhi," but then she always goes away. Then there is no one to call, until she calls me from wherever she goes" (Singh and Ahmed 107). Mona seems almost helpless without Singh's company, while Singh seems content to take photographs of Mona's continued suffering, perhaps making her complicit in Mona's pain. Indeed, one of Susan Sontag's most damning arguments is about how photographers structure their relationships to their subjects. She frames these relationships as often being highly exploitative, and perhaps even predatory. She states, "photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at scenes of violence, […] social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures […] in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them" (Sontag, *On Photography* 42). Although I think this would be an extreme view to take in relation to Singh's photography because Mona and Singh's friendship does seem genuine, the dynamic between the well-off photographer and her increasingly depressed and extremely

socially marginalised friend becomes progressively more uncomfortable towards the book's end, as Mona descends into depression and Singh photographs these struggles, without acting to help her. However, Mona continuously tells the reader of her authorial agency, stating "I cannot take orders from anyone" and "I do what I like" (Singh and Ahmed 142), and these exclamations of independence give us hope that Mona's story was largely told as she wanted it to be.

In Revathi's preface to the text, she includes a poem – seemingly written by herself, as it is otherwise uncredited – which encapsulates the societal violence, including isolation, faced by many hijras. She writes,

> In the battlefield we stand. / We do not seek sympathies / Understand our emotions—we / Demand our dues and nothing else. / Amma should accept us / Appa must accept us / Society should accept us—and / The world must accept us / Property we ought to get—sirs / Pleasures we must have / House we need—sirs / And jobs we need. (Revathi 75–79)

Revathi identifies her own and other hijras' position in society as a battlefield, in which they must fight for love, acceptance, and basic rights like homes and jobs. Looking to "Discussing Trans Rights in India" (2022), in which Aroh Akunth states that the biggest discussion with regards to trans discourse in India is whether trans people "deserve rights" ("Discussing Trans Rights in India"), Revathi too shows that she, and her contributors, are all too aware of this struggle. However, most interesting is her inclusion of "pleasure" as a right and desire amongst material needs, like housing and employment. Inclusions of pleasure and joy as a right or desire are often lacking in scholarship on hijras, and is arguably one important aspect of trans and hijra liberation. Following this poem, Revathi devotes a paragraph to describing the paralysing fear she feels throughout her daily life due to others' opinions and reactions towards her gender identity. Here, she begins every sentence with, "I was scared", "I was worried", "I was afraid", "I avoided" (Revathi 79). The things she is so afraid of are mundane, everyday occurrences like catching the bus and going to the supermarket. In these public spaces, she feels exposed and at risk because she is surrounded by members of the public whom she views as volatile and even violent towards her because she is a hijra. We understand as we navigate the various anecdotes told by other hijras, that Revathi is not alone in feeling like this. She ends this paragraph by asking, "Why am I so scared? […] Why should I live in perennial fear?" (Revathi 79–83). As we hear the other hijras' experiences of

being treated differently because they are hijra, both the abuses they suffered as children and the violence they have faced throughout adulthood, Revathi's fear of these everyday tasks begins to make sense.

Queering Kinship and Family Relationships Inside (and Outside) the Gharana

In the hijras' accounts of their gharana life, many present a community of daughters, mothers, and grandmothers living together, outside of heteronormative expectations. Although in the texts this is often represented as being done out of necessity, as many of the hijras' biological families are not accepting of their gender identity, this community space can provide a radical alternative to the strict patriarchal society outside the gharana walls. This can also be seen in some recent fictional texts with hijra protagonists. For example, in Samadrita Kuiti's analysis of motherhood in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a fictional account of a hijra's life which is largely based on Mona Ahmed's story, [61] she sees Anjum (who takes the fictionalised role of Mona) as creating a queer domestic space which resists government control and societal norms. She states that the graveyard home the Anjum/Mona figure creates is a "defiance of hostile institutions" and shows a

> depiction of a womanhood that signifies a sharp departure from the archetypal
> image of the reticent Indian woman with her infallible mothering instinct. Anjum,
> for instance, becomes the architect of her own kind of rebellion by erecting an
> unauthorized structure on government-owned land […] and transforming it into a
> utopian safe haven for people who have been preyed upon by […] the world
> outside and its corrupt ideals. (Kuiti 254)

Here, Kuiti draws a sharp distinction, which perhaps relies on stereotypes to some degree, of Anjum being a direct contrast with traditional Indian women. Whilst the traditional woman has a mothering instinct only for her biological kin, Kuiti sees Anjum as being inherently rebellious, anti-establishment, and encouraging of communal living. Kuiti also presents us with a divide between the inside/outside the graveyard, where the graveyard – and living

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[61] Although the only credit she gives is to Dayanita Singh, not Mona, stating in her acknowledgements, "My thanks to […] Dayanita Singh, with whom I once went wandering, and an idea was ignited" (Roy, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" 441).

liminally – symbolises a utopian way of living. Anjum/Mona is presented as living beyond (not merely against) the normative ideas of home and family.[62]

In her book, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), which follows on from her 2006 work, *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway discusses how her own relationship with her ageing dog challenges traditional understandings of kinship and family relationships through conceptualising an animal as family or kin. She uses the terms "multispecies", "cross species", and "species queer" interchangeably to describe the kinship relationship she has with her dog (and the family unit consisting of Haraway, her husband, and her dog). Her use of the term "species queer" is particularly interesting in the context of her understanding of inter-species as contrary to heteronormative family units. Harraway in part uses this term because of its allusion to queerness and LGBTQ+ kinship structures and communities. Hijras, Mona included, both "queer" the family unit and kinship bonds by refusing to adhere to the heteronormative family structure, but also literally by refusing to correspond to established heterosexual norms of gender identity; with heteronormative family units being dictated and predicated on the understanding that lines of patrilineal descent. Although hijras queer the family unit in all gharana settings due to their family units being non-biological, in her life, Mona's treatment of the graveyard animals as her family is species queer, just as Donna Haraway's family unit is.

However, more commonly in my texts, we see hijras discussing their queer gharana family, who come together through a mutual understanding of each other. In *Our Lives, Our Words*, many of the hijras draw attention to the bonds they have with gharana members because, at the point of entering the gharana, they did not know anyone who can relate to their hijra identity. Ayah talks about the first time she left her home to find a hijra household to join, stating

> I too went to Mumbai and became a chela. My Guru (mother) is no more. I did not want to be with any other Guru. I am with the group of members who are in the lineage of Padavetta Amman temple dasi. Hijras identify hijras and seek solidarity. "I am like this. Let me come and stay with you," they say and become my daughters or daughters-in-law. (Revathi 855)

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[62] I discuss these ideas of liminal space and liberation further in Chapter Five.

Here Ayah shows both her loyalty to her gharana and Guru in her refusal to pledge solidarity to another, showing how deep these kinship bonds can be. She also shows an openness and camaraderie with other hijras, whereby simply a likeness in gender identity is enough to welcome younger hijras to be her "daughters or daughters-in-law". This solidarity marks a particular difference between hijras' (often) tumultuous relationships with their biological family, and the new kinship bonds they create with other hijras which are based on solidarity and understanding. In *Our Lives, Our Words*, we also see gharana households being spoken of with tenderness and familial love. Santhi Amma talks of the closeness and kinship she feels with her gharana members when she says, "We remain as one family of artists. We do not quarrel. We are not jealous of each other. We do not make fun of anyone" (Revathi 555). This emphasises the sense of community Santhi Amma feels, and her use of the term "artists" suggests that this closeness is in part due to her gharana's shared culture of dance and performance.

In *Red Lipstick,* however, Laxmi finds gharana life difficult, and finds kinship elsewhere, often in liberal LGBTQ+ circles. For example, Laxmi is very close to a gay activist, Prince Manvendra, who also contributed a chapter to her book. Laxmi says about the Prince,

> He is like my soulmate; I am a sister to him. Our relationship is that of a real brother and sister, even more than my own blood brother. He's given me the true happiness of having a brother I can depend on and love, one who loves me back deeply. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 71)

This is one of the few times that Laxmi describes a relationship as loving, at least in a straightforward way. She both characterises their love for each other as spiritual ("soulmate"), but also draws a direct contrast between the Prince, whom she adores and calls "brother", and her biological brother whom she has a much more difficult relationship with. She implies here that her biological brother is not somebody she can "depend on and love". Again, her relationship with the Prince is borne of a mutual understanding and solidary, partly because their relationship began due to their work together for LGBTQ+ charities. Although Laxmi is close to her biological family, she seems to have a more innate understanding of the Prince due their shared experiences in working for these charities, and experiencing the world as queer Indians (albeit in very different ways).

Later, Laxmi draws attention to the fact that she never would have expected to have such a deep connection to someone who is from such a different background. Although Laxmi's family is from the Brahmin caste, the Prince is royalty, and even lives in a palace. Laxmi writes, "he always calls me for his birthday celebrations at the palace […] the first time I went, even though I had never stayed in a royal palace before, I didn't feel out of place, even once. He introduced me as his sister everywhere, to everyone" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 72). There seems to be a sense of disbelief to Laxmi's words when she uses the phrase "everywhere, to everyone". Although incredulity might just be due to her disbelief in her physical and social surroundings, it might also be due to her experience of much less welcoming receptions. For example, later in the book, she recounts how she was removed from an LGBTQ+ charity gala because hijras were not welcome, despite her working for an LGBTQ+ charity. She despairs at this exclusion of hijras from LGBTQ+ spaces, asking, "[what does it mean] for the movement if a well-known activist is thrown out of so-called mainstream, progressive, and elite places. It simply means we can never be accepted. It shows the hangover of India's upper class. And, its double standards" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 73). This demonstrates that kinship is difficult for Laxmi to find, even in spaces where she should be welcomed.

This understanding of kinship existing both within gharanas, like in Ayah's account, and outside gharanas, as in Laxmi and Mona's accounts, complicate the picture of hijra kinship which is drawn in existing studies of hijra life. While many hijras do find companionship and love with their hijra peers, the expectation that all gharanas can provide this for all hijras is challenged Mona's and Laxmi's accounts, in which they demonstrate how forging relationships in hierarchical gharana structures can be difficult, and this leads to them leaving or being ousted from these spaces. However, in my primary texts we are also shown the breadth of possibility in forming kinship bonds: where some hijras find community and kinship in the gharana, some find it in animals or in people who have similar political opinions (such as Laxmi and the Prince).

Hijra Mothering and Queer Futurity
We can also see the authors representing kinship in more typical mother/daughter relationships, outside of the gharana Guru/Chela relationships. Although some of the other hijras refer to their guru as "Amma" [mother], and write about other motherly figures in their lives, such as older hijras and dance mentors, Mona is one of the only hijra who writes specifically about adopting a child. Mona's relationship with her daughter, Ayesha, is one

which she makes central to her life writing text. The photograph which accompanies the introduction to the text is one of her and Ayesha (who is a young toddler at this point) (see Figure 13). The photograph is an intimate portrait of mother and daughter embracing, looking straight into the camera lens, and is captioned, "Mother's love – I am holding my adopted daughter in the family house of my only friend Dayanita Singh" (Singh and Ahmed 8). This photograph being the second in the text, and appearing directly opposite the introduction, helps to frame the entire text as Mona's reflections on her personal family life, and particularly her role as a mother. Particularly in the early parts of the text, when Mona lives in the gharana, many of the photographs include Ayesha; the photographs are a mix of more intimate mother and daughter portraits taken in Mona's bedroom, and larger family and community events and parties, such as those taken at Ayesha's first birthday party, which are the first set of photographs in the book. The first photograph in this collection is of Mona and Ayesha at the party, sitting at a table. Mona captions this photograph "Ayesha fulfilled my dream of becoming a mother, so I celebrated her first birthday for 3 days and 3 nights and invited over 2000 eunuchs from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh" (Singh and Ahmed 18). These photographs, which introduce us to who Mona, show her primarily as a mother: she is either photographed in intimate mothering moments, alone with her daughter, or at larger events which she has organised to celebrate her daughter. Although some scholarship does define gharana kinship through the lens of mother/daughter relationships (Ghosh (2016)), practically no scholarship I could find cites the practice of hijras adopting children. Again, we see the life writing texts providing new and unexpected understandings of how hijras define and create kinship and family.

Figure 13 (Singh and Ahmed 8). 122

Later in the text, Mona explains how she came to be Ayesha's guardian. She writes,

> The happiest day in my whole life was when Ayesha came into my life, because then I felt that I belonged to this society. I first saw Ayesha when she was 4-days old. Her grandmother placed her in my arms. The grandmother then left, and Ayesha's birthmother had died whilst giving birth […] When I took Ayesha in my arms, I felt complete […] When she was in my arms I felt a happiness of a very different kind. (Singh and Ahmed 83)

Here we see Mona representing her identity primarily through the lens of motherhood, and we understand that she feels destined for motherhood when she writes "I felt complete". She writes of a contentment, happiness, and fulfilment that we do not see elsewhere in the text. However, this heartfelt description of her first meeting with her daughter is contrasted with her relationship with Ayesha after Mona has moved to the graveyard. At this point, Mona's old guru is Ayesha's primary carer, and Ayesha only visits Mona when the guru allows it, which we are told is infrequently. Mona attributes her depression largely to a loss of contact with her daughter, writing, "love is like the moon. When it is full, it lights the whole world, and when there is no moon, then there is darkness in the whole world. First, Ayesha gave me so much happiness, now I have so much pain […] look what happened to me from losing one child" (Singh and Ahmed 85). Here we see the stark contrast between Mona's description of her joy and fulfilment at becoming a mother, and her despair at Ayesha being removed from her life. She writes of her total hopelessness ("there is darkness in the whole world"), and this is reflected in her later representations of depression in the text. Ayesha only appears in ten of the remaining seventy or so photographs. It seems that despite this lack of contact, Ayesha's presence in Mona's life remains a beacon of hope in her otherwise lonely life.

The importance of Mona's relationship with her daughter is emphasised by a letter she writes to Ayesha which is reproduced in the text. Throughout the text, Mona only writes letters to the book's editor, recalling anecdotes from her life which contextualise and weave the photographs together. The only personal letter she writes is to Ayesha, and serves to show what Mona is unable to say to her daughter under the watchful eye of her former guru. Mona writes how deeply she wishes Ayesha would visit her, and how she has attempted to make her graveyard home a pleasant place for Ayesha to visit. She writes,

I wanted to make a palace for my princess. I started to build the waterfall for you

to play in, I even built an entire zoo for all your animals […] If you were with me,

I could face any problem in the world. But now I am alone, all alone in the

graveyard. Waiting for the day when you will return to me. (Singh and Ahmed

151)

The fact that Mona tells us that she wanted to create "a palace" from the desolate and lonely surroundings of the graveyard is extremely moving, and shows her commitment to her daughter, despite the infrequent contact she has with her. It also echoes the language used at the start of the text, where she calls Ayesha her "princess" and throws elaborate parties for her, to celebrate her like royalty; while at the start of the story she could afford these luxuries, now all she can do is attempt to make the graveyard as habitable as possible for her daughter, despite her extreme poverty. Through her writing about Ayesha, we see that Mona defines herself primarily as a mother. Her hijra identity is about more than just her gender identity, and is rather about maternal nurturing, personal relationships, and a feeling of love and sympathy for other outcasts. This is a radical reconceptualisation of how hijra identity has previously been understood.

