

Hijra Representations in Bollywood: Adoption and Legal Discourses

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Abstract:

The proposed paper will examine the theme of adoption and motherhood in hijra representations in the mainstream Indian cinema. Hijras are members of a non-binary community in regions of South Asia who are born as males but identify mostly as females or third gender. The community is one of the most visible sexual minorities in the subcontinent and can be easily located on the streets across the country, begging, mostly, on traffic signals. They continue to live on the fringes of the mainstream society because they have no other occupation than prostitution and begging. They have also long suffered from misrepresentation in the mainstream culture which counters to their social marginalization.

The paper will argue that adoption and motherhood, which are central to hijra identities and, also, in the formation of hijra kinship ties, are almost always presented as ‘unnatural’ and criminal in the Indian mainstream commercial films, demonizing the community. An in-depth analysis of two Indian films – *Darmiyaan* and *Tamanna*, will be offered in this paper. These films offer sustained representations on hijra kinship ties, focusing on key themes of adoption and non-biological parenting, and challenge the conventional idea of ‘motherhood’. Following in the footsteps of scholars like David Eng, Kim Park Nelson, and Phelan, this paper critically studies hijra initiation practice with an intersectional lens in order to expose the structural inequalities of race, class, and religion. Thus, this paper starts a conversation in the area of queer non-cis community-based “adoption” from the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Hijras, Queer Bollywood, Hijra kinship ties, Postcolonial Critical adoption studies

Introduction:

In 2019, the much-contested Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (hereto referred to as the transgender bill) passed in both the houses of Indian parliament, making the experiences of Indian nonbinary communities, especially hijras, even more challenging. The bill staged itself to address the social inequalities that the transgender communities in India endure, essentially focusing on the hijra community. Hijras are members of a nonbinary community (often translated, contestably, as India's transgender population) who are born as males or are intersex but identify mostly as females or as the third gender. A large number of hijras are castrated by untrained fellow hijras, and almost all of them live in nonbiological kinship systems in various regions of South Asia (Nanda; Reddy). However, the 2019 transgender act fails to recognize these nonbiological familial patterns of living and deems them unconstitutional.

In its first chapter, the bill defines the family as “a group of people related by blood or marriage or by adoption made in accordance with law.” This definition legally casts aside all possibilities of queer kinship ties, as “legal adoption” is far from capturing the experiences that communities like hijras practice. Most new members of the hijra community choose a hijra household where they will reside after they are disowned by their biological parents. This non-cis community setting becomes the new hijra's “family”; they are expected to follow certain rituals and adhere to the household's unwritten rules and codes of conduct.¹ This initiation of new members into the hijra community is, I argue, not the same as adoption. Three main factors differentiate hijra initiation from legal adoption. First, there is no legal document or any other form of assurance that testifies to the responsibilities of the new family unit for the initiated hijra. Second, all the members of this community, differently from traditional families, are related to each other solely through their shared experience of “otherness” from hetero-cis society. Lastly,

new members join the community in order to live their gender freely and to experience a shared sense of belonging and togetherness. Thus, the term *adoption* fails to capture their experiences and, as Peggy Phelan rightly suggests, there is a need “to develop a much richer vocabulary for the myriad experiences that are currently known as adoption” (6). Therefore, I use *initiation*, rather than *adoption*, to describe hijra experiences of leaving their biological families and joining their new communities/families.

Nevertheless, the three kinds of relations that the legal definition of *family* recognizes—blood relationship, marriage, and legal adoption—reinforce conjugal essentializing within heteronormative patriarchal structures, leaving no space for legal recognition of community-based and other queer kinship formations. Such legal practices, as I will argue in this paper, have tried to exterminate the hijra population since colonial times by portraying their kinship ties as criminal, contrary to the hijras’ real-life practices. I will further argue that these legal spaces have built a public negative image of hijras, which is further encouraged by the mainstream Indian cinema.

In this paper, I use Critical Adoption Studies as a lens to disorient hijra kinship ties. Hijras’ community-based kinship formations have long been restricted to their gender in the dominant heteronormative society, confining “the uniqueness of hijra identities” (Dutta and Roy 326). This paper, following in the footsteps of scholars like David Eng, Kim Park Nelson, and Phelan, critically studies hijra initiation practice with an intersectional lens in order to expose the structural inequalities of race, class, and religion. As Kim Park Nelson observes, *identities* need to be seen as “layered, intersectional, and complicated” (20). In the first section of this paper, I study the shortcomings of the Transgender Rights Act 2019 using a postcolonial lens, as the postcolonial “insists that we witness the unfinished business of colonialism at work in our contemporaneity” to achieve a critical perspective (McLeod 208). Therefore, looking back at how the colonial

administration treated hijras helps in analyzing the hijra situation in contemporary India. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of adoption study in the field of postcolonial studies (McLeod 209). So, this paper attempts to start a conversation in the area of queer non-cis community-based “adoption” from the Indian subcontinent, with a retrospective gaze at the colonial legacies. The second section of this essay will describe how hijra kinship ties have been misused to misrepresent them in the most popular form of public representation, Hindi mainstream cinema, which reinforces hijras’ social marginalization. I will argue that their cinematic representations use certain tropes and cinematography techniques to portray hijras negatively—mainly as pitiable beings and criminals, as a tribe of kidnappers and murderers as a reference to their practice of initiating young boys into their communities. The following questions will be at the center of this paper: how are issues of caste, religion, and class absorbed within the intimate family structure of hijras? How are the legacies of the colonial rule regarding hijras persisting in contemporary India? What and how does hijra community initiation practices add to Critical Adoption Studies? And finally, how do these practices get projected into public culture?

I

Gauri Sawant, a well-known hijra activist, gained fame after she was featured in a Vicks India advertisement where she played the role of a real-life mother of an adopted girl: Sawant is a mother to three other children, all hijras, but has never been acknowledged for parenting her nonbinary children. She voices her concern in an interview on the systematic erasure of one part of her mother-life while bringing into the limelight the other (NLD Talk). She is critical of the fact that it is only when she mothers a cisgender child that her labor is recognized and respected.

