

Against Hijras as the Quintessential 'Third Sex,': Gayatri Reddy Book Review

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Gender and sexuality studies are a hot topic in the field of anthropology, with certain groups of people being typified in these debates through the assumption of their sexual differences. Hijras, phenotypic men who undergo sacrificial emasculation and wear female attire, are such an identity under the scrutiny of researchers that have aimed to capture their lives, or a limited version of them, for application within their ethnographies, films, or newspaper projects. Yet the diversity of their lives is evident from their renouncement of sexual desires as an ascetic yet operational relationship for sex work or intimate relationships with their 'husbands', to their Muslim self-identification whilst gaining ritual power from the Hindu goddess Bedhraj Mata. This shows that there is much more at stake in hijra identity than accountable for by a bound placement within the category of quintessential 'third sex'. Gayatri Reddy aims to break down this boundary in her rigorous yet sensitive ethnography, 'With respect to sex, negotiating hijra identity in South India' (2006). This appears temporally at the end of, and reactionary against, the surge of attention on hijras as she theoretically repositions them as an identity embodied through multiple

axes of subjective difference. Drawn from extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Southern Indian twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, we are introduced to a more marginalized group of kandra hijras (predominantly sex workers) who become the author's main ethnographic confidants and friends. Containing great theoretical interest, we are taken on a journey of repositioning. The ethnographic attraction to her intersectional approach intrigues the reader when Reddy's positionality as a native Hyderabad Indian woman from an upper-middle-class background intersects the world of hijras.

Reddy's target at hand is to argue against the essentialized vision of the third sex, often defined as neither men nor women, with hijras as the quintessential example of this. Instantiating the perspective that all thirdness is not alike, she utilizes her ethnographic fieldwork to articulate the position that hijra identity must be understood through multiple axes of interpretation in which differences of religion, kinship, and class, as well as sexuality and gender, construct this. Extending a Foucaultian framework of sex and sexuality to other aspects of hijra individuality, a perspective of embodied practice becomes the lens to which the vision of *izzat* (respect) is the social medium of exchange by which authenticity and identity are determined. Implemented in the cartography of her thesis – antecedent to her purpose at hand – is the need for good justification in carrying out of her fieldwork. Conducting her research during a time of great displeasure among hijras at being the focus of researcher scrutiny is acknowledged. Therefore, their desire for

fair representation is utilized by Reddy as her reason for refocusing their past-time positioning to one where the cornucopia of their life experience is acknowledged. Whether her justification is valid, is then evidenced in how successfully she carries out this purpose.

Chapter 1 introduces you to the research setting and subjects, leaving you intrigued to see their developing narratives from this initial ethnographic encounter. Reddy then delves into a long and complex consideration of previous thematic framing of hijra identity within the category of third sex more broadly (Chapter 2). We are thus submerged into a long sexual historiography of hijras, extensively embedded with secondary sources on our journey through religious, colonial, and contemporary analyses. The most profitable of which is her use of these representations to make the methodological criticism that those who frame hijras do so with the prerequisite of a personal, academic, or colonial agendas, giving us an insight into the effects of the specific vantage point from which they frame. This culminates in the critique of contemporary analyses, most effectively in a critique on the shortcomings of the best-celebrated book on hijras. Her criticism of Serena Nadas *Neither Man Nor Woman* (32) uncovers the thought-provoking perspective that in this book the analysis of hijras as having an institutionalized third gender role serves the framing agenda of de-mystifying notions of 'western' sex and gender binaries. Rejecting the abstraction of hijras for this purpose, and perhaps fueled by the shift in anthropology favoring an intersubjective approach, she pledges

to contextualize and complicate the multiplicity of difference that constitutes their lived experience, in which this identity takes its form in the wider social structure through regulating their levels of authenticity and *izzat* (respect). These multiple axes of identity are laid out as an embodied practice by which the configuration of sex/gender identity is performative in acts of difference rather than the anatomical difference (chapter 3); within legitimization through corporeal requirements of asexuality and transformation through emasculation (chapter 4); within religious enactments of Muslim identity assimilated with Hindu elements which crafts their difference by forms of bodily practice such as eating specificities, religious apparel requirements and circumcision (Chapter 5); through the practice of production of gender by the taking of hormones to sculpt the body, to differentiate their identity publicly with a specialist hand clapping, or by highlighting their identity intentionally by exposing their lack of genitalia (Chapter 6); or crafting a sense of self through the ritual placing of a rit in a lineage house (Chapter 7). Throughout the reading of this book, the fact that at times it can be difficult to digest simply matches the success in its capturing of the complexity of life in which hijras must be understood as full subjective beings.