Laxmi also briefly touches on her journey towards motherhood through her adoption of an adult son. She tells us about how she had always wanted to be a mother, stating,

I have wanted to be a mother ever since I was a child myself. If there is one

emotion I knew I wanted to fully understand and experience, it was of

motherhood […] I was ready to feel the giving and nurturing side of

womanhood and so, even though I was very young, I felt ready to be a

mother. And when the opportunity arose, I took it. (Narayan Tripathi and

Pande 66)

This once again shows that Laxmi views her own femininity through a very traditional lens, with motherhood being a central facet of her womanhood and hijra identity, with an ability to be "giving and nurturing" being specifically framed as feminine in her writing. She then tells the story of how a dance pupil becomes her adopted son, and tells us that they are very close and involved in one another's lives. She writes,

He [Deepak] always has a sense of ownership about me. He questioned anybody I was dating, and always wanted me to be involved in his life decisions. Like I feel and do for my mother, he does for me. I got him married. His wife, Megha, thinks of me as her mother-in-law. I'm a strict mother-in-law, I scold her often […] Mothers are mothers. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 66–67)

Here, we see Laxmi's relationship with her kin to be firmly rooted in a normative understanding of gender roles, with her son having "a sense of ownership" over Laxmi. Despite her being older and being a parental figure to Deepak, he still exerts a repressive control over her life, as we previously saw in her relationship with her current partner, Viki. Although this characterisation of herself as a commandeering mother might sound like a strange way to convey her relationship with both her son and her daughter-in-law, the fact that Laxmi is able to act like a mother, in whatever way she deems fit, and does not feel the need to portray herself as an omnibenevolent maternal figure, is significant. This final sentence, "Mothers are mothers", seems to admit that although she might not be a perfect mother, she is protective and involved with her child's life, just as a stereotypical mother would be. It also implies a comedic inevitability that Laxmi is somewhat of stereotypical Indian mother. Here, we can also see Laxmi playing with gender-normative stereotypes about motherhood, and family relationships, as she does when she describes her relationship with her abusive boyfriend. Laxmi has another son, Uday, whom she adopted after his biological mother died. He proposed the idea to Laxmi, saying, "If Deepak can be your son, why can't I?", to which she replies, "Fine. From today you'll be my son till my last breath" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 68). She conveys her relationship to her children as one which is committed, close, and everlasting. However, unlike Mona, Laxmi only uses a few sentences to write about her relationship with her children, and does not portray her identity as being *primarily* a mother, but rather a dancer and entertainer. These diverging presentations of motherhood show us that hijras *do* form kinship bonds outside of gharanas, but also that they understand their identities as mothers differently. While Mona's relationship with Ayesha forms the very basis of her identity as she presents it in her life writing narrative, Laxmi's is an important aspect of her identity but not how she chiefly views herself.

Romantic Relationships and Homonormative Households
In the hijras' life writing texts, a small minority of the gharana members leave, not due to being unhappy in their gharana, but because they want to live with a romantic partner. This

aspect of hijra life is very rarely documented in academic texts, which tends to focus on gharana life, or occasionally on those hijras who are ostracised from the gharana. In *Our Lives, Our Words*, some of the hijras write about leaving their gharana to live with their romantic partners. Aruna tells us about leaving the gharana, and sex work, once she meets a romantic partner. She says,

> He took me to Coimbatore and married me in a temple in front of his friends.
> Then he rented a house in Vadalur near Neyveli and set up a household. He
> provided all the comforts. He would come home by 6 pm every [day]. My
> happiest days were those spent with him. That was the greatest joy in my life.
> (Revathi 766)

Here we see Aruna enjoying a happy relationship in which her husband does not keep their relationship a secret from friends and family, and Aruna clearly finds immense relief in this ("the greatest joy in my life"). Although Aruna's relationship does not end happily, with her husband eventually having an affair and threatening to reveal her gender identity if she told anyone about his affair, she finds comfort in living as a couple to begin with. It seems that Aruna sees her marriage as an escape from sex work, which she must partake in to make money for her gharana.

However, often the hijras' attempts to live in this more heteronormative way ends unhappily because they cannot have biological children with their cis male partner, which is often expected by their partner's family. In *Our Lives*, Rajini talks about her experience in a romantic relationship with a cis man who wants children. She feels immense guilt that they cannot have biological children together, and attempts to leave the relationship to allow the man to have this opportunity with another woman. She writes, "'I can't get a child for you. Marry someone your family chooses,' I told him. I also said, 'If you want to meet me some time, call me. I will come. You can take me out. Let us continue our relationship like this'" (Revathi 681). Here, we see Rajini sacrificing her own happiness for the happiness for her partner and his family. Although she stays in this relationship, the man's family use their inability to have biological children against her. She writes, "Now his family has come to know about us. They do not approve of our relationship. They say, 'If she is a woman, she will get you a child. Tell us if you are with some woman. We will accept her" (Revathi 699–700). This attitude is common in India, with older generations relying on younger generations

for support in their old age, and wanting their own children to have this support from their future children too (see Mines 11).

Unfortunately, these insecurities around not being able to produce children with their cis male partners seem to be a common occurrence, at least in Revathi's collection. Rati talks about the guilt she feels about not being able to have a baby with her partner, and about his family's hypothetical feelings about this. She states, "The family would have nurtured so many dreams for their son's future. They would want an heir. It would be a big issue if they knew that I was a hijra" (Revathi 790). Later, she even talks about the prospect of him marrying another woman so he could have children, saying, "I don't mind if he gets married again. I would not block his way. But I would move out from then on. I would not even meet him" (Revathi 799). Again we see Rati, like Rajini, being willing to leave their partners so they can pursue heteronormative family life. Surprisingly, despite this concern about her and her partner's future, Rati never talks about how her partner feels about having children. It seems that this is more of a societal pressure than an inter-personal one within her relationship. Through these representations of romantic relationships in *Our Lives,* we can see the ever-present threat created by the expectations of heteronormative family and kinship-making. The expectation of getting married and having biological children often creates tension within these relationships. However, some of these relationships do end happily, and again provide a contrasting way of living and creating kinship than we see in sociological studies, where romantic relationships are scarcely mentioned.

Conclusion: Polymorphous Kinship Bonds

The life writing texts analysed here provide some surprises in the way they discuss kinship and family ties. There is an expectation in much of the academic literature written about hijras that the only family or kinship ties they have are with their gharana members, either because that is what hijra culture demands, or because their biological family have no contact with them due to their gender identity and involvement with hijra culture which is considered to be deviant and non-conformist. Whilst the hijra authors do make clear that gharanas serve a very important purpose in providing a safe space for hijras to live, preserving hijra culture, and concealing the existence of hijra life from prying eyes, both today and historically, the texts also make clear that many hijras choose not to live within the gharana system. The gharana served to avoid the regulations of the Criminal Tribes Act during the eighteenth century, whereby colonial lawmakers attempted to stop hijras from wearing female clothes and performing dance, and they would be at risk of imprisonment if they did so, but also to

keep some secrecy in an age where anti-hijra sentiment is still strong. However, many hijras struggle to cope with the authoritarian nature of the gharana, or choose to live a more homonormative life with a romantic partner.

In these texts, although some of the hijras do experience rejection by their biological family, by varying degrees, some have a close relationship with their biological parents and siblings, often alongside their gharana relationships. Another aspect of the hijras' family lives which is brought to the forefront in both *Red Lipstick* and *Myself Mona Ahmed* is the authors' alignment with motherhood. Although gharana guru-chela relationship are often depicted through the lens of mother-daughter relationships, it is much rarer to hear of hijras living outside of the gharana adopting children (either officially or unofficially). This might be due to historical stereotypes and fallacies about hijras kidnapping children (and often making them slaves or castrating them), as hijras don't want to be seen through the lens of these negative stereotypes. It is also not possible (or at least, the law is not clear on whether it is possible) for hijras to legally adopt children. This is ironic considering hijras' fundamental role in celebrating the birth of new-born babies in badhai celebrations; as Chinka Sinha questions in her 2013 article entitled "Eunuch Mothers Adopt to Fulfil Motherhood", "[how can it be] tradition for hijras to bestow their 'blessings' on expecting mothers or women who have already given birth yet, ironically, they are debarred from becoming mothers themselves" (Sinha n.p.). This demonstrates the profound inequalities hijras face from wider society; that a group can be so associated with celebrating family life and the birth of children but be barred from taking part in those activities as a parent themselves seems to be a particularly cruel exclusion.

Chapter Four

Dance, Musicality, and Movement: Creating Connection and Finding Joy

This chapter explores how traditional hijra identities and cultures – particularly relating to household (gharana) relationships – are presented as being deeply intertwined with musicality, performance, and dance in my primary texts. The word "gharana" is itself borrowed from North Indian music culture, where it is used to refer to "family tradition" or a "stylistic school and/or members of that school" (Neuman 272). The significance of music and dance is shown throughout the three life writing texts I analyse in the ways the authors variously write about their gharana communities and cultures, their relationship with wider society, and their individual understanding of art and joy.

In the texts, we see that traditionally one of the most common situations in which hijras have prolonged interactions with the public is during their performances at weddings and births (badhai performances) where they bless the married couple, or a newborn baby, and perform dances and songs to celebrate the occasion. Recently however, hijras, including Laxmi, have starred in Bollywood films. They have performed elaborate dance numbers, for example in the movie *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (2011), and have even begun their own TikTok dance trends, breaking down their traditionally held distance from wider society. In this way, dance serves to break down the barriers which have been built up since pre-colonial times between hijra communities and wider Indian society, allowing conversation, friendship, employment opportunities, and mentoring relationships to develop between hijras and non-hijras in online spaces. This marks a distinct change in how hijras interact with non-hijras through dance, from hijras' dance performances being seen by outsiders almost exclusively at badhai ceremonies, to being much more widely available and visible through social media and film.

Hijras' relationship with dance, however, has never been a simple one. After the British colonial government introduced the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871, police and government officials surveilled hijras (among other individuals, such as those living nomadic lifestyles).[63] Jeff Roy, perhaps the foremost scholar of hijra communities' relationship with

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[63] The CTA essentially outlawed any nomadic peoples. Hijras were considered to be nomadic due to their reliance on travelling (often long distances) to perform at badhai celebrations, and their travelling to visit other hijra gharanas. The purpose of the CTA was essentially to make it easier for colonial powers to surveill these people. Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850–1900* provides a fascinating

music and dance, as well as experts such as Gayatri Reddy, locate badhai performances as a key site of surveillance. During the later colonial period (roughly 1850-1947), these performances were targeted by local authorities who had criminalised aspects of hijra culture and identity, because these performances were one of the only occasions when hijras were easily identifiable and openly displaying their hijra identity. Not only this, but the supposed eroticism and sensuality of their performances – something which will be discussed in the context of autobiographical texts later in this chapter – was indeed one of the reasons for their assumed criminality. In her much-cited book, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (2005), Reddy states, "through the regulation and surveillance of badhais – among other mostly benign practices – the potential for criminal behaviour and its codification were inscribed onto the bodies of dancing hijras" (Reddy 27). Although the bodies of the hijras were othered in and of themselves due to their having undergone nirvan, it was through the practice of dance specifically that hijras were exoticised and were able to be targeted and criminalised. Roy also points to the intrinsic importance of musicality and dance culture evidenced through the Farsi language hijras speak, which also allows them a level of clandestineness and privacy from the outside world. While this language shares the same name as the modern Persian language spoken in Iran, the language absorbs popular phrases and references from modern and classical cinema and music to create a form of communication which is largely unintelligible for non-hijras, or outsiders to the community.

In the modern day, as shown in the texts, hijras are still made conspicuous by their performances at badhais (because this is when they are most identifiably hijras when they are outside the gharana), amongst other celebrations and festivities in which dance is a central feature. However, dance also establishes a way for hijras to establish bonds with members of their gharana, and provides a forum for expressing themselves and their culture. In his article, "Dance Floor Divas", Kareem Khubchandani argues that dance not only provides solace and freedom to hijras (and queer individuals and communities in South Asia more broadly), but it is also a political act of queer self-expression. He states, "dance is one way that queer people hold politics in their bodies as well as invent new social, erotic and political worlds, but it is grossly undermined, belittled as 'fun', worth a photograph but not analysis" (Khubchandani

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insight into colonialism as experienced by hijras. Hinchy brings particular emphasis to unique, and often ignored, colonial project which attempted to utilise "strategies of both cultural and physical elimination" in order eradicate hijras under the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (Hinchy 251).

257). In this chapter I will explore how Laxmi, Mona, and the hijras that Revathi interviews do express joy and have "fun" when dancing. More than that, though, I frame their enjoyment of the art form as something essential to their individual and communal identities, as well as a method of bonding and celebrating with other members of their gharana. It is both "worth a photo" – a particularly appropriate phrase considering *Myself Mona Ahmed – and* worthy of analysis. I agree with Khunchandani that dance is also a political act for hijras. When they dance alone or with their gharana, they continue the traditions passed down through generations of gharana life, which have existed even when colonial and postcolonial powers have attempted to abolish these practices. When they dance publicly, or for an audience, they take up space, demanding to be seen by a society who would otherwise have them enclosed in the liminal physical and political space they have inhabited for so long.

Embodiment and Dance

When writing about embodiment (especially in the context of dance), it is difficult to move away from explicit or implicit allusions to the duality of mind/spirit and body. I do so below not to draw opposition between them, or to make connection between these supposed polarities, but rather to show that they are indeed interconnected. More than simply refuting the polarity of mind versus body, I frame dance as an embodied praxis because, as Betty Block and Judith Lee Kissell state, "being *embodied* implies being *embedded* as well – embedded in a society, a culture, a language" (Block and Kissell 8). This understanding of dance being both embodied praxis, but also being an essential part of cultural being, bonding, and expression (through the body) is one which is particularly attractive when we see how the hijra authors represent dance within their communities.

Block and Kissell go on to state, "to be human entails existing in a world of symbolisation and meaning that is essentially tied to the material, the physical, the kinetic, the spatial, the temporal. Dance captures all of these ideas" (Block and Kissell 8). We can see this relationship between dance, symbolisation and meaning made through, for example, community spaces in the photographs of Mona Ahmed and her gharana peers. For example, in one of the party scenes where different party guests dance in the middle of the crowd, we see bonds being created and sustained through joy and dance as we see audience members getting up to hug the dancers, the audience members joining in with dance moves from their

seats, smiling, clapping, and gasping (see Figure 14). Through one dancer, the whole gharana seems to be infected with joy and delight and their excitement and love is made apparent.

Figure 14. (Singh and Ahmed 71).

Indeed, much ancient writing about classical Indian dance involves indications that dance should be a joyful embodied practice. The *Abhinaya Darpana* written in 1080 about the practice of Bharata Natyam, [64] includes the line: "Where the hand is, the eyes follow. Where the eyes go, the mind follows. Where the mind is, there is the feeling. Where the feeling is, there is rasa" (Bajekal 222). This connection between body, mind, and emotion in the practice of dance shows it to be an embodied practice which negates the duality of mind and body, while also showing dance to be a joyful practice. As Purna Bajekal states,

> Rasa, an essential element in traditional Indian art, dance included, translates
> to "nectar" or "juice" in Sanskrit. In ancient Hindu Vedic scriptures, rasa is
> discussed as the nectar that the gods and goddesses consume. The word also

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[64] A classical Indian dance form that originated in Tamil Nadu.

has an artistic metaphor, which means a complete absorption into the joyful

experience of art. (Bajekal 222)

This connection between mind, body, and joy is clearly stated in ancient texts, and is visible in my primary texts too.