Motherhood in India and other South Asian countries is strictly policed and is closely associated with gender and sexuality. Sawant complicates this idea of motherhood, saying it is a behavior that is beyond gender. Anyone, including hijras like herself, can be a mother to anyone. Ina Goel rightly suggests: “hijra motherhood challenges the heteronormativity of the family as a social institution. By claiming motherhood, hijras have re-appropriated the gender of the term mother by making it trans-inclusive, third-gender inclusive, and non-binary inclusive. Additionally, making womanhood trans-inclusive by practicing hijra motherhood, a new frontier is also set for hijra performance of gender” (“What”). Hijra motherhood, which is based on non-blood kinship ties, does not accept the conventionally accepted norms of motherhood. It issues a strong call toward nonbinary reproductive justice. Reproductive justice, as Tanya Saroj Bakhru claims, “interrogates and complicate[s] notions of ‘choice’” (7). It recognizes nonbiological choice-based parenthood. Hijra kinship formation gives the choice of a family to its initiates, though this choice occurs within a complex network in which motherhood is practiced through a unique way of adoption.

Against the traditional norm in Indian heterosexual families, hijra households are formed within nonbiological matriarchal systems, where older hijras initiate new members (usually in their teens) into the community. These new hijras become *chelis* (female disciples) of their chosen *guru* (teacher), who is generally a senior member of a particular hijra household, sanctioned and legitimized by “hijra panchayats or jamaats”² (Goel, “What”). The *cheli* hijra has the freedom to choose their *guru* on joining the community. However, this freedom is layered and is often limited. Since most young hijras who join the community are abandoned by their natal families because of their gender and sexuality, they readily accept whatever option appears, having no other place to go and impelled to consent to the community’s rules and regulations (Nanda 16). Furthermore,

initiation under their chosen *guru* comes at the cost of accepting all of the *guru*'s commands and serving her for the rest of her lifetime. Failure to do so mostly results in direct excommunication from the community. This implies the *cheli* will no longer have a *guru* or access to the extended hijra community, which is equivalent to social suicide for hijras (48). Without a *guru*, a hijra is no longer considered to be within the community. For instance, when Madhavi, a hijra from Gayatri Reddy's ethnographic study, underwent *nirwana*—an operation conducted to remove male genitals often in an unhygienic atmosphere by elder hijras—against her *guru*'s will, Madhavi was refused any place within the community and had to live an abandoned life “on pain of social ostracism” (Reddy 142). This made Madhavi's hijra identity questionable. Clearly, this *guru-cheli* relationship problematizes consent, freedom of choice, and the conditional care of initiated hijras.

The process of hijra initiation involves power politics: the well-established hijras within the community are empowered and the new members are left highly vulnerable and disenfranchised. However, to suggest that the *guru-cheli* relationship is about dominating the *cheli* hijras would be to shatter the principles of the hijra community, as this relationship is the most idealized and “serves as the primary axis of kinship and genealogical descent” (157). It is the ritual of leaving one's biological parents' house and joining the *guru-cheli* framework that marks the birth of a hijra. This move gives them the right to access the “*deras* (communes of hijras) with a newly assigned name, generally in the female derivative” and makes them a member of the clan or the larger family as soon as they start contributing to the “hierarchical yet symbolic *guru-chela* relationship” (Goel, “Hijra” 539). In return, the *cheli* promises to take care of the *guru* when she is old. In this way, an agreement is established between the hijra *guru* and *cheli*. The *guru* finds security for her old age, and the newly initiated hijra gets access to a community space that is

possibly more welcoming. This process and commitment also builds a level of hierarchy, trust, dependency, and understanding between the *guru* and *cheli*.

Apart from the fact that the *cheli* needs a *guru* for “initiation into the community” as this is possible “only under the sponsorship of a *guru*,” which makes this relationship extremely important, the *guru*, importantly, acquires the “mother” status for her *cheli* hijra (Nanda 43). The *guru* and *cheli*, as in modern adoption like those described by Margaret Homans, “mimics” the biological ties to authenticate their experience as well as relationship (3). For instance, when a *guru* initiates a *cheli*, the *guru* performs a symbolic ritual of breastfeeding where milk is poured over the *guru*’s breast that the *cheli* then drinks (Reddy 164). The *guru* also provides emotional and economic support to their *chelis* and forms kinship ties similar to those in matriarchal societies. Additionally, as with biological families, hijras also form relationships with other hijras who become “dudhbehan and dudhbeti, literally translated, ‘milk sister’ and ‘milk daughter’” (Reddy 165). Unlike the transactional *guru-cheli* relationship, these are based on love. Reddy points out that they “strengthen ties between hijras . . . widening the kinship network . . . for an extended, interconnected network of relationships between hijras living together” (165).

This mimicking of the biological relations to validate hijras’ experiences can be understood in two ways. Firstly, hijra imitation of biological ties can be seen as an important way in which the community members relate with each other. The internal workings of the *guru-cheli* relationship closely resemble those of Indian biological joint families in which, as Alan Roland notes, “the person lower in the status relationship within the kinship or work group needs the nurturance and protection of the one higher up, and will therefore show the proper deference and loyalty to the superior in exchange for consideration and being taken care of” (Nanda 46). Serena Nanda rightly suggests that hijras are more likely to follow this Indian joint family framework seriously as the

community itself is their home and workplace (46). Additionally, as these kinship ties are not legally recognized in the Indian constitution, it becomes very important for hijras, in order to survive as a community—crucial for the hijra identity—to have a framework that binds all of them not only formally but also emotionally. Hence, imitation of the biogenetic tie can be understood as a way to “reclaim motherhood” by hijras (Goel, “What”).