The main coverage of the methodological application within her fieldwork setting comes to light in the opposition of others. Reddy succeeds in highlighting that durable commitment to any analytic perspective can lead to confirmation bias, in which research data is skewed

by overlooking factors that do not fit into the synthesis of a thesis. As noted, this is strongest in her critique of the methodology of contemporary third-sex analysis, which comes in the post-colonial setting, engaging hijras as a center of cross-cultural understanding of the construction of gender categories where they are lumped together with other 'non-western' sites of binary gender – an analytic framework by which the domain of their sexual practice becomes detached from other important domains un-extractible from it. What can be seen as a rejection of exoticizing otherness in the game of 'west' versus 'the rest', her ethnographic methodological commitment to an intersectional analysis by crafting hijras as composite subjects is indeed a move in the right direction and can be revered for initiating theoretical progression in the field of gender and sexuality studies. This not only plays out within her ethnographic method but also her method in structuring each chapter of her book. Fairly consistently Reddy launches each chapter with a vignette of varying lengths, but in my opinion, not long enough to create a full immersion into hijra subjectivity. This initial platform then springs into an analysis of her point at hand. Yet, as you feel it is reaching its head, it gets subjected to further complication, de-constructing flaws in previous analysis or being compared to counter-examples from another hijra's contradictory experience. Whilst making the book a more challenging read for those who are not well apt in anthropological literature, it should also be celebrated for this perspective as a rigorous commitment to representing multiple instead of unitary categories of being. Also, multiple dimensions of sexual

difference rightly require multiple avenues of analysis to transform the superimposed stability common in many ethnographic texts to a more dynamic version of authenticity.

Whilst her implementation of an intersectional methodological approach is discussed in her fieldwork data as being the means of crafting an identity explanation of her hijra community, a less explicitly mentioned force of intersectionality present is how her positionality within the field through multiple identities of subjectivity collides with theirs. Under the scrutiny of some categories of being, Reddy can be seen as being in a prime ethnographic position. Native to Hyderabad and of Indian ethnicity, she is not restrained by the barriers often faced by the anthropologist who comes into the field needing to learn a new regional dialect or a whole new language. Aside from this, her emic perspective privileges the book with occasional personal anecdotes which shine a light on how hijras are perceived in other settings. From descriptions of her seeing childhood playground imitations of the hijra trademark hand clap, to comments made by friends and relatives both before and during her research, these allow us a view of the perception of hijras within the wider public eye of the Hyderabad community. Despite the potential benefits of this, with all positionality comes an individual's deterministic characteristics which in effect change the objectivity of their view or their access to the field. Reddy's position as a woman from a middle-upper-class background has such an effect.

In the very first paragraph of the first chapter, one of Reddy's informants discusses her initial impressions of her as a young boy. Despite wearing a salwar-kurta dress frequently worn by young women, her 'hair was so short that we thought, "It cannot be a woman" (129). In this initial positioning of the ethnographic subjects and the ethnographer's relationality to them, the length of her hair is used as a primary gauge to mark gender. Yet for Reddy, in her different upbringing, this highlights that she is part of a global India, something her class privileged her access to. Reading the text with perhaps an overly critical eye on positionality, her specific lens of analysis, whilst having the ambition of being multi-perspective, can be seen to be biased by virtue of her positionality. For example, her first recorded hijra encounter was one-directional, with Reddy having a 'moment to observe her before she saw me walking up', in which the hijra as the object of observation becomes scrutinized based on her 'very-dark complexion' and synthetic sari material (14). Whilst potentially being objective observations, they are significant because they are her first observations within the wider context of Indian culture where skin color is an important differentiator of class. Finally, her positionality can also be seen to affect the scope of her research data. When considering the inclusion in her book of the men to whom hijras have sex with, occupationally and as partners, arguably very important to understanding an element of hijras' sexual difference, she was inhibited due to her being a 'respectable, middle-class Indian woman, with her own 'fears and inhibitions associated with normative gender and class prescriptions"

(49). Overall, despite her positionality inevitably affecting her field data in terms of scope, collection, and processing, for a text which prides itself on presenting a hijra identity unbiased from the researcher's analytical frameworks, it would have been nice to see more reflexivity on how her class, sex and gender, among other elements of axes, intersect the process of representation within the research.