Not only can hijra dancing be seen as embodied joy, it can also be seen as embodied knowledge. The necessity of community for hijras learning traditional cultural dances is shown through them learning dance through their gurus and gharana peers. Because new recruits must be physically present in the gharana to learn the dances, the process of sharing knowledge and learning is an embodied learning practice. Indeed, in her writing about preserving Indian dance culture, Shruti Ghosh writes that because of the nature of dance as an embodied practice, it is also "learned, remembered and performed through an embodied encounter" (S. Ghosh 71)

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor looks to Native American knowledge to understand that traditional, indigenous dance, as an embodied practice, is a form of knowledge which is deprivileged in the modern day. She writes that there has been a

repression of indigenous embodied practice as a form of knowing as well as a system for storing and transmitting knowledge. Non- verbal practices – such as dance, ritual, and cooking to name a few – that long served to preserve a sense of communal identity and memory, were not considered valid forms of knowledge. (Taylor 18)

Paralleling this repression of indigenous Native American dance, the repression of sharing and learning hijra dance (as well as other types of knowledge) is well documented in colonial archives where we see hijras being arrested for performing publicly ("Criminal Tribes Act (1871)"). Although we can understand this criminalisation as a wider colonial repression of Indian dance in general, and classical Indian dance as being tied up with post-colonial nation building, and even Hindutva ideals about Indian-ness, these systems of knowledge were particularly policed in hijra communities.[65]

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[65] Many authors have written about the resurgence of classical Indian dance in recent years, and its repression under colonial rule. See Sitara Thobani's 2017 *Indian Classical Dance and the Making of Postcolonial National Identities* for an in-depth analysis of this trend.

The refusal to adhere to these restrictions under colonial rule, but also a refusal to change the way the authors dance (for example out of fear of a volatile or aggressive audience), also shows that dance can be a tool of resistance. We also see the hijra dance performances as sites of potential violence from the audience. Santhi Amma writes about when she sends her chelas to perform at events such as badhais. She states, "When we send them dancing, there are various incidents that have occurred. Some people pull their hands, tease them, or poke them unnecessarily" (Revathi 540). Although, here, we see that the dance performance itself provides an opportunity for aggressors to inflict violence on the hijra performers, the hijras insistence on continuing their cultural dance practices despite this is resistance to their audience's attempt at intimidation.

Indeed, in her examination of dance in Palestine, Sara Christophersen (2022) shows that despite oppressive circumstances, the practice of dance can create a sense of freedom. She writes, "dance creates an experience of moving freely within [Palestinians'] own bodies, in contrast to the restrictions and limitations they experience every day […] This feeling of moving freely and being in control creates a feeling of empowerment" (Christophersen 238). This understanding of the moving and unrestricted body shows dance as directly resisting demands made by oppressive forces (in this case, the Israeli government and military), as well as providing momentarily relief from dispossession and violence. Although taking place in an altogether different context, the authors also frame the dancing body as a sight of resistance. Christophersen understands that there is a negotiation between dance being a "private space [used] to become yourself" but also being, through its physicality, "a public space of negotiation, tension, risk, and rupture" (Christophersen 238). Although the authors' safety is not threatened in the same way (they do not, for example, have bombs dropped on them, and are not continuously attacked by the army), they do face violence and harassment from their performance audiences and the public more widely. They, however, use dance to negotiate their place in society. Through their practice of dance at weddings, births, and other important life events (often of the non-hijra public), they have been able to resist societal oppression by creating a niche in which they provide an important, necessary, and beloved tradition. Because they provide this service, they can perform publicly in a space which is less dangerous for them and have resisted old laws which attempted to keep hijras out of the public eye. For the authors, dance can be both a spiritually emancipatory practice, allowing space to express joy, and an economic and socially emancipatory practice, allowing them to enter spaces they usually would not, and earn money through their performances.

While the authors acknowledge the violence they are threatened with because of their love of dance, they refuse to let this dissuade them from dancing. In *Our Lives* we see many of the contributors being faced with violence either because of their love of dance, or being exposed to violence because they are exposed to a heteronormative audience which is prejudiced against hijras. For example, we see Sundari being abused in childhood because she enjoys dancing the female parts in group performances. She writes, "Once I danced for the song from the film *Mythily Ennai Kadali* which goes 'pon maanai thedi—thaka dhimi thom' ('looking for a golden deer'). At home they scolded me for doing such dances and burnt my leg—left and right, and my thighs. You can still see eight scars on my legs" (Revathi 256). This terrible violence experienced by Sundari seems focused on attempting to stop her from dancing in the future (perhaps focusing the violence on her legs, which are a key part of moving the body in dance). Santhi Amma further comments that many of the hijras in her gharana sought out a gharana to escape their biological family homes because their families were not supportive of their love of dance and performance. She writes, "Here [in the gharana], they [her chelas] can sing and dance. At home, this is not possible. No one will permit them to do such things. So the hijras leave them in peace, and come away" (Revathi 883). Here we see a supportive community of dancers providing solace and freedom to perform. However, we also understand that the urge to perform and dance must be innately felt for those hijras to want to leave their family home.

Tradition, Culture, and Work: Establishing Identity through Dance

Anthropological and sociological studies of hijras and hijra culture have largely focused on the (surgically transitioned) body and the ritual of nirvan as what bonds hijras into separate communities. Scholars often choose to focus on otherness and social exclusion as what ties individuals to the gharana as a necessity for safety and wellbeing.[66] However, in their autobiographical work, the authors whose work I analyse rarely write about gender-affirming surgery or traditional nirvan rituals. When they do, the authors often choose to focus on the musical and ritualised activities that take place within the ceremony. Indeed, music and dance seem to be the foremost thing which bonds members of the gharana together, and what helps to create a specific and recognisable hijra identity. This understanding of hijra identity being

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[66] See, for example, Serena Nanda's 1990 text *Neither Man nor Woman.* Although Nanda's text does include broader discussions of hijra history and culture, much of her analysis and description of hijra identity hinges on gharana members having undergone nirvan.

at least in part created by and performed through dance and musical ritual lends a different perspective to the traditional understanding of hijra identity existing within the body, as we see it being discussed in relation to nirvan by other scholars. As Ankush Gupta writes, this expression of identity through bodily movement often takes the form of "a coming together of rituals, community structures, traditions and performative markers of the [h]ijra identity" (Gupta 71). So, rather than existing *within* the body (in terms of a pre- or post-nirvan status), hijra identity it is often performed *through* the body.

These rituals and traditions (including badhai ceremonies) often have spiritual or religious origins, and this is something which is repeatedly discussed by Revathi's contributors throughout her text, as well as by Laxmi and Mona on occasion. In *Our Lives, Our Words*, one of Revathi's interviewees, Rajam, explains how many hijras and non-hijras alike see hijra culture as deeply connected to spirituality (largely deriving from the Hindu religion, but often less clearly defined spiritual or religious practices). Rajam remembers her first interaction with a hijra during her adolescence. She writes,

> near our house, there was a hijra who used to be possessed by a deity and dance.
> Many saree-clad hijras would visit [the] house from Mumbai. I used to watch
> them come and go. But I did not mingle with anyone. My sister told me that these
> hijras would abduct me and take me to Mumbai or Pune. (Revathi 277)

Despite stereotypes about hijras running riot within Rajam's family fables ("these hijras would abduct me"), with Rajam perhaps finding the hijra's relationship to a deity unnerving (given that the word "possessed" is often used colloquially to mean crazed or cursed), Rajam and her family see this hijra as an interlocutor for Hindu Goddess Bahuchara Mata, and therefore as someone with a spiritual connection to deities.[67] The method the Goddess chooses to "speak" through her interlocutor is dance – although the phrasing Rajam uses makes it unclear whether she means that the deity is using dance to possess the hijra, or if it is *both* the deity *and* dance which are possessing her. Either way, the relationship between dance and religiosity is clearly deeply intertwined, and the hijra's dance draws attention to her possession by the deity. The fact that it is dance which is Rajam's foremost and earliest memory of being introduced to hijra culture reflects Roy's observation that dance is often

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[67] Bahuchara Mata is a Hindu goddess who represents fertility (and many see her as representative of the epitome of femininity). She is considered to be the patroness of hijras.

how new gharana members (or those who are new to gharana life) are introduced to hijra culture, and start to form bonds with their new prospective family. This is often through the rite of jalsā (the ceremony to celebrate a new gharana initiate), which usually culminates in the whole gharana singing and dancing along to songs typically performed at marriages. For example, Roy writes that the following song, which is usually sung by a bride at her wedding, is often sung by new gharana initiates to the Mother Goddess:

<blockquote>

Mileko bakko mai re,   I'm yearning to meet you,

Jisi ki lodh lagavi re,   That is all I want,

Gale mein aaj samao re   Through my throat (voice) you sing.

(J. Roy, "From Jalsah to Jalsā" 422)

</blockquote>

Roy understands that the literal translation of the final line "figuratively calls the goddess to inhabit the body of the singing hijras" (Roy, "Translating Hijra into Transgender" 422) . This underscores long-standing beliefs that hijras are messengers between gods and mortals (which explains their ability to curse and bless people at their leisure). Clearly, the idea that the Goddess inhabits hijras' souls, and often communicates through music is a potent one, both inside and outside of hijra communities.

   Another highly discussed musical ritual (which is also a religious one), is the hijras' involvement in karagattam festivals, at which they are hired to perform. In Tamil Nadu, karagattam (also known as karagam) is a type of classical dance performed to invoke rain by asking mother nature (or the Mother Goddess) to provide and protect harvests. These hijras' standing in the village is in keeping with wider society's understanding of hijras as having both divine providence and power, while also being something of a societal nuisance. Sudha Senthilkumar, another of the hijras whom Revathi interviews in the text, describes her first interactions with hijras. She recalls how a group of hijras would "come to [her] village to dance [k]aragattam during village festivals" (Revathi 300). Although Sudha Senthilkumar does not explicitly state that dance is a method of conversing with the Mother Goddess, the very fact that non-hijras hire hijras to dance to ask the Goddess to provide fertility to the land exemplifies the power that both hijras and non-hijras perceive their dancing to have. Put

simply, outsiders recognise that they are able to converse with the Goddess through the power of dance.

Throughout the texts, the hijras' love of dance and the importance of dance in their individual and communal lives is emphasised, and also complicated, by it being a key part of their employment prospects. Badhais are the most popular and traditional method of hijras earning money, but other performances such as those at karagattams also provide employment opportunities. Another of Revathi's contributors, Santhi Amma, speaks of how teaching karagattam to her chelas has created a bond between them, as if she is handing down family traditions. She remembers: "once I got older, I taught the karagam dance to my chela and granddaughters. If an organizer booked us, I would send them with different teams. My students are now visiting all the places I had danced in. Because of my reputation, they are also treated with respect" (Revathi 536). However, Santhi Amma emphasises how dangerous it is to be a hijra who performs publicly, whilst also understanding that this is a necessity to earn money. She writes about how it is only the respect she has built up over the course of her career as a performer that results in safety for her chelas. However, she tells us that most hijras do not enjoy such respect from their audience, with "[s]ome people pull[ing] their hands, tear[ing] them, or pok[ing] them unnecessarily" (Revathi 536). Clearly, the visibility that comes with public performance is a risk to the hijras' safety, but is also a necessity for such performances allow them to earn money through their chosen craft; this is something I will explore further, later in the chapter.

Santhi Amma also emphasises how important it is for her and her chelas to devote themselves to Bahuchara Mata and the art form of traditional dance during their karagam performances. She states, "Our focus should be on the art. Only if we keep that in mind and dance with devotion will people seek us out. I always give this advice to my disciples" (Revathi 541). Santhi Amma situates herself as the antipode to society's stereotypes about hijras and their methods of performing and dancing, emphasising how central religiosity and an appreciation for the art form itself is to her craft and her hijra identity. Indeed, in Santhi Amma's chapter about work, she relates all her anecdotes to dance.[68] Despite previously speaking about how important piety and chastity are to her craft, Santhi Amma comments that in the modern day, people have come to expect hijras to perform more erotic and sensual dances. She states, "I feel that the attitude of looking at dance as an art has become rare.

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[68] The text is split into sections entitled "Childhood", "Work", and "Activism", and contributors offer short autobiographical essays on these topics.

People demand obscene dances" (Revathi 551). This shows the conflict many hijras feel between performing and enjoying dance as an art form, and the external pressure to perform dances that customers and audiences want to see, which provide income. Santhi Amma also tells us about how attitudes have changed over time from audiences: where they used to appreciate the art for what it was, they now expect to be titillated. She writes,

> In those days, if one danced revealing the ankle, people commented, "Why is she showing her thighs!" We had to wear a soruvadu—a cloth tied up like pants covering the legs on both sides—as an inner garment so that our legs would not show even if we danced whirling round. Later, it changed to a full skirt. Then slowly it came up to the thighs. Now the underwear has to be shown. People want glamour. They enjoy only such dancing. (Revathi 544)

We see from Santhi Amma's descriptions that hijras' own desires about how they want to perform dance are nearly completely ignored, and instead is dictated by their audiences' whims. Santhi Amma is emphatic when she writes that "underwear has to be shown", and that their audiences will "only enjoy" the performances if this is done. This shows a stark contrast between the wishes of the performer, who see their art form as spiritually and religiously important, and their audience who merely see the dancing as entertainment.

Although the stories from Santhi Amma indicate that, for the most part, she is not able to earn very much money through singing and dancing, in *Myself Mona Ahmed*, Mona's discussion of her love of dance during adolescence tells a different story. Not only did her family encourage her love of dance, they also believed that it could provide a successful career for Mona, sending her to renowned dance teachers to learn her craft. She writes:

> My family, seeing that I was becoming interested in singing and dancing, told me that if I wanted to do this work, I must go to the famous dancers and singers to learn, hoping this could be my occupation. I had heard that Shambu Maharaji was the master of khatak dance. I had a deep desire to be a great artist and to earn fame in the world. Finally, I found out where his house was and went there and said that I also wanted to be a great dancer. He said, "it is hard work. Will you be able to put in that effort?" I said, "yes, of course". (Singh and Ahmed 48)

Here, her family's insistence on Mona receiving formal dance and singing training marks a stark difference between Mona (and indeed Laxmi, who also learnt to dance from a professional teacher), and the hijras Revathi interviews, in terms of their ability to access professional dance training rather than relying on the gharana's teaching. However, as Mona realises her gender identity, her family becomes far less supportive of her performance endeavours. Despite Mona's ability to continue her dance career both within her gharana and after she leaves, it seems that because she is a hijra, she is only invited to perform at badhai celebrations rather than performing in a more professional and lucrative environment, as was her parents' wish when she was a child. However, as I discuss later in this chapter, dance still provides an essential outlet for creativity and joy for Mona, despite her emotional and physical distance from communal hijra culture.