On the other hand, it can be argued that such mimicking leads to “biogenetic essentialism” (Homans 3). Rather than offering alternative kinship formations, the hijra kinship ties situate their practices within the framework of the biological families, instantiating them. However, it is worth noting here that hijra relationships also differ in several significant ways from South Asian biologically derived kinship ties, as South Asian kinship ties are usually based on “marital obligations and procreative kinship ideologies . . . moderated by the logic of the caste system and its concern with the ‘purity’ of women...mediated by the soteriological imperative of the kanyadana (gift of a virgin) ideal” (Reddy 145). Instead, hijra kinship groups are more often structured around complex nonbiological affiliations: every person comes individually to the hijra community, irrespective of their natal family’s status, class, caste, or religion, and acquires a hijra identity after joining the hijra kinship network.

Significantly however, these social markers also remain an important aspect of the hijra community. Swadha Taparia rightly defines hijras as a “social group [in which each member has] a gender, religious, historical, kinship and class identity” (169). Hijras are bound and defined by all these factors, making religious, cultural, historical, social, and biological factors active participants in forming hijra identities apart from gender. Hence, caste and religion frame hijra experiences as much as their gender positions. For instance, when initiating new members in the hijra community, most upper-caste hijra *gurus* are reluctant to take lower caste hijras as their *chelis*

(Goel, “What”). Laxmi Narayan’s *Akhara*³ embodies one of the many examples of such discriminatory practices in hijra households. Narayan Tripathi is one of the most recognizable hijra faces in the subcontinent. She is a hijra activist who upholds her Brahmanical lineage and has asserted, rather unapologetically on several platforms including in her autobiography, that she comes from a Brahman family and is, therefore, more knowledgeable than others (67). All her hijra followers are also upper-caste hijras. Hence, while hijras may choose which hijra household they want to join, their caste, class, and religion significantly affect their choices.

Hijras’ imitation of biological relationship ties cannot be simply read as a “biogenetic essentialism” as it does move beyond certain significant orthodox practices which are restrictive, like essentializing marital procreativity. However, there is a need for a more welcoming environment to decenter the dominant, cramped, homophobic, and non-cisgender-phobic spaces. Hence, for a better understanding of hijra communities and their kinship ties, it is important to look at hijra identities intersectionally.

Hijras in Legal Documents

Legal documents try to be “colorblind,” as Eng says in the US context, when looking at sexual minorities and queer subjects. The Indian Supreme Court’s landmark judgement⁴ in 2014 decriminalized hijra existence in India but was colorblind towards the community’s intersectionality. Since then, several bills have been introduced in the Indian parliament, all harshly criticized by the hijra community, with the most recent Transgender Rights Bill 2019 becoming an Act. This Act, following from its earlier drafts, essentially targets the hijra community-based existence in its attack on the centuries-old practice of hijra community initiation, which is based on non-bloodline kinship formation. Chapter 5 of this Act states:

(1) No child shall be separated from parents or immediate family on the ground of being a transgender, except on an order of a competent court, in the interest of such child. . . .

(3) Where any parent or a member of his immediate family is unable to take care of a transgender, the competent court shall by an order direct such person to be placed in rehabilitation centre.

The use of the term *transgender* here is highly contestable. An elaborate discussion on the problems of using *transgender* as an umbrella term within the hijra context can be found in the work of South Asian gender theorists such as Swadha Taparia, Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, and Loh (2018). Aside from its use of the term *transgender*, this clause is deeply problematic on multiple accounts. First, while it claims to be “in the interest of such child,” it erases the social realities of hijra experiences in contemporary India. Several hijras have voiced their concerns through the recently emerging hijra life writing practice that reveals how they have feared honor killing by their biological families their entire lives (Aggarwal; Narsee et al.). Rachana Mudraboyina, a trans activist, says that “moving out of the family has been the need of a large number of transpersons, primarily due to the discrimination and violence they would face from their immediate family and the immediate surrounding community.” Their freedom to choose a family for themselves, which for most hijras is the only available option that allows them to survive, has been pulled apart by this Act.

Second, by restricting government-led rehabilitation centers as the only resort for hijras who are disowned by their natal families, the Act leaves hijras in an extremely vulnerable situation. Since the community has been one of the most visible sexual minorities in the subcontinent, members of which continue to live on the fringes of the mainstream society, involved in prostitution and begging, among other low-status occupations, because there is no other work open

to them; their public image suffers. Accounts by hijras of the everyday violence that they face, along with their representations in the mainstream culture (as I will explore in detail later), illustrate the hatred that the dominant cis-heterosexual society cultivates against hijras.

Quantitative research conducted in Bangalore in 2019 concerning the violence and mental health issues hijras face shows that around fifty percent experienced physical violence over the span of six months studied, and that the suicide rate for hijras was above thirty percent, with the majority attempting suicide in their teens (Thompson et al.). Most of the direct violence, harassment, and abuse against hijras is reported to occur in government-led institutionalized settings, such as “harassment in police stations,” “police entrapment,” and “rape in jails” (PUCL-K). Given such a threatening environment, rehabilitation centers will further lead to the exploitation of hijras. Sawant, an important hijra activist, fears that “forceful rehabilitation will put such individuals [hijras abandoned by their natal families] in unsafe, abusive situations, pushing them to self-harm/suicide” (Pawar). The ambivalence of the Act’s language doubles these fears, as there is absolutely no provision about how these centers will be operated, making this Act nightmarish for the hijra community (Ghosh and Sanyal).

Significantly, these two clauses from the Transgender Act reiterate the nineteenth-century colonial legal policies concerning hijras. In 1871, the British government legally subjugated hijras as “criminal and sexually deviant persons” under the Criminal Tribes Act (Hinchey 2). As Jessica Hinchey outlines, a strong narrative was created before this Act that characterized hijras as kidnapping young boys. The nonbiological kinship ties that hijras practiced threatened British morals and Victorian ideals of chastity and conjugal family ties (111). Hence, the initiation of young members in the community was slanderously used to portray hijras as kidnapers and castrators of young boys, enabling the hijras’ horrible mischaracterization. For instance, in the

accounts of several British historians, hijras are presented as effeminate men. (Preston 375). In fact, they were seen as “males born with some congenital malformation,” filthy and contagious “habitual Sodomites” who faced “gender and sexual disorder,” as well as “a danger to children, since they were the kidnappers, castrators and pimps of young Indian boys” (Hinchy 8, 35; Preston 375). For the British, hijras became an “ungovernable population,” “a source of disorder, and as ‘matter out of place’, which threatened their colonial moral, social and political order” (Hinchy 44). They were taken to be a threat not only to the long-standing colonial “masculinity” but also to society itself. Suspected “of sodomy, kidnapping and castration,” hijras were brought under the Criminal Tribes Act in the nineteenth century.

One of the many purposes of this Act was the extermination of the hijra population. It involved an official register of hijras to keep a count and to stop new members from joining the community. By criminalizing the hijras’ community-based life, the Act also made it possible to legally remove young children from hijra households to stop new cases of castration (94). Such historical interventions regarding hijras from the nineteenth century easily made their way into the present century, feeding into the deeply heteronormative ideology on which post-colonial India is built. Thus, it can be argued that in contemporary India, through the 2019 Transgender act, similar attempts of policing hijra initiation and their right to choose their family are made. This act is, thus, not only a threat to the hijra community but is also a human rights violation, where the freedom of choosing one’s family is criminalized.

Adoption in India

The legal complications involved in including a new member in the family through non-conjugal relations are not limited to just the hijra community, though it is more particular to their case. Adoption in India is generally undesirable and stigmatized (Bhardwaj 1879). Here, I am

referring to the adoption of children in cis-heterosexual families created through conjugal bonds. Adoption is taboo in such Indian families because it “fractures [the] culturally conceptualized boundaries of a family as inextricably tied to the conjugal bond” (1865). However, it is also true that for centuries the adoption of young males (mostly from among blood relations) has been an acceptable practice in Indian families who do not have a male child (Groza and Bunkers 162; Bhargava). Since only male children can be heirs in the Indian Hindu system, they are expected to carry the family name (family blood) into the next generations by producing further male children. Nevertheless, as Bhardwaj suggests, “intractable infertility” and the absence of a male child remains the most acceptable reason for adoption in India (1868). In such a scenario, hijra initiation destabilizes the dominant, Indian-heteronormative cis-family that is created through conjugal bonds, since hijra kinship is not concerned with conjugal bonding, infertility, or the desire to have an heir. Thus, fear and anxiety about the hijra community persist in the dominant, heterosexual cisgender society, responses that are also reflected in popular cultural representations of hijras in India.

II

Hijras in Bollywood

In this section, I will review mainstream Hindi films and analyze two films at length, arguing that hijra kinship ties, unlike in real-life, are criminalized in film, which is a repercussion from the prevalent hijra-phobia and the legal policies that invalidate hijra existence. I will attend closely to the films to highlight how film as a genre has contributed to the problematic hetero- and cis-centering series of representations of hijras.

For decades, mainstream Indian Hindi Cinema⁵ has been an important part of Indian popular culture and has served the dual purpose of both representing and influencing the masses in the subcontinent. Given the large number of cinema-goers in India and elsewhere, its influence over popular culture and youth culture has become “very crucial to understand[ing] current trends, behaviour, fashion and lifestyles” (Sabharwal and Sen; Bhuyan). In Sabharwal and Sen’s words: “it is very important to understand how the country [India], its people and its aspirations are represented in the cinema produced in the country. Cinema as a medium of mass communication can be seen at different levels, serving different purposes. It can be an art form, an entertainment, a social document or a social critique. Cinema can be all of these and at the same time be a means to something else—a mirror unto our lives, showing us exactly how we function as society.” In other words, I aim to look at the cinematic representations of hijras because they are widely accessible and known throughout the country, mirroring the legal and societal attitude towards the community. Indian cinema is not a unified category: it is segmented based on languages and regions. However, Hindi film industry, usually known as Bollywood, is the largest and most successful film industry among all others in India. Thus, the images that get circulated through it reach a wide range of audiences, both nationally and globally, becoming a source of cultural information and influence.

Significantly, hijras have always been visible in mainstream Hindi cinema, though they are mostly misrepresented. Gopinath suggests that they are the “most obvious and common manifestations of sexual and gender transgression in popular film” (“Queering Bollywood” 294). In almost all the films that portray hijras, they are presented as cross-dressers with confusing pronouns. While in real life, hijras use female pronouns and identify with either the female gender or the third gender, in most films, the central hijra character identifies themselves as third gender,

uses feminine behavior and male pronouns. Hijras' gender identity, as I will further explore in this essay, is confused in Bollywood representations and is projected as performative.⁶

Bollywood's hijra are usually represented as comic relief, villains, or pitiable beings. As comic relief, hijra characters mostly appear for a short duration, especially in the song scenes. Song and dance scenes comprise around forty percent of most Bollywood films; therefore, they are significant and stand as separate entities, often aside from the rest of the plot (Gopinath, "Queering Bollywood" 285). It is in these song and dance sequences, as Gopinath suggests, that "queer, non-heteronormative desire emerges. . . . [as] it falls outside the exigencies of narrative coherence and closure, it can function as a space from which to critique the unrelenting heteronormativity that this narrative represents. Furthermore, the unmoored quality of the song-and-dance sequence...makes it particularly available for queer viewing strategies." ("Bollywood/Hollywood" 101). When hijra characters come on-screen during these song sequences, they rupture the heteronormative and cis-normative order of the rest of the film. For instance, in the songs "Tayyab Ali," "Dhik tana" and "Munni ki Baari," from the blockbuster movies *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (1994) and *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), among many others, the hijra characters sing, dance, and clap in their traditional style, making space for alternative gender expressions within the dominant cisgender-occupied narrative. In these occurrences hijras become the essential and the only representation for all kinds of non-cis-confirming genders and sexualities. However, their presence in these songs limits them to certain gender and sexual identities, even ridiculing them through hypersexualization, not representing the full extent of their experiences or identities.