Gender Expression and Femininity in Dance

The embodied practice of dance is also presented as something which brings the authors closer to their feminine identities. Laxmi locates dance as one of the things which allowed her to access her femininity as a child. She writes,

> I never gravitated towards "manly" things. I loved to draw and paint, twirl around in lovely flowy fabrics, wear make-up and jewellery. My absolute passion, however, was dance. In dancing I was completely and utterly free. All this, of course, meant I was feminine. (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 2)

Although through this statement, Laxmi shows that she views gender through a very traditional lens, with things like "flowy fabrics" clearly being designated feminine, it is the sense of freedom (perhaps freedom to be herself), which interests me most. In a childhood where Laxmi felt largely restricted by familial, caste, religious, and gender conventions, dance is what makes her feel truly herself and allows her to feel unrestricted by social norms. Similarly, in *Our Lives, Our Words*, Sundari explains that in her childhood, dances provided answers to her questions about her gender. She states, "it was only through dance that I revealed my true self of being a female […] I would take my elder sister's clothes, dress up as a woman and dance" (Revathi 253). It is interesting to note that Sundari uses the more categorical, emphatic term "being a female", unlike some of the other contributors and authors of the others texts who use more descriptive terms like "feminine" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 2). The idea of dance allowing a person to transcend their physical body, and

others' expectations of their perceived gender, is also emphasised by Roy in "From Jalsah to Jalsā". In Roy's conclusion, where he explains how dance, music, and the rite of jalsā help to encourage and nurture a distinct hijra culture, Roy states, "[dance] liberate[s] the soul from the constraints of the (gendered) body, [and] musical place making […] shrouds hijra identity from those who seek to define it" (Roy, "From Jalsah to Jalsā" 415). This paradoxical sense of escaping one's body (or at least others' perceptions of the body) through dance is also reflected by Debashree Basu in "Club and Courtyard":

> in the wild dance steps of […] hijra performances all borders are
> dissolved between the sexes, between classes, between nature and
> culture. The dancers indulge themselves in a sort of mania and exaltation
> of their being, "when a dancer becomes the dance"[69] by the delirious
> whirl of steps, music and all other projections of this bodily art. (Basu 3)

Although Basu's argument is an interesting one, in the context she is writing in, the hijras are not performing for a badhai audience. During a badhai however, despite the dancers' possibly being able to escape their bodily and societally enforced restrictions if they close their eyes, they will still be aware of their often pejorative audience, and are brought back down to earth, and into their body, as their performance ends. Indeed, the power of dance to bring oneself both paradoxically closer to one's body, whilst also escaping the body to reach a plane of divinity or spirituality is highlighted in Elizabeth Anderson's "Dancing Modernism: Ritual Ecstasy and the Female Body" (2008). Anderson understands that the female dancer is "a creative being, a woman with subjectivity and agency, and dance as a bodily founded art form", and yet she also sees dance as a key part of many spiritual "ecstatic ritual[s]" (Anderson 355). This juxtaposition between being grounded in the body, whilst simultaneously being a divine and incorporeal experience in moments of ecstasy is an idea that repeats throughout the autobiographical texts. This relationship between the mind and body, which occurs during dance, is also explored in Anna Morcom's *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance* (2013). Morcom comments on how, upon watching hijras and kothis[70] dance, their

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[69] Basu takes this quote from the film *Flashdance* (1983).

[70] As I explained in the introduction, kothis are men and boys who dress in women's clothing and often engage in sex work. They usually identify as effeminate men, unlike hijras who

femininity becomes most apparent. She states, "Through moving the body in this hyper-feminine, emotionally deeply invested and often seductive manner, the femininity becomes physical—it is rooted in the body, and hence appears to be as 'natural' as if the body itself were female" (Morcom 100). Although, here, Morcom's phrasing is perhaps outdated because she seems to suggest that a hijra's body is not female, or "natural", her sentiment remains an interesting one. That femininity is rooted "in the body" during this display seems to suggest that it is in these moments that the feminine mind and body are most connected. This seems to reflect the kind of mind-body eroticism that Adrienne Maree Brown points to throughout *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019), which I will discuss later.

Rites and traditions such as jalsā also serve to allow individuals to create new positive memories and traditions associated with their hijra identity. Indeed, some scholars, such as Basu, have located hijras as inhabiting the feminine space which the art form of dance provides, whilst also being allowed some freedom to bring a sense of eroticism to their dance should they wish to. This is because cis female dancers must adhere to strict patriarchal social norms, whereas hijras, because they inhabit a more liminal, less binary gender, are free to explore their art form in different ways. In her article, "Club and Courtyard", Basu declares: "if dance is considered to be a feminine space, it falls within [...] hijra dance, which [is] articulate[d] in [its] own autonomous and independent way, transcending social control that limit[s] dancing bodies" (Basu 2). However, what Basu fails to mention here are the many and multi-layered hardships hijras face *because* they disrupt patriarchal lineage and modes of control; it seems to me that freedom to dance in a less constrained way is small recompense for this.

Indeed, some of the hijra authors write about their experiences of being labelled as dancers who perform for the sexual gratification of men, rather than dancers and artists in their own right. Although Laxmi is taken seriously as a dancer, for example, her friend sees her dance and convinces her to start giving dance lessons, she is also labelled by her as a less serious dancer because of her erotic or sensual style. Laxmi states, "at times, she would get furious with me for being too hijrotic, as I call it – a blend of hijra and erotic, of course! – or

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identify as women. However, many hijras first identify as kothis before joining gharanas and becoming hijras. In her book, Morcom argues that while hijra performances are not usually overtly sexual, kothi performances *are.* She interviews kothis who use dance as a flirtation tactic to entice new customers who will pay for sex.

acting too hijrotic She would even tell me to seek help from a psychologist because she thought I might have a specific issue that made me behave so femininely, despite being a man" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 38). This term "hijrotic" is captures society's view that hijra culture is irrefutably linked with sexual behaviour, including sex work, which is something I will discuss further later in the chapter. Despite her friend's disapproval, Laxmi highlights how eroticism and sexuality are crucial parts of her personal identity and her romantic and sexual relationships, which is something I explored in detail in my previous chapter. Thus far, I have used the terms sensuality and eroticism interchangeably. The concept of the erotic/eroticism has been discussed by feminist theorists, such as Audre Lorde in her 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power": "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (Lorde 29). When I refer to eroticism, I draw on Lorde's work, but I also include the more common understanding of the term; an understanding of the self as a sexual being, and embracing this as a way to feel pleasure and joy, but also to show that the hijras employ dance as an embodied, reclamational feminine practice, as Lorde explains it.

Through her love of dance, we can see how Laxmi accesses her eroticism through her own body, and not just her relationships with men. The eroticism (in the colloquial sense), and indeed the hypersexualisation of hijra dancing has been pointed to in much academic writing. This can also be seen in fictionalised accounts of hijras in novels, including Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) and Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), with hijra characters' performances often being labelled bawdy or vulgar. In contrast, in my primary texts, hijras express their love of dance as being part of a religious ritual. Dance is thus made resolutely distinct from the stereotypes often assigned to hijras (promiscuous and sexually liberal) by the hijras themselves. However, Laxmi sees her dancing as something erotic, and as something which does have a sensual energy. She never writes about her performances as sexual or encouraging promiscuity; dance instead concerns how she feels and relates to her own body. Similarly, in Roy's account of a jalsā, Sowmya – the gharana's new initiate – performs a dance which is erotic (in both senses), highly feminine, and dramatic without being explicitly sexual. At the climax of the jalsā, she unveils herself to her audience: "Sowmya stylishly lifted her veil and turned 180 degrees while popping her hips to the start of the first verse […] she mouthed the words to the song of her choice with a slight smirk in the corner of her mouth" (Roy, "From Jalsah to Jalsā" 411). Roy understands that in this

moment, Sowmya embodies a key idea from classic Indian dance, saltanah, which is the "building and releasing of emotional affect that enables the performers to produce highly affective renditions" (Roy, "From Jalsah to Jalsā" 411). This moment of saltanah is indeed erotic, but focuses on the dancer's ability to portray the emotive power of their dance, rather than stimulating their audience in a sexual way. In her edited collection, *Pleasure Activism*, Adrienne Maree Brown highlights how feeling pleasure through eroticism can be a radical mindset. Brown returns throughout her book to the idea that pleasure (and eroticism) is a radical and resistant mindset for oppressed peoples. Indeed, it was Lorde who said that allowing oneself pleasure is "not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde 57). While in the texts, we do see the authors and contributors suffer, we also see them experience pleasure and eroticism, primarily through dance.

Whilst the hijras themselves often see dance as a way to channel divinity and religious fervour, as well as providing a pleasurable and erotic experience for themselves, those who watch their public performances seem to understand it as something inherently sexual, and sexual for the amusement of the watching audience. So, while the erotic can be a powerful thing for both the individual and the community, what happens when dance (and its related eroticism) is commodified by wider society so they can enjoy this erotic artform for themselves? In "Uses of the Erotic", Lorde is clear that there is an important distinction between the erotic (a radical way of experiencing pleasure for oneself) and the pornographic (something which she sees as being about performative sexuality, and is "a suppression of true feeling [which] emphasizes sensation without feeling" (Lorde 27). I would argue that for the audiences watching the hijras' performances, and particularly male audiences, they wish to see the dancers' eroticism as pornography. As well as being anti-erotic, this desire to see the hijras' dancing as something pornographic also suggests that it is something commodifiable. When they are seen to exist, or to perform, for the sexual pleasure of their audience, rather than for their own sense of erotic joy, their art becomes a commodity. More than this, once their dance becomes commodified, and is a "product" to be bought and sold (according to the whims of their audience), the meaning (cultural, religious, and erotic) of their dance is lost. Indeed, this could be named a type of cultural appropriation, whereby people use, take or partake in activities which have a cultural significance to those who invented it, but is used as a form of entertainment by those outside this specific community.

Indeed, from Revathi's text, it seems that male audiences in particular have come to see hijra performances as something which should titillate and serve to satiate men's sexual desires, with members of the audience sexually harassing the dancers, and believing they

have the right to do this. In Ranjini's description of her paid dance performances, we see audience sexualising her and the other performances. She states, "Only if you hug, kiss and roll on each other and dance do they appreciate your dance. If the dance is sexy, everyone will appreciate it. They would also pay us a little extra […] I would dance revealing my thighs" (Revathi 571). Although Ranjini does not comment on whether she is happy to dance in this way, rather than for her own love of the art form, we see that is a financial necessity for her and her gharana. However, we understand that often this is against Ranjini wishes, as she later describes being forced to perform like this for her audience. She writes, "I have to dance in all kinds of ways: hug men tight, roll down with them and get kissed in all parts of the body whatsoever. I have to dance and bear all this" (Revathi 575). Her repetition of "I have to" and use of the word "bear" implies a sense of coercion and obligation, where her audience expect to be able to sexualise the dancers, and will only pay them if they as pleased with the performance. This over-sexualisation is probably in-part due to hijras having a reputation for being heavily involved in the sex work industry, as well as their relation to traditional courtesans in the popular imagination.[71] Indeed, many scholars writing about cis female performers have commented on the stigmatisation and abuse they have experienced due to their association with sex work. In, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance*, Morcom states that "Women from communities of professional female performers are nowadays typically spoken of only in terms of prostitution" (Morcom 4). Because hijras *do* engage in sex work, which caters for the male gaze, onlookers expect their dance performances to cater to the male gaze (and male desire) too. Of course, it is not just during their dance performances that the hijras in the text are sexually harassed by men; many face sexual abuse throughout their lives, usually because their abusers know it is likely they will face impunity for their crimes, and that hijras, as a stigmatised group, get little support in prosecuting their abusers. The fact that men feel free to harass the dancers during their performances is probably, at least in part, due to this too. In *Myself Mona Ahmed*, during one of the early party scenes at the gharana, one of the party's guests is pictured dancing, surrounded by a circle of other guests and musicians. In the photograph, one of the male attendees (who I would assume to be part of the group of musicians, as all the other guests appear to be hijras), pinches or gropes the dancer's groin.

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[71] Although there is no evidence to suggest that hijras were courtesans in the colonial period (women who both entertained men with dance performances, and engaged with sex work), they are often grouped together.

Mona captions this image, "Men enjoy to touch us where they cannot touch women" (Singh and Ahmed 72) (see Figure 15). Although in other sources, scholarship seems to suggest that cis female dancers are as disrespected as hijra dancers, Mona's caption would suggest otherwise. Mona's caption communicates to us that while men might deem it improper or inappropriate to grope a female dancer, they seem to have no problem doing this to hijras. Mona's use of the term "enjoy" makes it clear that male observers are doing this for their own sexual satisfaction, rather than something which is mutually agreed upon or pleasurable to both parties. The surrounding audience, largely made up other hijras, and the dancer herself looks completely unsurprised by the man's behaviour, signalling that this behaviour is not at all out of the ordinary.

Figure 15. (Singh and Ahmed 72).

For most of the hijras who have written or co-written the life writing texts, dance was a passion or a part of gharana life. However, what creates tension between Laxmi's narratives around dance and those of the other hijras is that Laxmi has trained to be a dancer, becomes a teacher of dance, and then performs dance in Bollywood films. This makes her experience of dance and others' perception of her style of dance very different to the other hijras whose autobiographies I analyse. This contrast is a topic which Roy has also drawn attention to in his article "Translating Hijra into Transgender" (2016). Roy compares traditional badhai performances with dance performances from a professional troupe of trans dancers called the Dancing Queens who embody more respectable and middle-class values through their dance

style.[72] Roy concludes that "performance ensembles [such as the Dancing Queens, and arguably, Laxmi] are participating in the creation of new, emergent adaptive strategies for hijra identity" (Roy, "Translating Hijra into Transgender" 413). Roy positions the trans dancers as those who once would have chosen to belong to hijra gharanas but have discovered Western notions of trans identity (or the possibilities of what trans identities can be), and have chosen to pursue life outside of a gharana, preferring to identity as trans women rather than as hijras. He asks, "if music and dance are central ways of reflecting and engendering identity, what happens when the very music and dance forms that define hijras are changed and/or challenged by new forms?" (Roy, "Translating Hijra into Transgender" 416). Whilst the other hijras take part in very traditional dance styles – either performing at badhais or performing at religious festivals – Laxmi has more freedom to express herself how she wishes. This is because she is already respected due to her classical training and teaching, enabling her to explore other forms of hijra dance identity. Therefore, we see in Laxmi's text that the gharana environment, and the environments in which dance is performed, are presented as spaces of incarceration and control, rather than the embodied joyful practice we see represented in the other texts.

Expressing Joy through Dance

Towards the start of *Myself Mona Ahmed*, when Mona is still living at the gharana, a majority of the photographs which include dance are taken from within the confines of the hijra gharana itself, with hijras from Mona's extended community coming to celebrate Ayesha's birthday. Unlike discussion of dance thus far in this chapter, the hijras in these photographs are not dancing as part of badhai or religious celebrations, but simply to have fun at a party, with friends and extended family members they have not seen in a long time (Singh and Ahmed 68–71). In my previous chapter, I pointed to the fact that not many academic texts prioritise identifying queer joy, and specifically hijra joy, in their interpretations. In his autoethnographic "Dance Floor Divas", Khubchandani states that "dancing [is] important fun – it offer[s] significant respite from the repetitive temporality […] of the neo-liberal city. Dance is scripted into […] labouring li[fe] as an alternative, an antidote to work"

[72] The Dancing Queens identify as trans, rather than hijras, and do not partake in the traditional badai (etc.) dances that hijras are known for. Roy, here, is comparing and contrasting the performances of traditional hijra dancers and trans dancers who entertain audiences for any occasion.

(Khubchandani 259). Although for these hijras, the division between "work" and "fun" is not clear-cut, as they also dance as a form of work, in these instances it seems that dance *does* provide a release through bodily movement for bodies which are normally surveilled and restricted. When Khubchandani sees a trans woman in the club he is in, he sees her joy and freedom expressed through dance. He writes, "her irreverence (kicking off her shoes, dancing sexually), feels like a fervent capitalising on a moment of fun she is not often permitted" (Khubchandani 266). Indeed, while in fiction and sociological scholarship, hijras are often not permitted fun, here in the life writing texts, we see this sense of fun, perhaps for the first time. Dayanita Singh captures Mona's sense of fun in private moments with her friends and family, which often seems to be lacking in her public performances (see Figure 17).

Throughout Brown's *Pleasure Activism*, dance is pointed to as an activity which is symbolic of pleasure and joy. However in Mona's text, dance is often referenced as an off-the-cuff activity which people are engaging in to express joy, rather than as an artistic passion. Indeed, although the authors and contributors of my life writing texts often reminisce about dance being a joyful and spontaneous activity when they were children, it is rare that they think about dance in this way as adults. One of the infrequent moments when this does happen in the texts, is when Mona performs at one of the gharana parties. She is pictured surrounded by musicians and a few of her hijra peers while she dances mid-frame. She captions this photograph, "I get this strong urge to dance from within" (Singh and Ahmed 41, Figure 16). The word "urge" suggests a feeling of spontaneity and impulsiveness, and the party surroundings signify the light-heartedness and joy of this moment. Indeed, in later photographs where Mona is performing at badhai celebrations or is dramatically posing in the street or the graveyard, her classical training is apparent from the precise and elegant lines of her body and limbs, and the seriousness of her expression. However, in this photograph, there is something childlike and goofy in her movement, as she grins at the onlookers. This

photograph is the moment in which Mona seems the most joyful and unrestrained, and also unaware of Dayanita Singh's presence,[73] in the entire text.

Figure 16. (Singh and Ahmed 41).

After the party scenes, there is a selection of photographic shots which show Mona performing a dance (and possibly also a song) in the street. She captions these photographs, "to bless the newborn child, I am dancing in front of the house" (Singh and Ahmed 77). However, in this scene, Mona is the only hijra who performs, and we, as readers, are not able to see the family she performs for, making the scene seem like one which has been set up and staged to tell her story rather than one that is actually taking place. However, over the pages that follow, Mona performs at a marriage badhai with other members of her gharana. The images are captioned, "dancing to bless a marriage house", "to please the people we take

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[73] Although, of course, I cannot be sure about Mona's awareness of Singh in the photograph, this photograph marks a stark contrast to the photographs immediately preceding it, in which she is posing for the camera, and stares directly into the lens; and are staged much more formally. These photographs, taken at the same event (Ayesha's birthday party), take on the effect of photos taken at a family event, with different groups posing together; the photo of Mona seems to mark a district turn in the event and change of mood, perhaps later in the night when everyone is more relaxed. The photograph of Mona dancing seems much more candid than any other in the text.

money from…", and "we dance and enjoy with them" (Singh and Ahmed 78–79). For once in these stories told by hijras, when this gharana performs at the badhai, there seems to be no real separation between the performers and the party guests, for while they are performing a paid service to "please" their customers, they are also "enjoy[ing]" this party amongst their audience. For example, in the first image, Mona wraps her arms around one of the men at the wedding while he laughs genially (Figure 17). It seems that the hijras are less like performers and more akin to wedding guests enjoying the celebrations. Although Mona is joyful in these photographs too, it is difficult for the reader to ascertain the authenticity of this joy because it is complicated by the fact that she is being paid to entertain in this instance.

Figure 17. (Singh and Ahmed 78).

Mona enters a depressive episode when moves to the graveyard. In two sequential photographs taken after Mona's move, she performs a song and dance routine for the camera. In the first picture (Figure 18), Mona spins around, smiling and lifting the side of her pale flowered sari as she moves. The second picture (Figure 19) shows Mona singing towards Singh and the camera, gesticulating for extra emphasis. Taken from approximately waist height, as if Singh is sitting on the edge of one of the graves to observe Mona's performance, it seems as though Mona is putting on a show for her friend. The black and white photographs, previously adding to the nostalgic atmosphere akin to family photographs, now take on a different kind of nostalgia, reminiscent of old Bollywood films. Not only is Mona's

supposed joyfulness in these photographs bizarrely juxtaposed with her graveyard surroundings which signify death and decay, but Mona's caption accompanying the photograph makes it clear that this apparent joyful moment is actually the opposite. She writes, "my attempt to buy false happiness, pretending that I am happy to Dayanita, so she would not worry about me" (Singh and Ahmed 113). The façade Mona presents to Dayanita, and initially to the reader, is reflected in Mona's surrounding in this pair of photographs. On first glance, the background is alive with trees and grass, and it is also decorated with grand sepulchres which are richly decorated with columns, flowers, and mosque-like qubbas, or domes. However, beneath the frontages of the sepulchres lie long-dead corpses; the very opposite of Mona's act of life and joy. Although Mona does express joy through dance, and finds joy within the practice of dance, she is also self-aware and understands that other people see her engaging in dance as an expression of joy. Her attempt to fool Dayanita into believing that she is happy (as we discover in the following sections, Mona is actually suffering from depression), is realised through the medium of dance. Instead of living in her real life which is portrayed as poverty-stricken and depressive, Mona chooses to step out of that and live, if only for a short while, in a fantasy world, channelling her inner Bollywood star, for the benefit of her friend. So, while this dance performance is not expressing joy, it is expressing *potential* joy; a future or dream that Mona has. It is also interesting to note that Mona is pictured here in a Muslim graveyard. Although Mona is, of course, from a Muslim background (her name gives this away), usually hijra culture (within India) is associated with Hindu culture and religious practice. It is interesting, then, that she is pictured in such a scene, which seems almost antithetical to the hijra gharana, once she has been banished from her own gharana community.[74]

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[74] Although hijra culture bases many traditions on Hindu cultural and religious practices, many hijras from Muslim backgrounds will still base their personal religious beliefs in Islam. Indeed, it seems that many members of Mona's North Indian gharana do so, and have extended family in neighbouring Pakistan, whom they visit frequently.

Figure 18. (Singh and Ahmed 112).

Figure 19. (Singh and Ahmed 113).

Conclusion: Resistance and Embodied Agency

In this chapter I have examined how the importance of dance as a hijra cultural practice is represented in my primary texts. What comes to the fore, however, is more than simply being an expression of culture and kinship (though this is important too), is how dance is an expression of joy. Block and Kissell state, "few human experiences express so vividly and so totally the meaning of an embodied being-in-the-world as does dance" (Block and Kissell 13). Indeed, this sense of dance being something which happens through and with the body (and mind) *as well as* being a practice grounded in the one's physical surroundings is shown throughout the texts: an expression of joy performed through the body with or to an appreciative, excited, joyful audience.

Although some studies do exist which point to the cultural and familial importance of dance within hijra communities, for example Jeff Roy's work, very few scholars point to dance as a joyful embodied practice, and fewer still mention the emancipatory potential of such a practice. Most have continued to frame dance as merely a money-making activity without fully investigating the complexities of interaction between audience and performer, dance as knowledge creation and learning, or understanding dance as an embodied praxis.

Therein lies perhaps an inherent duality in how (certain) audiences and scholars view a dance performance, and how performers feel about their performance. To their audience, the dance performance may just be an extension of the female, or hijra, body's use as pure ornament and entertainment, but to the performer it is anything but this, instead providing an embodied exercise in worship, cultural learning, and joy. To fully break free of the restrictions placed upon the hijra body (in dance, but also throughout their lives) would require an engagement and understanding of hijras culture and dance as something to be taken seriously. However, in their insistence on performing despite their audience's preconceived notion of who hijras are, they continue to resist and perform embodied agency. Indeed, returning to Khubchandani's argument, we see in the texts that hijras use dance as a political tool which creates agency, and to "invent new social, erotic and political worlds" (Khubchandani 257).

Chapter Five

Life on the Thresholds: Reconstructing Liminal Spaces

In this chapter I examine how my primary texts represent the spaces their authors inhabit. They show (in photographs) and write about their physical surroundings, where their material living conditions are often sub-par. However, they also analyse their position within Indian society: how they are treated as outcasts or "othered", not just in terms of their physical space (where their gharanas are often located in poorer neighbourhoods or at the outskirts of city limits) but how they are othered in the psyche of the nation.

Where previous scholarship (including my own) has solely framed this exclusion from normative societal spaces as negative (because of how this affects tangible outcomes such as health and wealth), my primary texts show that these liminal spaces can produce opportunity and freedom. These liminal spaces (such as a gharana on the edge of a town or city) historically provided opportunity for hijras to hide from the policing eyes of the state under colonial rule. Today, this provides an opportunity for hijras to live their lives away from the watchful and titillated eyes of mainstream society. In many previous scholarly works hijras themselves, as well as the spaces they inhabit, have been described as "between the binary": existing somewhere between two points of reference, in terms of gender but also the spaces they inhabit. With regards to their gender identity, this has meant that hijra identity has been understood as existing somewhere between male and female, rather than a unique understanding hijra identity as a unique culture of its own. In terms of physical space, they have been described as belonging at "the threshold": not totally outside of society, and not totally within it either. Although this can be a useful way to understand the spaces hijras inhabit, my primary texts represent these spaces as something else: spaces of potentiality and remaking. They are neither spaces of absolute freedom nor absolute incarceration. The authors present spaces such as gharanas, graveyards, and red-light districts as something altogether more complex that the absolutes found in previous literature, where scholars largely focus on the gharana as a kinship space without understanding the specificity or nuance of hijra culture, and how this is created through the space of the gharana (see Mal (2018), Nanda (2010), Sequeria (2022)).

Remaking Space: Literature on Hijras

The language of liminality (occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold), margins (those boundaries upon which liminal spaces are positioned), and thresholds (the entryways between these different boundaried spaces) is apparent through

much of the scholarship written about hijras. The titles of many of the most well-known and informative works on hijra life in the Indian subcontinent include words in the semantic field of liminality (and related themes of thresholds, margins, becoming, and otherness), such as: Serena Nanda's "Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Story" (2010), Sarah Newport's *Writing Otherness: Uses of History and Mythology in Constructing Literary Representations of India's Hijras* (2018), Sayan Bhattacharya's "The Transgender Nation and its Margins: The Many Lives of the Law" (2019), Kira Hall's "Intertextual Sexuality: Parodies of Class, Identity, and Desire in Liminal Delhi" (2005), my own *India's Third Gender: Exploring Queer Identity, Liminal Space, and Sex Work in India's Post-Colonial Hijra Communities* (2019), and so the list continues. This sense of hijras being at once an enduring part of Indian society, and yet also being located outside of the usual societal boundaries, at once physically, socially, and in the national consciousness, is an idea which repeats itself ceaselessly in both the scholarship on hijras and in hijras' own life writing.

This seems to be a popular linguistic trend due to the multiple ways it can be applied to hijras' existence: they are often physically located outside of town and city boundaries, with gharanas commonly being located in less affluent and less central areas of the town or city of which they are a part. However, in their gender identity and expression, hijras also occupy a space at the threshold between male and female; they are simultaneously both and neither, and neither of these genders, inhabiting their own third space gender. They are also thought to be at the threshold of the divine realm and the earthly world; demigods who have the power to bless and curse, but are stuck here, much maligned, on Earth. Through these positions and identities, hijras appear to inhabit a kind of "in between" space (or, as the previous scholarly titles refer, the "other", the "margin", the "liminal"). Most of the texts (including my own primary texts) do not reference the physical location of hijras and hijra gharanas, but rather reference hijras' position as outcasts in Indian society; outcasts who are simultaneously occasionally invited into the fray of mainstream society to attend, ironically, important heteronormative cultural events which help to cement the patrilineal kinship ties of Indian society, namely marriages and births. Although in recent years, some hijras have been able to take advantage of the more flexible social mobility of liberal circles to achieve success (or at least greater visibility) in, for example, politics or the film industry,[75] these

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[75] Hijras holding political office is still rare but there are some instances of this e.g. Madhu Kinnar is the mayor of Chandmari. Like Madhu, nearly all hijras who hold political office are involved in local politics. Hijras have had slightly more success in the film industry. As early

instances are rare, and for the most part, hijras are still assigned to taking up space at the thresholds of society, rather than the centre.

Viewing gender non-conformity and queerness through the lens of liminality is not unique to my research, and indeed has been a key theme within much queer theory and related writing in the twenty-first century. In their 2020 article, "Queer and Trans* Geographies of Liminality", Loren March states that much of the work done on queerness and liminality "conceives of liminality as subversive and productive of alternative ways of being" (March 457). However, March focuses their research on physical space – not least because their work is largely a literature review, and the literature points them towards physical space because this is where the majority of writing exists – and while this does in some ways give an indication about the large sociological and psychological space that queer people inhabit, March (and the academics whose work they review) do not see these spaces as inherently liminal (or perhaps even as spaces at all). Like I have mentioned elsewhere, some scholars see trans and queer identity as inherently tied to "illegibility, partiality, fluidity and in-betweenness, and can better direct us towards a political project of mess-making" (March 466), and although I do not believe it is helpful to view queer experience *only* through these lenses, heteronormative society insists that queer experience must inhabit a place of in-betweenness. This sense of enforced liminality, and how these liminalities can be overturned and remade, is what I will seek to explore in this chapter through the unique lens of hijra interactions with, and inhabitance of space.

It seems that at least part of the reason hijras are forced to occupy liminal space – both physical space and within the collective consciousness of the nation – is because they are seen as transgressing the norms and rules set out by mainstream society. Because they do not adhere to gender norms, and often refuse to live within traditional familial households, they threaten the heteronormative and patrilineal norms of wider Indian society. Throughout the ages, hijras have defied traditional modes of organisation and classification, creating a threat to those in power whose aim it is to rule over subjects who are easily identifiable and do not threaten the normative patriarchal power structures (see, for example, Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India* (2020)). With hijras refusing to adhere to male-female binaries and rejecting traditional heteronormative society – with its foundations

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as 1974 (*Kunwaara Baap*) hijras have performed in Bollywood films, although usually serving as comedic side-characters. Laxmi herself has starred in some films, most notably *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (2011) which starred a few other hijras actors.

in patrilineal descent – they are often still viewed with suspicion and fear by that wider society. There persists an attitude that hijras belong outside of society, within liminal or marginal spaces, and should not be allowed to occupy respectable and central spaces reserved for those who do adhere to these binaries and social structures. Therefore, often hijras have no choice but to leave their family homes (whether they wish to or not), and join gharanas. As previously discussed, although gharanas can be a place of community and kinship-making, they are also liminal spaces whose marginal position their inhabitants can never truly escape. For those hijras who leave the gharana, such as Mona, the spaces they are able to inhabit become even more limited and liminal. However, they can produce a space in which they can work and live openly as hijras, in an otherwise hostile cityscape. Often, in their texts, the hijras radically reconstruct spaces which were not intended for them, and even spaces specifically meant to exclude them. Whilst Mona is unique in her particular positionality as a hijra who has been ousted from her gharana, she is symbolic of hijras, both as individuals and communities, who are able to remake the meaning of the spaces they have been assigned.