Outside of the song sequences, hijras are mostly absent from Bollywood films. There are very few that focus exclusively on hijras, and even fewer that portray their community-based

existence or kinship patterns. In films that center hijras, they represent perverse sexuality and their characters embody the so-called evils present in society. Where hijras have prominent roles, they are mainly portrayed as either villains or unfortunate characters. Detective stories or crime thrillers—as, for instance, *Sadak* (1991), the first film with a significant hijra character; *Sangharsh* (1999);⁷ and *Murder 2* (2011)—use hijras to portray villains, or the most detestable beings. In thrillers, anxiety, suspense, and shock are evoked through the “mysterious” hijra character. Interestingly, using hijras in this framework has been well received by audiences, as all these films have been blockbusters. In fact, they were created under big banners and production houses and star leading actors, they were released on multiple screens all over India and globally, and they broke records at the box office. It is important to note, however, that these films do not celebrate hijras. Instead, they work with the common Bollywood hero-villain trope: the hero is a strong cis-gender masculine man who is on a mission to save the world, especially the heroine, from the archetypal villain. The hero mercilessly kills the villains of these three films at their ends, a clear message that deviant sexualities can only exist in these films to a point. After that, they need to be punished for their transgression by the cis-gender masculine hero.

In *Sadak*, the hijra villain, Maharani (played by Sadashi Amarpurkar) is a brothel owner who attempts to make the heroine, Pooja Bhatt, one of her brothel’s prostitutes. In the movie, Sadashi’s character is depicted as excessively inhumane and disgusting. *Sangharsh* is a psychological thriller, whose central character, Pandey (played by Ashutosh Rana), a hijra, is one of the most horrific depictions of a hijra character in Indian cinema. He is both a murderer and a kidnapper of young children. The plot unfolds as he kidnaps another young boy. Pandey nurtures him like a mother in the movie, but plans to slaughter him later. Similarly, in *Murder 2*, the hijra villain, Dheeraj Pandey (played by Prashant Narayanan) is a frustrated eunuch who abducts

women only to kill them brutally. In both *Sadak* and *Murder 2*, the hijras are “bad guys” out of sexual frustration: they cannot have sex with women since they lack a penis. It is for this lack of a penis, an essential lack in defining their masculinity, that they are punished by the hero. Hence, these films work with deep-rooted transphobic and non-cis-phobic attitudes, by which any deviation from the accepted norms of gender and sexuality portrayed as malevolent.

The second type of role offered to hijras in Bollywood is that of simply miserable people who are not accepted by society. Usually, these portrayals belong to Bollywood dramas, for example, *Darmiyaan* (1997) and *Tamanna* (1997). Drama includes stories about “emotions, addictions, hope, tragedy, poverty, woman empowerment, violence, corruption etc.” (Bhaskar Ranjana et al. 2845); drama allows depictions of hijras as “persons” rather than just villains, as in the thrillers. However, this genre is consumed with maintaining and upholding Indian middle-class virtues (Mishra 37) and so hijras must be outside and miserable. My analyses of the films in this category will highlight how, through the use of certain common tropes and cinematography techniques, hijras are depicted as pitiable.

In *Darmiyaan*, a famous actress, Zeenat (played by Kiron Kher), gives birth to an intersex child, Immi (played by Arif Zakaria), whom she raises as her brother. A hijra *guru* named Champa wants to adopt Immi to her kinship network but Zeenat refuses permission. Immi, as he lives among cis-gendered people, does not fit in the society, and is mocked by other characters. The film, as the movie critic Madhu Jain rightly asserts, “hits you in the face like a backhand slap—albeit [delivered by] a bejewelled and manicured to glossy perfection hand. Lajmi has trespassed into an area where brave directors have feared to tread: the world of hijras, up close and personal. . . . There’s no airbrushing of reality, no matter how sordid or unaesthetic.” *Tamanna*, on the other hand, deals with the world of hijras rather more subtly. In this film, the hijra protagonist, Tikku

(played by Paresh Rawal), adopts a heterosexual girl. He raises the abandoned baby girl, who was left to die by her biological father, and nurtures her against the will of the hijra community with which Tikku was associated. The movie reaches its climax when the child grows up and realizes that her father is a hijra and not a man. Like Immi, Tikku is created as miserable character who gains the audience's pity in the film.

Interestingly, both *Tamanna* (Mahesh Bhatt) and *Darmiyaan* (Kalpana Lajmi)—released in 1997—portray hijras sympathetically as compared to other films that came out three years after hijras obtained legal voting rights in India. The protests and other events leading to voting rights of hijras in 1994 gave recognition to hijras, probably for the first time, in media and news coverage (“Eunuchs”). This brought some level of awareness about hijras into a small section of the dominant cisgender society. It can be well argued that the production of these films, which are probably the only Hindi films starring popular actors with comparatively sympathetic hijra characters, are a consequence of the events that made hijra voting rights possible. However, while both these films gained critical praise and one of them even won a national award, neither did well at the box office, unlike the other films at that time that portrayed hijras as villains. In fact, *Darmiyaan* was a low-budget film and was directed by Lajmi who is known for directing women-centric films. It starred Kiron Kher and Tabu in lead roles and did not have the banner of a big production house. The reception and production of both these films mark their difference from films like *Sadak*, *Sangharsh*, and *Murder 2*, which were produced under major production houses and were box office hits. Mahesh Bhatt, the director of both *Tamanna* and *Sadak*, says in an interview that “The first time I dealt with a character who deviates from the prescribed sexual code was in *Sadak*. . . . The film was a hit, but the perspective on gays was still in keeping with times when movies treated gays as an aberration. However, in *Tamanna*, I broke that mold with a tale

based on a real-life hijra who saved a girl from the streets where she was left to die and nurtured her. The film won a national award but made no money. The message was loud and clear; portray gays as villains and comedians. If you project them sympathetically, you will get critical praise, but the public will reject your film. You are what you consume. The Indian nation is still shy of embracing its gays” (Dubey). Bhatt’s critique of the popular reception of both his films reveals Indian homophobia and nonbinary-phobia. He is right to say that movies that depict hijras as villains do indeed prove hits: *Sadak* was among the highest-grossing Hindi films in 1991 and remains one of Bhutt’s highest grossing films, while *Murder 2* earned a gross total of 115 crores and was claimed to be the twenty-eighth biggest opening week of all time by Box Office India in 2012 (Palat; Indicine Team). Hence, it is significant to see what patterns and narratives films like *Darmiyaan* and *Tamanna* adopt which make their reception so different.