Graveyards, Spectral Liminalities, and Heterotopic Spaces

The majority of analyses about the burial ground (in Urdu, the Qabristan and in Hindi, the Kabristan) as spatially unique centre around Foucault's theory of heterotopic space (followed by Lefebvre's Representational Space and, later, Soja's theory of Thirdspace). Foucault names several types of heterotopic spaces, including heterotopias of deviation where "those […] individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 25). Foucault's theory famously focuses on prisons, however, he also mentions retirement homes, psychiatric hospitals and, importantly, cemeteries. Foucault suggests that it is not just behavioural deviation from the norm which leads to people inhabiting these spaces (for example, crime, old age, or disease) but also the activity (or lack thereof) taking place within these spaces as being deviant due to the inhabitants' "extreme idleness" (due to incarceration, old age, and in the case of cemeteries, death) (Foucault 25). If we understand Foucault's term simply as a conceptualisation of "other" spaces – at once uncomfortably different and yet obviously recognisable and parallel to other "normal" spaces in society, in an almost uncanny sense – it is clear how the cemetery fits with Foucault's theory. Since Foucault's analysis of these heterotopias of deviation, many others have attempted to further explain how the cemetery provides a parallel space to societal space, for example, with reference to how the cemetery presents an ideal space where people of different faiths/classes can occupy the same place without ever interacting (see Peter

Johnson's "The Geographies of Heterotopia" (2013), and Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter's "Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society" (2008)). However, the context for Mona's graveyard, and indeed graveyards in India more generally, paints a somewhat different picture of this ideal.

Whereas India is largely Hindu, Mona occupies a Muslim graveyard. Whilst this might seem like a particular oddity in Hindu-majority India (although Muslims are the largest religious minority in India, Hindus do not bury their dead so Muslim Qabristans are a marker of this physical and religious difference), it seems that in Indian attitudes towards death, regardless of religion, death is considered a liminality rather than a fixity. We see this in much writing about Hinduism and death, where because of Hindus' belief in reincarnation, "death is not [seen as being] the end,
but a stage in the chain of deaths and rebirths" (Sharma 238). Indeed, one branch of liminality theory particularly focuses on the ghostly, haunting, and spectral. In his 1970 text, *The Forest of Symbols*, Victor Turner analyses the liminality of death rituals, and in this case specifically looks at the rituals of the Ndembu people of Zambia. Turner likens liminality to death, darkness, and eclipse. Liminality, for Turner, is akin to blindness, with individuals inhabiting liminal space being "betwixt and between" (Turner 125). These spirits are, for the most part, invisible, but might also be maligned by the living due to an inherent fear of death, darkness, and the unknown. He states that,

> The Ndembu concept of ku-fwa (death) does not have the note of finality that, despite Christianity, death seems to possess in Western civilisation […] When a person dies he is still active, either as an ancestor spirit who keeps watch over the behaviour of his living kin […] or partially reincarnated in a kinsman. (Turner 71–72)

This sense of being physically dead but spiritually alive elicits a strangeness and unique liminality. More than the graveyard being a liminal space because it is inhabited by living humans, Turner argues that the graveyard is also a liminal space because the spectres and spirits who inhabit the graveyard are liminal beings.

As well as the graveyard symbolising death, and social death in the case of Mona, I find it also symbolic of illness, decay, and disease – all things which society attempts to expel from their living space. In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980), she theorises that while dirt and waste are things which are expelled from society, death is something which society

attempts to expel while it nonetheless "encroache[s] upon everything" (Kristeva 2). She writes,

> [T]he corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death [...]. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being [...]. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with good conscience. (Kristeva 3–4)

Kristeva identifies death (which is the ultimate fall), but also those who have fallen (those who have sinned, or failed to show due respect to the "borders, positions, rules"), as being abject. Therefore, it makes sense that those who are abject because they are "in-between", like Mona, are cast out to live amongst the dead. However, while this signals a casting-out from society, the graveyard still exists within the city walls; the abject, death, and the (gender) non-conforming can never be removed completely, as they still live within the bounds of society and have the power to co-construct other meanings within this space. Interestingly, too, is that Freud referred to the "uncanny", a word which Kristeva uses repeatedly to describe "the stranger", as "the return of the repressed" (Ruers n.p.). With hijras having been repressed in modern Indian society (ignored and hidden from view), then their return to visible spaces indeed becomes uncanny in the most basic Freudian sense. While Freud's analysis of the "Uncanny" or "Unheimlich" has the double-meaning of "unhomely", Kristeva makes this link clearer in her work: the other, the stranger, or the uncanny is that which does not belong because it makes "our" space (the homely) putrid, degraded and defiled (unhomely, in other words). The stranger is therefore the "unhomely" who creates a sense of the uncanny within the city (or homely space).

Like Mona's graveyard, a majority of the graveyards in India are Muslim graveyards – as Christians make up only 2.3% of the population and Hindus do not bury their dead – and Mona's position within this inherently Muslim space seems significant. In Arundhati Roy's article, "The Graveyard Talks Back", she explains the significance of Muslim graveyards in Hindutva BJP narratives around alleged preferential treatment towards Muslim communities,

at the expense of the Hindu majority.[76] Roy argues, "The BJP's rabble-rousing, spearheaded by Modi himself, involved pitting Muslim graveyards against Hindu cremation grounds, and accusing the opposition of 'appeasing' Muslims by developing one but not the other. This obsession with burial versus cremation runs deep" (Roy, "The Graveyard Talks Back" n.p.). Roy's article also presents the graveyard as a site of conflict between Muslim and Hindu sensibilities, with more visceral (and yet semi-fictional) violence in her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Based on the real-life Gujarati violence in 2002, when a train was set on fire by a group of Muslims targeting Hindu pilgrims and the retaliatory violence that ensued, in which hundreds of Muslims died, Anjum (the novel's hijra protagonist) is attacked but eventually let go by the Hindu mob. The mob was "deployed to deliver an Equal and Opposite Reaction. Thirty thousand saffron parakeets with steel talons and bloodied beaks, all, squawking together: *Mussalman ka ek ki sthan! Qabristan ya Pakistan!* Only one place for the Mussalman! The Graveyard or Pakistan!" (Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 62). This menacing chant, in which the mob threatens the Muslim crowd with death if they refuse to leave India, foreshadows Anjum's move to the graveyard, except in this case she has not been murdered by the mob; she merely lives in the graveyard. In her article, Roy repeats this chant but now more obviously links it with the Hindu nationalist imagination and its association with the graveyard as an inherently Muslim (and marginalised) space. She states, "The Muslim graveyard, the *kabristan*, has always loomed large in the imagination and rhetoric of Hindu nationalists. '*Mussalman ka ek hi sthan, kabristan ya Pakistan!*' […] is among the more frequent war cries of the murderous, sword-wielding militias and vigilante mobs that have overrun India's streets" (Roy, "The Graveyard Talks Back"). Although Mona's experiences of anti-Muslim violence do not seem as extreme as Anjum's, it appears that they both see the graveyard as a safe (or at least safer) space, not least due to the absence of other (living) people in this liminal, or interdimensional space.

Swapna Gopinath's 2020 article discusses the use of heterotopias as being akin to a safe space in which "the other" is protected from the violence of wider society. However, she also understands the queer body as being representative of conflicts of the nation and national identity, especially in a nation like India, which experiences so much inter-religious violence. She states, "The body as a space, in the context of conflict-ridden countries, is a trope that

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[76] The Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP as it is commonly known, is India's largest political party which has been in power since 2014 and is led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP is known for its right-wing, Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) ideology.

captures the structural violence capable of challenging the national identity of a nation"
(Gopinath 8). Similarly, Thea Wrede discusses the relationship between trauma (and the
traumatised body) and heterotopias of deviation in her introduction to a special issue of the
Rocky Mountain Review, entitled "Theorizing Space and Gender in the 21st Century". Wrede
focuses on hybridity and borderlands and how the traumatised body attempts to escape state-
sanctioned violence: for example, in a colonial or imperial context. However, structural and
systemic violence often "transcends physical, cultural, and psychological boundaries" (Wrede
15) and therefore these heterotopic spaces often become a darker parallel to "normal" society.

In a heterotopic stereotype, Mona does attempt to recreate or parallel a kind of
"normal" family life. In one picture (Figure 20), Mona cradles a monkey outside her house in
the graveyard. The monkey's expression is as forlorn as Mona's – he seems to be chained to
the outside of the house – and also appears as a bizarre inversion of a previous picture which
captured an intimate moment between Mona and Ayesha on her second birthday, in which
Mona stares lovingly at her daughter and Ayesha looks on at the party whilst adjusting her
party crown. Although Mona acknowledges that she had chosen to surround herself with
animals to replace the people in her life, it seems that she particularly attempts to replace
feelings of maternal nurturing she still has for her estranged daughter, with animals.
However, in another cruel twist of fate, all of Mona's animals disappear from her life too. Her
dog is stolen, her rabbit gets eaten by cats, her ducks get eaten by people and her monkey is
poisoned, allegedly by a group of Muslims who believed he represented a Hindu god so
should not be allowed to live in the Muslim graveyard. This once again demonstrates the
small but persistent religious tensions Mona experiences (Singh and Ahmed 117).

Figure 20. (Singh and Ahmed 117).

Mona's life in the graveyard contrasts the worst parts of city dwelling in Mumbai (pollution, loneliness, and slum living) with her close relationship with her animals and her proximity to nature. Although this does not negate the obvious difficulties of Mona's life, she seems to have created a space that is in some ways paradisiacal. She lives alongside many different species of animal, which is rare in urban Mumbai. Although many Mumbaikars own pets, it is not common to see someone with so many types of animals. She lives amongst nature and greenery, unlike her previous small, crowded, and urban gharana, and she also teaches the Quran to young children for free in a community-led project, as well as building art installations for visitors to enjoy. Unfortunately, though, when outsiders enter the graveyard, they take it upon themselves to ruin this paradisiacal ménage when they kill her animals. It seems that Mona's peaceful idyll cannot exist within the city that views her as "the stranger", and even an intruder who is viewed with fear and confusion.

Arundhati Roy also looks at the exclusion of Muslim communities within cities and their position as "the other", even in death. Roy describes the increase in segregation in Indian cities between Hindu and Muslim populations, with Muslim areas often called "little Pakistans" and having their own graveyards. She states, "Now in life, as in death, segregation is becoming the rule" (Roy, "The Graveyard Talks Back" n.p.). As such, Mona perhaps personifies segregation in more ways than one, with her life as both a hijra and a Muslim having elements of inhabiting segregated space. Roy concludes her point by saying, "Muslim graveyard, the kabristan, [is] the new ghetto—literally as well as metaphorically—of the new Hindu India" (Roy, "The Graveyard Talks Back" n.p.). By seeing the Qabristan as a ghetto (much like Laxmi's earlier declaration that the gharana, too, is a ghetto), Roy perceives those who inhabit the space, at least those who are alive, as the definitive outsiders or the ultimate unwanted; as with any ghetto, I wonder if Mona could ever escape from this space. Indeed, in one photograph Mona poses sitting on a grave enclosed with large stone slabs attached to the headstone to create a box around it. In the background, readers can see a metal fence, reminiscent of the wall perimeter of a prison (Singh and Ahmed 101, Figure 21). In fact, Mona herself sees the graveyard as a prison, saying, "In the graveyard I feel like a prisoner in Tihar jail, even though I can go out, but I do not feel like it. So maybe I have put myself in jail" (Singh and Ahmed 102).

Figure 21. (Singh and Ahmed 101).

However, in this contested space, Mona has created a home for herself. Although far from ideal, she has carved out a space where she can exist, largely undisturbed by the anti-hijra violence of wider society. In her chapter, "Lahore, Lahore Hai", Claire Chambers explores the cityscape of Lahore in popular fiction and analyses how urban space is changeable and socially manipulated. She writes,

> Soja and his theoretical forerunner Henri Lefebvre write compelling accounts of the ways in which city planning is intimately related to ideology and methods of social control. They also recognize that the attempts of the powerful to monopolize the social production of space are never entirely successful. The intentions of town planners are modified or subverted by the uses locals make of their space "on the ground" and city dwellers have varying degrees of agency to transform their surroundings. (Chambers 123)

It seems that Mona is not alone in her transformation of the Qabristan into a paradoxical and highly unusual living environment, with other social outcasts also living there. However, Mona is alone in her vision for the Qabristan as a fully functioning village. She envisions a school to teach the Quran - Mona captions this photograph "To pass my time while the eunuchs fought with me, I came to the graveyard and taught little boys the koran" (Singh and Ahmed 90). She functions as a teacher in this reimagined space of the burial ground, which she has refashioned into a classroom. She also wants to build a swimming pool, a place where

pets are welcome, and a place where lovers can have romantic outings, captioning Figure 24: "I like lovers, so I put the Tajmahal on the walls that I started to build in the graveyard. Then I started thinking about a marriage hall with a swimming pool for poor people" (Singh and Ahmed 93). Here, Mona physically reconstructs the space of the Qabristan to be a space for lovers as well as mourners. Mona becomes a town planner herself, creating agency in constructing her own society (see Figures 22 and 23).

Figure 22. (Singh and Ahmed 90).

Figure 23. (Singh and Ahmed 93).

Relating to this insider/outsider narrative, Sara Ahmed's celebrated *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (2000) examines the significance of the community as an entity in recognising individuals who do not belong, whom she calls "the stranger". She sees the figure of the stranger as one who encroaches into a community's space – the community being "us" and the stranger being "them". She states, "such a recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of 'this place', as where 'we' dwell" (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 22–23). Ahmed sets up the first part of her text with an image of the uncanny stranger striking fear in the heart of the resident. She writes:

> I turn around as you pass me. You are a stranger. I have not seen you before. No, perhaps I have. You are very familiar. You shuffle along the foot path, head down, a grey mac shimmering around your feet. You look dirty. There are scars and marks on your hands. You don't return my stare. I think I can smell you as you pass. I think I can hear you muttering. I know you already. And I hold myself together and breathe a sigh of relief as you turn the corner. I want you not to be in my face. I cast you aside with a triumph of one who knows this street. It is not the street where you live. (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 21)

Here, Ahmed implies a feeling of fear; simultaneously a fear of the unknown *and* the known. The stranger might be unknown on an interpersonal level, but the stranger represents something which inhabitants of "normal" society spend their life avoiding; the stranger is at once hypervisible ("shimmering"), broken in some way ("scars and marks on your hands"), other, *wrong*. More than this, the viewer's assumptions of what the "other" is coagulates around the stranger, with Ahmed repeating the phrase "I think". And yet with the stranger being totally unknown, the narrator declares, "I know you already". Although this argument is helpful in identifying Mona as the outsider in pictures in which she is photographed in public spaces filled with people, for example, the photograph on page 127, where Mona rests outside a mosque with passers-by staring at her, I would extend Ahmed's argument to include entire spaces (and the people within them) which subvert expectations about wider societal normativity (see Figure 25). So, although graveyards are located within the city, they essentially act as a void, with nobody ("normal" or alive) living within. Ahmed also maintains

that it is the idea of neighbourhood, and the healthy body which inhabits it, which allows us to mark out "the stranger" within.

In the few photographs where Mona is pictured in a crowded public space, it is difficult for the reader to discern whether members of the public are treating Mona as "the stranger" or whether they are simply interested or confused by Singh photographing Mona in these crowded and busy locations. While in the aforementioned photograph, it is clear that three men to the left of the frame, and one woman in the background, are looking over at Mona with interest, there is also a man to the left of the frame who is staring directly towards the camera. Although it is clear that people are taking interest in the scene playing out in front of them, it is not clear whether this is because of Mona's gender identity, or because of the unusual nature of a photo shoot happening outside the mosque. However, Mona evidently feels it is her specifically that people are staring at, with her caption to the photograph stating "People always stare at me but it does not bother me" (Singh and Ahmed 127), suggesting that this is the case even when Singh is not photographing her.

Figure 24. (Singh and Ahmed 101).

Contemplating this theme of "the stranger" or "other" and their location in societal space, Homi K. Bhabha makes many noteworthy analyses about cultural space, nation

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building (and national identity), and time/space in his influential work, *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha draws on Goethe and his use of time to exhibit the past as ghostly, terrifying, and unaccountable. Bhabha situates the other as the double or the uncanny as "the repressions [here Bhabha uses the Freudian definition of the uncanny] of a cultural unconscious; a liminal, uncertain state of 'cultural' unconscious; a liminal, uncertain state of cultural belief when the archaic emerges in the midst of margins of modernity as a result of some psychic ambivalence or intellectual uncertainty" (Bhabha 206). Bhabha sees the other as often embodying the past, in contrast with a modern culture always striving towards the future. Not only does Mona, as do many hijras, locate her identity in historical cultural moments but she also lives in the graveyard, a space of ghostly atemporality; here she is surrounded by people who used to be alive, with overgrown plants which have been neglected for years and left to time, but also by thoughts of her own past. In his analysis of Foucault's theory of heterotopic space, Peter Johnson states the graveyard's "emplacement […] paradoxically incorporates both extremes of a 'heterochronia', an utter break with time as well as an accumulation of time through its formation as a kind of 'museum' of the dead" (Johnson n.p.). And, indeed, it seems that Mona's own sense of time has become distorted as she daydreams about the past and her schemes to win Ayesha, her daughter, back, with the past and present seeming to collapse into one.

Whilst the setting of the Qabristan is one example of spectral liminality, in her article, "Exploring the 'Liminal' and 'Sacred' Associated with Death in Hinduism through the Hindu Brahminic Death Rituals" (2022), Khyati Tripathi explores how liminality and death play a significant role in Indian society. She argues that the boundaries between life and death are much more flexible than in many Western cultures due to mainstream Hindu beliefs about death and reincarnation. She writes, "the idea that only the human body is perishable and not the soul is celebrated. Somehow, this ideology and philosophy keeps the dead alive in the bereaved's mind and helps them know that not all ties have been cut and the deceased is still alive, either as a *pret* or as a *pitr* (which is the ancestral spirit the *pret* transitions into at the end of the immediate mourning period)" (Tripathi 506–07). This sense of keeping the dead inside the minds of the living, Tripathi argues, means that within Indian society, liminal spaces, and those who inhabit liminal space, are a more commonplace prospect in Indian culture. However, while the presence of the reincarnated soul might be a common prospect, people like Mona who are forced to live amongst the bodies of the dead in the Qabristan are still a rarity.

Queer Heterotopias, Enforced Liminalities, and the Freedom of the Gharana

In her 2009 article, "Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness", Angela Jones discusses the freedom that heterotopic spaces can provide to queer people outside of heteronormative norms and expectations. She writes, "queer heterotopias are places where individuals can challenge the heteronormative regime and are 'free' to perform their gender and sexuality without fear of being qualified, marginalized, or punished" (Jones 2). However, while the gharana provides community, and even family, to many hijras, many gharanas also have strict rules and authoritarian leaders. Whilst the environment of the gharana can provide freedom for hijras to express their hijra identities, this must be done in specific and particular ways. Therefore, whilst Jones' argument has some merit in her analysis of queer heterotopias, she ignores the complexity and structure of many queer communities. Jones erases the particularities of unique communities by framing them as overly utopian spaces, amid her otherwise constructive attempt to claim space and celebrate uniqueness in defiance of dominant culture. Jones further comments, "[q]ueer heterotopias exist in opposition to heteronormative spaces and are spaces where individuals seek to disrupt heterosexist discourses" (Jones 2). In many ways there is a conflict between the gharana and wider Indian society, with the gharana and its inhabitants disrupting the heteronormative standards outside.

However, the gharana's inhabitants are also active participants in the normative traditions and celebrations of Indian society, for example, when they take part in blessing ceremonies at weddings and births. That said, it is also often not the intention of the gharana's inhabitants to disrupt their surroundings; they are merely existing in a way in which society tentatively allows them to, and in this way, are in fact abiding by the rules of heteronormative society. In embodying their queerness, whilst simultaneously emulating more normative family structures in the gharana, they are also exhibiting the behaviour that Ahmed sets out in *Strange Encounters*, uncannily mirroring heteronormative society without really taking part in heteronormative lifestyles or patrilineal family structures. However, it could also be said that while hijras do not fully participate in wider society, they have been able to remake these heteronormative traditions into events which *must* include them. By making their presence at these celebrations a key feature, they have been able to co-construct meaning alongside the heteronormative meaning created by wider society, and it is therefore made into a space in which they too can belong. By being present at weddings and events, they have radically recreated the heteronormative essence from *within* those very structures which have attempted to exclude them.

While Jones has sought to argue that queer heterotopias are spaces of freedom and fluidity, the hijra gharana fits more easily into traditional understandings of liminal spaces as spaces which have been abandoned by society. These are spaces in a kind of limbo: between the living and the dead, or between the visible and invisible. Many hijras inhabit these specific and unique spaces because they have been forced to. Rather than being utopic spaces in which queer freedom prevails, it is instead where hijras have been consigned by the rest of society. Although before the British colonisation of India, hijras did indeed form communities, it was only during the Raj that hijras began exclusively living in gharanas. In essence, during this period, the gharana was where hijras took cover from the surveilling eyes of local colonial powers. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the Criminal Tribes Act aimed to "erase [h]ijras from public space through the prohibition of performance and feminine dress, and, in the long term, to gradually render them 'extinct' by interfering with Hijra discipleship and preventing castration (which the British incorrectly considered a prerequisite for Hijra-hood)" (Hinchy, "Gender, Family, and Policing" 1681). The gharana was, therefore, a space in which hijras could perform and dress in gender non-conforming clothing; but this was the only space in which this could be done freely.

Preceding the era of colonial rule, and going back to what many scholars see as the beginning of hijra ancestry in India: the Mughal empire, eunuchs were forced to live very separate lives from larger society. Although not hijras in a cultural or gendered sense of the term, many scholars see these eunuchs as a starting point for the development of hijra culture and gender identity. In Mughal courts, hijras (or eunuchs, as they were then referred to) often served as the protector of the courtly harem or zenana (a part of the household exclusively for women). They were perhaps more appropriately called eunuchs at this point, as they did not dress in women's clothing but were rather castrated and forced into slavery under Mughal emperors. These individuals were trusted protectors of the court's harems because "their bodies were imbued with moral worth and it was believed that on account of severed family ties, such enslaved individuals would pledge their loyalties to their masters" (Taparia 170). Furthermore, they proved no sexual threat to their master's prized females due to their castration. Although some eunuchs found positions of power in their master's court, many were often banished to the zenana with the women instead, and were rarely seen outside of this insular and confined community. This sense of being both confined and out of sight seems to have been passed down to later iterations of hijra culture and community.

Mona writes at length about the complex position hijras occupy in Indian society. She explains that although some hijras have navigated methods to increase their standard of

living, they are still outcasts. She writes about how hijras were promised land to rule over by King Ram (in the Hindu epic scripture, the *Ramayana*). She states, "Now we are in the worst times in history, but no eunuch are ruling. Or maybe we are ruling. They [other hijras] barge into people's homes, give blessings, and charge 11,000 rupees. They have fancy cars and mobile phones. But still there is no respect for them in society" (Singh and Ahmed 63). This sense of being able to be economically mobile whilst still being incarcerated by the social liminality of her gender and culture is something which Laxmi also writes about in her text. Laxmi has herself found fame and economic stability through her work on television, but she still struggles to find acceptance in both regular Indian society, and even centrist LGBTQ+ groups, as I will discuss later.

In the hijras' accounts of their gharana lives, many present a community of daughters, mothers, and grandmothers living together, outside of heteronormative expectations. Although these family structures are often created out of necessity, as many of the hijras' biological families are not accepting of their gender identity, this community space can provide a radical alternative to the strict patriarchal society outside the gharana walls. Although Laxmi does not write at length about her own experience of the gharana, because she did not live in one for an extended period of time, she does make passing comments about it in her text. When she writes about her decision to leave the gharana in order to move back to her parents' house when her father became ill, "in order to be available and accessible to them" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 151), she refers to the gharana as "the hijra ghetto" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 151). Although the word ghetto finds its etymological roots in the Jewish ghetto in 16th century Venice, it has come to mean an area of a city which is impoverished and usually houses a minority group (for example, Jews in Europe between the 16th and 20th centuries, Black communities in 20th and 21st century America, and in this case, hijra communities in modern day India). However, the word ghetto also implies a sense of liminality, with its enforced segregation and a restriction of movement between the ghetto and the main part of the city. Mona encounters a kind of double ghettoisation due to her identity as both a Muslim and a hijra. Indeed, this shared character of Muslim and hijra "outsider" identity is something which some scholars see as inherent to the etymological origins of the word hijra. Some see the root of the word "hijra" as "Haj" or the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca which all Muslims aspire to make at least once int their life. This migratory journey indicates a sense of returning to a spiritual home, re-joining a wider community, and a commitment to this particular way of (religious) life, which is particularly

apt considering many hijras' ostracisation from their families and wider Indian society in general.

In their 2011 book, *People Without History: India's Muslim Ghettos*, Jeremy Seabrook and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui discuss the many examples of Muslim slums (or ghettos) in India. They write that the UN definition of a slum household (slightly different to a ghetto, with economic deprivation being the key factor in creating a slum, and for people's movement to a slum) as one which is missing one of the following characteristics: "improved water supply, that is, which was sufficient, affordable, and the procuring of which did not involve excessive effort; improved sanitation, […] security of tenure, […] durability of housing, [and] sufficient living room" (Seabrook and Ahmed Siddiqui 117). This lack of basic amenities definitely applies to Mona's living space in the graveyard, and the double-liminality of being Muslim and being a hijra enforces a particularly remote liminal space for Mona.

Despite her inability to make peace with life in the gharana, Laxmi does attempt to create a community of her own in LGBTQ+ activist spaces. However, when she attempts to create a sense of community for herself within the wider LGBTQ+ community in India, she is met with resistance. She recounts how she was removed from an LGBTQ+ charity gala because hijras were not welcome, despite her work for an LGBTQ+ charity. She despairs at this exclusion of hijras from LGBTQ+ spaces, asking: "[what does it mean] for the movement if a well-known activist is thrown out of so-called mainstream, progressive, and elite places. It simply means we can never be accepted. It shows the hangover of India's upper class. And, its double standards" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 73). This demonstrates that kinship is difficult for Laxmi to find, even in spaces where she feels she should be welcomed. This sense of being unwelcome, despite her relative fame and prosperity, demonstrates how even outside of mainstream society – in LGBTQ+ spaces – hijras are often viewed as "other" and are therefore occupants of an even more narrow and othered space at the thresholds. However, although this might be how Laxmi feels, her right-wing Hindutva views (which she publicly broadcasts) are no doubt unpopular amongst many of her LGBTQ+ peers, so, although we are never explicitly told why Laxmi is ousted from this space, this is one possible alternative for the group's less-than-welcoming attitude towards her. Laxmi is a celebrity, and she is very publicly aligned with Modi's BJP, which is unpopular within activist spaces. So, while hijras may face stigma within these activist spaces, Laxmi's experience might be more to do with who she is as in individual, rather than her hijra identity.

Laxmi, like Mona, experiences othering with people stopping to stare at her , but most of the time Laxmi attributes this to her fame, rather than any judgement about her being a hijra. For example, she describes an outing with her friend, a fellow hijra called Gauri. She writes,

> Gauri […] looks out for me – especially since I have gained fame and became a known face. Sometimes she'll pity me for it! Like this one time when we went to Ajmer Sharif together […] This was soon after I came out of the *Bigg Boss* house, so a lot of people at the dargah spotted me and soon there was a mob around us. It was very difficult to leave the dargah, and it took us almost five hours to walk barely a ten-minute distance! (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 101)[77]

This is one of many such experiences Laxmi writes about, with her often dropping in mentions of encounters with members of the public who are enraptured by her fame. In her 2023 book, *Doppelganger*, Naomi Klein writes about the othering of oneself from one's authentic self when one is a public figure. Klein both discusses the consequences of modern-day social media use, but also the effects of presenting oneself as a brand (as many celebrities do). She writes that making a person into a brand or commodity is not only objectifying, but it is also a dissociative process whereby a person creates a double (or doppelganger) of themselves to present as their public-facing persona. She writes, "[the] triad – of partitioning, performing, and projecting – is fast becoming a universal form of doppleganging, generating a figure who is not exactly us, but whom others nonetheless perceive as us" (Klein 57). In some ways, Laxmi's public image becomes a kind of doppelganger of herself; a front which she uses to protect and simultaneously promote herself and her so-called "hijra-isms".

Working at the Thresholds: Sex Work and Liminality

As hijras emerged as an obvious part of the Indian population, away from the Mughal courts, they were seen as homosexuals who lived in communities together. Furthermore, especially under the British Raj, with its imported notions of homosexuality, many hijras were forced into sex work because they were deemed as effeminate or even, as stated above, criminal. They were therefore unable to find regular and legitimate employment, meaning many hijras

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[77] Ajmer Sharif dargah is the tomb of a Sufi saint located in Ajmer in Rajasthan.

became reliant on sex work for an income (both personally, and to help sustain their gharanas).

Scholars often locate environments in which sex work occurs, especially red-light districts, as liminal spaces. These spaces are often located within the city limits and they are "othered" by their semi-legal or illegal status, and the stigmatised activities taking place within. Indeed, in his analysis of fictional and real-world sex work, James Klemens states, "sex workers and their clients [are seen] as liminal and interdependent entities, operating in an equivocal and shadowy state between the legal and illegal, the self-empowering and the self-abasing, the mundane and the out-of-the-ordinary" (Klemens 88). Hijras are well-known for their involvement in sex work, with some working in brothels and red-light districts, but most soliciting on the street, alone. Reddy reports in her detailed ethnographic investigation of hijras on the Indian subcontinent, "at least half of the current hijra population (at least in Hyderabad) engages in prostitution" (Reddy 2). While sex work tends not to be encouraged by hijra gurus, this does not negate the common association in the Indian national psyche between hijras and sex work. Indeed, Salman Rushdie states that there are three recognised forms of hijra work: "manti (or basti), that is to say, begging; badai, the marriage celebration; and pun, the selling of sex" (The Half- Woman God 111).