Additionally, these two are also the only films in the mainstream which depict hijra kinship patterns and explore the theme of motherhood, initiation, and nonbiological parenting. These films break the structure of conventional motherhood by giving space to queer non-cis parenting. My analysis of these films focuses on how motherhood is used as a trope to help the audience sympathize with, yet also categorize, the hijra community. In *Darmiyaan*, Immi is a child of a famous film actress; she finds an abandoned child later in the movie but could not adopt him due to social prejudice against hijras. In *Tamanna*, Tikku parents an abandoned baby girl; the film is based on a real-life incident, a fact presented at the beginning of the film and which highlights the importance of motherhood and adoption to create sympathy among the audience members with the larger hijra community. Thus, both films bring attention to the theme of motherhood as a reproductive right by allowing a nonbiological and non-cis persons to nurture children. However, these films, as I argue in this section, fail to fully acknowledge the potential of reproductive justice

for hijras as the films categorize and selectively recognize only a few people as “mothers.” The films also work with prevalent, South Asian stereotypes of hijras, as that they are kidnappers and criminals. When presented in a highly influential cultural form, these depictions add a magnitude of weight to the already-prevalent societal bias against hijras and to the myths around their kinship ties.

Motherhood: An Essential Trope for Normalizing “Femininity”

Just because *Tamanna* and *Darmiyaan* have central hijra characters who are not villains does not imply that the films offer positive and progressive non-cis inclusive spaces. Sustained non-binary representations do not necessarily guarantee “equality” and could instead be used as tropes to “reinforce” heteronormativity (Keegan). Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen aptly suggest, “neither of these films attempt[s] to locate the character of the hijra within a larger social genealogy of the hijra community in India. Also, the sexual life of the hijra remains unexplored” (169). These films, nevertheless, aim to depict hijras as essentially “normal” persons by using the trope of motherhood.

Motherhood, as I argued earlier, is one of the primary kinship relations that binds hijras in South Asia. Hence, when representing hijras in a sympathetic light, films often depict hijras as mothers. Also, keeping in mind that hijras are usually projected/understood as women in most of these representations, the emphasis on motherhood could be due to the unique position given to women as mothers in the subcontinent. In Bollywood, biological mothers are often made symbols for goddesses and the nation, which, as Aditi Chakraborty suggests in her book, are the key tropes to sympathize with women characters in Indian fiction. Monomaternalism⁸ has been the only favor of parenting in Bollywood. It is equated with “real mother” from the logic that real mothers go through pregnancy and hence, develop maternal instincts naturally. This way motherhood is

“rigidly policed,” as Elizabeth Reed argues, where only certain women are validated as mothers (42).

Hence, what follows from a deeply patriarchal and capitalist society like that of India, is “discipline [for] those [women/non-binary] who deviate from the norms of femininity” (Shelley 3). As a result, stepmothers or non-biological mothers, including non-cis mothers, are “widely theorized as offering space for radical and original ways of living that challenge the primacy of patriarchal and heterosexual structures in social life”; hence, their nonbiologically-formed maternity reduces them to a secondary status in most Bollywood films (Reed 42; Shelley 5). This attitude, Meghana argues, is mainly a result of “how directors of these films are not part of the queer community and assume cis-gender people as the only audience. As a result, the trans people’s characters (and I cannot emphasise enough on how these roles are taken up by cis-gender actors) are made space for by casting them as loud energy-filled super heroes.” In both *Tamanna* and *Darmiyaan*, the hijra characters are played by not-so-popular “heroes”/ actors, while the other, central characters are played by some of the most popular actors of the time. Similarly, in no other film that features a hijra character is the hijra protagonist a popular actor. Furthermore, the roles assigned to hijra characters by the filmmakers, as I have discussed already, are that of pathetic, pitiful anti-heroes consumed within the hero-villain trope. The plots of these films are outlined in *mise-en-scenes* that deliberately make hijras seem miserable: no hijra is a hero.

Tikku, a Hijra Parent

Tamanna with Tikku in male attire pitifully wailing for his dead mother, which immediately creates sympathy and pity for the character. Tikku acts like a stereotypical effeminate man, loud and feminine in his gesture. The diegetic sound in this scene very clearly establishes the difference between Tikku and the 90s Bollywood hero. Tikku’s crying and yelling, shrieking

loudly at his mother's death, is contrary to the Indian cinematic standards of male heroism. The filmmakers are alert to not project the hijra protagonist as the "hero. Later in this scene, Tikku's only friend, Saleem, reminds him that Tikku is different from other people and therefore must live his life alone. His loneliness is foregrounded several other times in the film. There is an entire song sequel that emphasizes Tikku's loneliness. This may be an attempt to make the audience aware of the sufferings of the hijra community, as they are isolated from mainstream society. But Tikku's loneliness is also contrasted with his being a hijra in the film throughout. For example, when Tikku refuses to send Tamanna, the baby girl whom he finds in the street, to school, his friend says: "Apna akelapan door karne ke liye bachi ko barbaad kar raha hai. . . .Tu saala hijra ka hijra hi rahega . . . Baap banna seekh . . . takleef jhelna seekh [To get over your loneliness you are destroying the life of the . . . you rascal will always remain a hijra . . . learn to be a father . . . learn to face struggles]" (00:26:55—00:27:15).