As well as the spaces in which sex work takes place, the status of sex workers themselves inhabits liminal space due to their marginalised status, which occurs due to the stigmatisation of sex work. In Laxmi's and Mona's texts, the authors do not mention taking part in sex work – although this does not necessarily mean they have not. However, in Revathi's text, some of the hijras do mention participating in sex work. In her introduction to the text, Revathi writes that sex work is one of the key reasons why hijras are so stigmatised and receive such a high level of abuse and marginalisation. The association between sex work and hijra communities is so strong that Ranjitha states that it was initially because she wanted to start doing sex work that she approached her local hijra community: she saw them as her path to working in the industry. She writes, "I would see a few aravanis […] in our town. They would also call out to me. Initially I was scared to meet them. Later I started going with them without the knowledge of my family members, to do thantha (doing sex work)" (Revathi 199).

Because of the physical and social liminal space hijras inhabit, and particularly those who engage in sex work, they are also more at risk of violence from their customers, as no protections are put in place for them. Roja explains how dangerous sex work can be as a hijra. She states,

[i]f we got money from two customers for sex work, we had to do sex work free
of cost for 10 rowdies. They would force us to do things we didn't like to do.
They would beat or threaten us with knifes. Once we were sleeping inside the
hamam. Some people came and banged the door. We didn't open it. They threw a
stone at the roof. A tile broke and fell on my nose. My nose started bleeding. I was
taken to Boris Hospital. I had to get a few stitches. (Revathi 468–73)

Although Roja writes in a matter-of-fact tone about these events, her description of how for
every two paying customers, she would have ten men forcing her to have sex with them
(without payment), depicts a systematic experience of rape. She also describes a group of
men terrorising her and other members of her gharana by throwing stones onto the roof of the
gharana. While Roja does not state this, it is unlikely that any legal action would be taken
against these men as crime is not policed in the same way for gharana members. Because
these spaces are outside of "polite", heteronormative society, little is done in the way of
protection for gharana members, not least because hijras are often policed for minor offences
such as begging, and the members therefore have a turbulent relationship with the police (as
seen in Saria 145). These liminal spaces seem to be excluded from the protections provided
within the mainstream spaces of society.

Some of the hijras who contribute to Revathi's edited collection view sex work as one
of the key reasons for their stigmatisation. For example, Ranjitha believes that hijras'
involvement in sex work is the primary reason why they are not accepted into the
heteronormative spaces of society. She states,

[w]omen do not respect us because of that. Society is also not ready to accept us
because of that. Why does everyone accept hijras from Vellore? Because they
know that we don't do sex work. Some people think, "Hijras are sex workers. If
we let them in they will spoil our men-folk." They fear that the men would
become friendly with us by the way we behave. (Revathi 1111)

Although I think Ranjita is mistaken, and it is not just because of sex work that wider society
stigmatise hijras, it seems that at least partially, this is why they are not allowed to be fully
functioning members of Indian society, and are forced to live at the thresholds.

Conclusion: Potentialities and Perils of the Betwixt/Between

In this chapter I have discussed a variety of ways in which the hijra authors inhabit liminal space. Not only are the spaces themselves different from normative, mainstream spaces (the gharana, the graveyard, LGBTQ+ spaces, the broader cityscape, and the psychological space of the societal psyche), but the ways in which the authors inhabit them differ vastly. Some feel they are trapped in a kind of limbo (particularly Mona, who is without any real kind of sympathetic support system or community), but many understand that these poorly defined spatialities allow for a radical reconstruction of meaning and an endless potentiality for how their communities can exist within these spaces. In his 2017 text *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruin*, An Yountae asks "What happens to us as we gaze upon the abyss and as it gazes back upon us?" (Yountae 141). His answer is that the abyss can be made and remade into the beholder's (or in our authors' cases, inhabitants') desired space. He states that the abyss is "a space replete with potential" that "nurtures a sense of possibility" (Yountae 2–3). Yountae contrasts "the abyss", empty but full of possibilities, with the void, which points to "absence and death […] nothingness and emptiness, vacillating between silence and absence" (Yountae 1–2).This remaking of empty or liminal space is seen in Mona's remaking of the Qabristan as a place of learning and romance, many Revathi's contributors creating a place of extremely close kinship bonding and even finding romance in the gharana, and Laxmi's ability to create a celebrity status through her unique hijra identity.

Looking outwards, and looking at these liminal spaces within the context on India's political governance, it is also important to state that these spaces are not always the spaces of positive potentialities which Yountae theorises. Although I have touched on temporal liminality, in particular with regards to Mona's proximity to death, and the ghostly, this aspect of the temporal and temporal displacement and liminality is also important to consider when looking at Indian society's attitudes towards hijra identity and the future. Despite the BJP's tendency towards conservatism, it also places itself in direct opposition to its neighbouring Pakistan, painting itself as more liberal, accepting, and Western-facing. In line with this outwards-facing façade of liberalism is the Indian government's alignment with apparently Western ideals of being gay-friendly. The BJP has faced increasing critiques of "pinkwashing" or "rainbow-washing", whereby LGB(TQIA+) rights and protections are used as examples of liberalism, often to disguise or justify a country's failings in other areas. Often these so-called rights or protections do little to actually help those in the LGBTQIA+ community, and are more about the promotion of the country's standing on the global stage,

and particularly how it is perceived in the West.[78] So, while India's government is looking towards the future, using liberal policy towards the LGBT community to (at least in part) help its standing in the West, traditional gender identities are not necessarily included in that. In India's law and policy they use Anglicised terms like "third-gender" and "transgender" rather than traditional terms like "hijra" and "kinnar".[79] Some scholars have seen this as an erasure of those who self-identify using those terms. It seems that while the Indian government attempts to be seen as liberal, inclusive, and pro-LGBT, it is leaving its hijra population unseen and in the past, in a kind of temporal liminality, or heterochromia, to use Peter Johnson's terminology.

Looking towards the future, it is important to consider both the radical possibilities the hijras themselves present in their texts on how the spaces they inhabit (both physical and psychological) can be reconstructed and embodied, but also how outside pressures from the government and judicial systems (who at once appear to embrace pro-LGB(TQIA+) policies whilst simultaneously erasing particular queer identities) might attempt to change these liminalities into obscurities. While I framed much of this chapter's emphasis on the exciting possibilities for remaking and co-constructing liminal space, I also want to make clear that hijras' inhabitation of this space often has real-world implications for them and their communities. Often because these liminal spaces (the gharana, the graveyard, spaces in which sex work takes place e.g. red-light districts) are located either physically outside the city or town boundaries, or because hijras themselves inhabit a liminal space in the social psyche, the benefits of belonging to mainstream society are not extended to them. For example, they are often not protected from violent crime by the police, safe living conditions, or easy access to legitimate and legal employment. Whilst the authors demonstrate a remarkable ability to create these protections and opportunities for themselves, it does not negate the need for local and national government to provide these too. Not only this, but public bodies should provide protections and opportunities specifically for hijras (and other minority groups), rather than undefined and vague groups like "transgender" which does not necessarily include hijras *specifically*.

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[78]See footnote on p.17 for a better understanding of pinkwashing, and the term's history.

[79] I wonder also if there's a sense of obfuscation with using these Western terms, as they do not inherently bring to mind associations of begging and sex work, as well as long standing rumours about, for example, child abduction.

Conclusion

The Creation of a New Genre and New Hijra Knowledge

Through analysing these life writing texts, we can see that although the themes and facets of hijra identity and experience are not fundamentally different from what previous sociological scholarship has shown us, the ways in which the authors frame these themes *are* radically different. Whilst existing sociological scholarship shows hijras as the victims of intolerable violence, leading to unadulterated misery (Thompson et al. (2019), Li et al. (2017)), and much fictional literature does the same (Thompson (2011)) or frames hijras as criminals themselves (Singh (1990)), the authors complicate their representations of violence in far more interesting and nuanced ways, and refute the binary of perpetrator versus victim. While they do experience violence on both interpersonal and structural levels, and this is painful, the authors present this as a small emotional facet of their lives which they feel alongside joy, creativity and frivolity. Some of the authors also frame themselves as both experiencing violence and committing violent acts themselves. For example, Laxmi's discussion of her own rape of her cousin as an act of revenge is shocking but is also framed as a defiant act of justice and agency creation.

In their discussions of community and kinships (especially in gharanas) and dance, the authors' narratives reflect the importance placed on gharana kinship structures and dance (especially at badhai celebrations) that we see in sociological scholarship. However, while in previous scholarship we see gharanas as the only possible kinship available to hijras because of their status as social outcasts (Tanupriya (2020), Ghosh (1999), Goel (2019, 2022), Kumar Singh (2022), Nanda (2010)), my authors present gharanas as complicated spaces in which some kinship relationships can be familial in nature and provide deep understanding and love, while others can be hostile and cruel. Indeed, the texts also provide differing insights about the possibilities for hijra kinship: some find kinship and acceptance in their biological family, some with romantic partners, some in adopted children, and some in animals. Similarly, in most existing scholarship we see dance being framed only as an employment opportunity for hijras, or as a method of strengthening kinship bonds within the gharana. Whilst we also see these representations of dance in the life writing texts, we also see dance as a mode of expressing joy and an embodied cultural tradition which is performed both for personal enjoyment and as a gender-affirming practice. Again, in their explorations of liminal space (the gharana, the graveyard, the red-light district), the authors do not just frame these spaces as spaces which they inhabit as social outcasts, but they also frame the spaces as modes of

potentiality and remaking. They also include fascinating representations of their encounters with heteronormative society, and how these encounters can provide liberation and rebellion.

Finally, in their acts of writing, the authors choose innovative and unusual forms to tell their life narratives. Thus far, there has been no scholarship of form in hijra life writing, which locates it as a genre in its own. Any existing scholarship (Ramos (2018), Samanta (2017)) which looks to these texts, and to hijra life writing as a genre, analyses chiefly the content of the texts as evidence for sociological research, rather than as creative literary texts in and of themselves.

The authors present their lives and the lives of their peers as complicated and nuanced, as all lives are. Unlike what we see presented in fictional literary representations or sociological scholarship, hijras do not *only* experience violence, they do not *all* rely on gharanas for kinship, they do not *only* dance to make money, and they do not *only* exist in liminal space. My authors present their lives as being full of potentialities and possibilities despite the structural and societal restrictions put on them. This sense of possibility and opportunity pervades across the texts, and it is only through reading these works of hijra life writing that we are afforded this view of hijra identity and experience. The authors also represent themselves as agents in their own lives: they feel, sense, and act, and are not just acted upon by their violent adversaries.

Further than just using their life writing texts to tell their reader the events of their lives, the authors also use this space to reclaim the agency of telling their own stories. As Laxmi states, she is able to choose how her emotions and actions are conveyed, writing, "I can't just be a victim, I am a celebration, I feel, and that's the narrative I choose for my story" (Narayan Tripathi and Pande 171). While the authors tell stories of complex lives, in which they can indeed be victims, it is their choice how to frame this within their narratives.

The Hijra Archive

I have briefly mentioned "the archive" throughout this thesis, both in reference to the hijra archive specifically, and the difficulty of locating or creating queer archives more generally (see Chapter One) because of queer individuals and communities specifically being excluded from national, historical archives. These life writing texts, therefore, also act as archival documents through which understandings of hijra culture and identity can begin to be comprehended and appreciated by both hijras themselves to gain a fuller understanding of their history and sympathetic outsiders. In his article, "Trauma Is as Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times" (2016), Maurice E. Stevens states that it remains

difficult for the disaffected to claim space within typical archival spaces, and for many, "memory and forgetting as cultural practices remain the only mode of history making available to abjected groups" (Stevens 21). Indeed, it seems that through these hijras' memories (and writing these memories and narratives) we are able to understand a much fuller picture than the national archive, or sociological studies, have been able to illuminate.

In Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India* (2019), she discusses the difficulty in locating hijra history within usual archival spaces. Her book includes a chapter called "The Hijra Archive", which makes clear that there is an existing physical archive which records hijra history. However, the records are largely part of a wider history of peoples targeted by the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). Although there are records of interviews with hijras and, for example, neighbours of hijras and neighbourhood watchmen, Hinchy suggests that these are fuelled by coercion and moral panic, rather than anything resembling an interest in truth or an increased understanding of the hijra individuals and communities being surveilled. Although, much to her credit, Hinchy seeks out varied and sometimes contradictory sources from the colonial archive, the lasting impression left by her chapter "The Hijra Archive" is that despite the "plural forms" she locates (Hinchy 138), the voices of hijras themselves are made conspicuous by their absence. By their very nature, these colonial archives represent a history-from-above framing of Indian society and the hijra communities they surveilled.

In my life writing texts, however, the authors bridge the gap between this available mode of history-making through remembering (and forgetting) but also through documenting this in published (and often celebrated) texts, allows these memories to become part of a physical archive of hijra life. Stevens goes on to write that because of the exclusion of these abjected groups from history-making, it is their burden to write and celebrate their own histories. He writes, "the denigrated and degraded […] must create histories that feature themselves and their loved ones as vindicated whole beings who possess the stuff of historical merit" (Stevens 20). And whilst I believe it should not be the burden of these abjected group to write their own histories, it is often left to them to devise a way of celebrating these histories, as mainstream culture will not. So, while it should not be the responsibility of hijras to write their own histories, by doing so they vindicate themselves and create community and individual agency.

Creation (and the Future) of a Genre

Although these texts cannot be representative of every hijra's experience of living in India today, they do give us an indication of how hijras view their individual and community identities, cultures, and experiences from the authors' shared inclusion of the themes I have discussed in this thesis. While every life story is different, the authors and contributors have all shown that the violence they have experienced due to their hijra identity has caused both mental and physical pain in their lives, but they have also shown how important their hijra communities are, how they value and find joy in dance, and how they often find themselves living in and occupying liminal spaces that have the potential to create unexpected forms of freedom and agency. While not every hijra will agree with the importance of these themes in their own lives, it seems that this is a good place to start in identifying what makes a hijra life writing text. The hijra authors and contributors all come from different gharanas, castes, classes, religions, geographic areas, and are different ages, but have all found these themes and experienced to be a commonality amongst them.

Although other hijra life writing texts, for example Laxmi's 2015 *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and Revathi's *The Truth about Me* (2010), have not utilised a collage method of writing their stories, the authors' later texts (as well as Mona's text) which are co-written with reputable authors are written using more experimental forms and styles. Their co-writing with these more established figures in the literary and art worlds legitimises their writing, and therefore allows them further authorial freedoms. The authors use these freedoms to express sentiments which have previously not been expressed in more conventional hijra narratives. These innovative works of literary collage allow for nuance, complexity, conflict, and explorations of the potentialities and possibilities of living as a hijra in modern India.

Although I have chosen to shine a spotlight on texts whose authors practice a collage aesthetic, and employ unusual forms through which to tell their stories, this is not a prerequisite for writing a hijra life story. I expect that in the fullness of time, as more hijras are able to tell their stories, many subgenres will emerge within the broader life writing genre, and I look forward to future analyses of the genre as more hijras write their life stories.

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