Here, two things are reinforced. First, hijras are alone, selfish, and weak; hence they do not have the ability to parent children. Second, to parent a child, a hijra must learn how to be a father and leave his hijra self. The right to parent a child for a hijra comes at the cost of hiding his identity as Tikku does in this film. The filmmakers are clear not to present the film as a critique of the lack of reproductive justice for the non-cis in India; rather it is a reinforcement that hijras cannot be parents, and that it is not usual for hijras to be parents. When Tamanna learns that her father is a hijra, she is bewildered and disgusted. She says: "ye mere abbu nahi hosakte. . . . mujhe ye sochkar hi ulti aati hai ki is aadmi ne mujhe kabhi chua bhi hoga, in haathon se mujhe khilaaya bhi hoga. Mere abbu aise nahi hosakte. Ye aadmi ek hijra hai [He cannot be my father. . . . I feel like vomiting even upon thinking that this man would have ever touched me, played with me with these hands. My father cannot be like this. This man is a hijra]" (01:05:30—01:06:21). Tamanna's disgust and

anger is not because she learns she is an adopted child whose biological parents left her on the garbage dump to die, but from the fact that she has been raised by a hijra. The manner in which Tamanna says the above-quoted dialogue marks hijras as untouchables. Furthermore, Tikku's portrayal in this particular scene is highly demeaning. He comes out of hiding into flickering light that reveals a hapless person in tattered, non-binary clothing with shaggy hair and smudged lipstick. This scene refuses to give Tikku a respectable portrayal.

It is significant to note here that since colonial times, hijras have been associated with disgust and filth. Jessica Hinchy argues in *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India* that the British, during colonial rule, were adamant in portraying hijras as dirty, filthy, and contagious beings, thus, associating non-binary parenting with filth and disgust (47). This easily made its route into present-day hijra mainstream representations. The overall narrative strategy of this film as it tries to “normalize” Tikku's identity through his experience of parenthood does so at the cost of demeaning him through various such scenes in the film, therefore. If a hijra character is sympathized with, it will be evoked by portraying the hijra as helpless, miserable, and dirty.

Policing The Right to Parenthood

Tamanna's reaction as she gets furious about Tikku being her parent also invites attention toward cis-normative parenthood. As their relationship is unintelligible to her, and she repeatedly questions Tikku's role as a parent— “How can he be my father? He is a hijra” (01:06:23)— parenthood gets conflated with gender. *Tamanna* reiterates the widely accepted societal belief that only cisgender persons can be parents. The labor, effort, and emotions Tikku invests in parenting are erased. Whereas from the real-life practices of hijra communities in various regions of South Asia, it is evident that adoption and parenting is a common practice among hijras. But in their

popular representations, motherhood is often the most contested role that is ascribed to hijra characters—a trope used to sympathize with them.

Interestingly, in all such plots the hijra character raises a heterosexual child. In *Darmiyaan* too, the hijra character, Immi, finds an abandoned baby boy whom he parents, but only temporarily, and like Tikku, Immi also attracts audiences' pity. Though *Darmiyaan*'s plot gives more space to the hijra community than *Tamanna*'s does, the space is not necessarily positive. While on the one hand, the plot is highly sympathetic in depicting Immi's desire to nurture, the hijra community in the film and their internal kinship formation are shown as mean, criminal, and bawdy. There are two instances in the film where the hijra community tries to initiate a new member. First, Champa, the head of the hijra group, tries to take Immi forcibly from his mother, Zeenat, since Immi is a "born hijra." She also threatens and frightens him when he was seven years old, in order to initiate him. Champa's and other hijras' desire to adopt Immi is depicted in a rather humiliating manner. They want to adopt Immi because he is a "pure hijra" (hijra by birth); hence, he will have a high rank in the community, something that will also raise Champa and her group's rank in the hijra Jamaat. This scene is indicative of the initiation rituals and the politics surrounding it whenever a "pure hijra" joins the community. But Champa's act in this film of forcing Immi, and later kidnapping Immi's child, criminalizes the hijras' initiation ceremony.

Later in the movie, in a scene in which Immi refuses to join the hijra community, Champa kidnaps Immi's adopted son, Murad, to castrate and initiate him as a member of the hijra community in place of Immi. Significantly, this scene is shot very differently from the rest of the movie. It has loud and overlapped music, blurred images, and depicts a strange place where hijras are performing their rituals before castrating Murad. In such a scene where the non-diegetic sound overpowers everything else present on screen, boundaries between "reality" and "fiction" within

the film are blurred “carrying strong thematic resonances for the film” (Watts 23). A scene like this also conveys directly “a message from the filmmaker directly to the audience” (Dykhoff 170). Within the context of this film, the use of non-diegetic sound helps in eroticizing the community as well as to portray the community’s indulging in some dark, secretive acts. Hence, through such projections and the use of evocative cinematography techniques, hijra initiation, culture, and tradition are shown in a negative light. The false narrative that hijras initiate young boys forcibly into their community is promoted through such a loaded scene.

Similarly, towards the end of this film, just before Immi mixes poison in his and his mother’s drink, there is a very vivid scene which is particularly significant as it brings the film’s message across through sharp filmic techniques. This scene punishes Immi for the hijra affiliation that he has long been denying. A lone and fearful Immi climbs a dark staircase in search of his sister and finds himself in a huge red room with curtains and big chandeliers with multi-colored bulbs hanging down, approached by a group of nonbinary people (probably hijras), all dressed in black saris with long unkept hair, who circle around Immi, standing and kneeling with their hands raised. Immi is not in a state of shock on encountering these people; rather, his saddened gestures say that he understands what is happening and knows what he needs to do as he also starts kneeling along with them. Eerie music runs at the background, providing elements of horror; this ruptures the overall dramatic genre of the film, making this scene even more significant. The *mise-en-scene* here, as it blurs the “realism” of most of this film, reinforces the fact that hijra community is involved with dark and horrifying acts. More importantly, it brings the message that non-cis people do not have any place in the dominant cisgender society and if they try to create a space there, then they must be punished—both by their community and the dominant society.

Since in the structure of the film, this scene comes right after Immi's acceptance of his hijra identity as well as his refusal to live among them, the scene signifies that Immi must have his due ritualistic punishment from the community. Even if he did not live by or accept hijra customs, the fact that he understands and is ready to perform the final ritual to leave the community labels hijra-ness as innate to someone like Immi, who was born an intersex. Furthermore, this scene is followed by Immi killing himself and his sister, a punishment that he provides both of them for trying to create a space for deviant gender groups in a hetero, cis-identifying society. It is the horror of the intersex, a nonbinary child, that gets projected in these last scenes of the film. The message that hijras are ominous and hence must not be allowed to mingle with the mainstream society comes straight to the viewers, as this film punishes both the mother and the child.

Conclusion

There is a conscious attempt to distort the reality of hijra's kinship and adoption culture. Both *Tamanna* and *Darmiyaan* represent hijra characters as mothers by erasing their non-bloodline mother-daughter/*guru-cheli* relation through which they essentially form kinship ties. Neither of them recognizes nor portrays hijras as mothers when they adopt inside of their community. The hijra mother character in both films is someone who does not essentially belong to the hijra community. Tikku left the community because he wanted to live a respectable life, and Immi's biological mother never gave Immi to the hijras. Even when Immi joins the community because he needs financial assistance, he realizes that he does not fit there and leaves. Nevertheless, the point here is that both these characters have voluntarily left the hijra community, which in itself is a direct critique of the community-based nonbinary existence. While *Tamanna* lets hijras mingle in the mainstream society inside strict conditions (they must leave their specific community-based

customs), *Darmiyaan* does not offer even that choice. It closes all doors for deviant sexualities to enter the mainstream, cis-dominant society as it mercilessly punishes the characters who make any attempt to bridge the two worlds. Thus, it can be argued that while hijra characters are at the center of these films, just as with other films, these seem to police the hijra population and their community-based existence, just as the legal documents do.

The filmmakers, like the lawmakers, control the right of parenthood by allowing some characters to become parents while criminalizing others. Though at the cost of demeaning them, both Tikku and Immi are recognized as parents in their respective films because they do not follow the hijra lifestyle or live in a hijra community. Whereas other hijras, who are parents to their initiated younger hijras, are refused recognition: their customs are eroticized and depicted in a negative light. This leads to very few hijra characters getting comparatively better portrayals, leaving most unrecognized and demonized. Therefore, though hijras are central characters, the films are not necessarily progressive. Like the contemporary transgender act, the Bollywood film industry comes in the garb of progress while they both try to portray hijras in mainstream society on the film's own terms and conditions. Thus, these films repeat the colonial project, which tried to govern hijras by selectively accommodating them in the system. Those who refuse to be accommodated in these structures are left to live on the margins, without any scope for development and positive representation (like other hijras in these films).

These film narratives thus re-enforce cis normativity and heteronormativity as they try to assimilate hijras into the dominant, mainstream, cisgender society using particular genres, tropes, and techniques. Hijras are allowed to enter the mainstream at the cost of accepting the deep-rooted transphobic and cis-normative rules. In their representations, their identities are suppressed repetitively to the extent that what remains is a mere image of "hijra" ("a man dressed in women's

clothes”), erasing their unique cultural and kinship-based existence. By associating their community-based existence—which has the initiation of new members at its center—with the crime world, the entire community is criminalized. As a result, such depictions fail to provide any “real understanding of the economic and financial constraints of the community as it exists in the domain of heterosexual norms” (Pattnaik 6). More significantly, as my analysis of the two films shows, cinematographic techniques only to reduce hijras to fit within the available modes of problematic dominant thinking. Hence, a new approach that focus more on inclusivity and multiplicities is urgently needed to look at issues surrounding queerness and non-cis persons. This approach should not define and restrict but recognize that gender and sexuality cannot be understood without context-specific knowledge. Hence, to portray groups like hijras, new ways of thinking must be brought from the margins to the center to make use of available modes and techniques to represent non-normative gender and sexuality-based groups positively.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my amazing supervisors—Dr. Churnjeet Mahn and Prof. Yvette Taylor—for their help and support throughout.

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Notes

¹ A more elaborate discussion on hijra kinship ties will follow.

² Hijra Jamaat or Panchayat is an elected body of hijra members who lead all hijra groups across the country.

³ *Akhara* is an upper-caste Hindu monastery which works on the *guru-cheli* framework. Narayan was appointed the *Acharya Mahamandleshwar* (the highest level of Hindu monk) of this *Akhara* in 2018. She has said in several of her interviews that it is the Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism) that has given the hijra community its lost place.

⁴ In 2014, India's Supreme Court legally recognized India's third gender as citizens. It was a landmark judgement as it gave fundamental rights to communities like hijras. More details about it can be seen in the works of Ina Goel, Jennifer Ung Loh, and Aniruddha Dutta.

⁵ Mainstream Hindi cinema, also known as Bollywood, is the world's largest film film-producing industry, with around 2000 feature films produced in 2017 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20181124213649/http://filmfed.org/IFF2017.HTML>). There are other regional cinemas as well, like Tami, Punjabi and Marathi, which are also very popular.

⁶ In this paper, I retain the pronouns that the characters use for themselves in the film.

⁷ The end of the twentieth century was an era of extreme transphobic and nonbinary-phobic films in many parts of the world, like Hong Kong and Hollywood. Films like *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Crying Game* (1992) and *Ace Ventura* (1994) are examples.

⁸ Shelley Park defines monomaterialism as “the ideological assumption that can only have one real mother. . . [which] stems from a combination of beliefs about the socially normative and the biologically imperative” (3).