A final note, aimed specifically at the ethnographic field site, is that it brings up the core characteristic of the practice of fieldwork through the determinants of chance and reciprocity. The unpredictability of true life is often mirrored in the field, and Reddy's ethnography is a prime example of this, with apprehensions about her fieldwork setting not matching up to its final reality. Whilst Hyderabad was the initial site of choice, and the hijron ka allawahs (of a larger hijra lineage) were the targets of research, she was deterred from approaching them due to their non-hijra weariness (11). Her final locus of fieldwork un-foreshadowed was in a community of Secunderabad hijras, countering her belief that hijras only lived in the old city of Hyderabad. Additionally, her access to the field was through unpredicted means; her dad's cleaner, who also worked as a policeman, showed her the way to the 'tanki' hijras on his way to work (14). These initial chance variables thus affect the whole scope of the book as the subjects are kandra, hijra sex workers instead of badhi temple and ritual workers, opening the hijra experience up to a different sense of community with varying levels of izzat being symbolically applied

accordingly within their positionality to wider society. Reciprocity within this particular hijra group then becomes fundamental in a network of exchange where the gathering of anthropological data can leave a debt. This can be seen through the various roles Reddy played in the community, such as taking them to the optometrist, accompanying them to buy saris, and calling electrolysis centers about their treatment. This text, thus, is a lovely example of how an initial chance ethnographic setting and subject begin the relationship with a healthy amount of mutual distrust, but then over the two years, developed into a close friendship. This close friendship, however, ends on a sobering note as in the post-script, when surprising her hijra friends after a time away she finds at her dismay their homes destroyed and the news of the death of her closest friends caused by AIDs. The ethnographic relationship, thus, shows the humanistic nature of the book and despite its ability to administer abstract analysis, it retains sensitivity to the very real human relationship to which the data is founded on.

Chapter 7 is one of Reddy's most convincing chapters that challenges sexuality and gender performativity as sufficient to explain hijra identity as it displays the complex and dynamic kinship contexts as crucial for life as a hijra. Hijras often face ostracism from wider society and separation from their natal families by the requirements of their self-identified states as ascetics. Family, however, becomes redefined in the webs of signification between other hijras and the wider koti community where a hijra

finds their place within various affective bonds, either affectionate or structurally necessary to their hijra identification. In this chapter titled 'Our People', one person, in particular, is stressed as being of the highest importance. The guru, sitting relationally higher in the social structure than the hijra who ritually becomes instantiated as her *cela*. Within this power structure, the guru has the monopoly of authority over their financial earnings; when they work, their free time, and they enforce the *celas* requirement to obediently carry out domestic tasks by making the consequence of disobedience verbal or physical abuse. Despite the anticipation of reciprocity by the means of fair treatment and teaching of customs, the narrative more readily displayed by Reddy is the extent of the difficulties the *cela* faces, illuminated by graphic (in their depiction of brutality), primary ethnographic examples of the fate of unfaithful *celas*. The goal of Reddy in painting these scenes is to build an image that despite suffering ensued by this relationship, it is better than living alone. Reddy, thus, pieces together a convincing argument that the axis of kinship is fundamental in hijra identity as the lack of guru means a lack of *izzat* large enough to make the individual unrecognizable as hijra. Within this chapter, Reddy's success is in instantiating *izzat* again as the perspective by which kinship patterns are the axes that differentiation takes place. Additionally, she succeeds in displaying factual material in the form of a guru-*cela* family tree to support her point. She presents alternative arguments for the hijra requirement of kinship in their most credible form such as relational or psycho-analytic explanatory

frameworks, before disputing them, in this case on the grounds of cultural and gendered essentialism to then through their flaws instantiate the strength of her own perspective. My main criticism of this chapter is the fact that in discussing hierarchical power structures that order their lives there is no mention of the effects of the caste system, here or throughout the book. Even if this is intentionally un-included, as such a fundamental part to the structuring of Indian society, it would be useful to see her reasoning behind its absence.

In my favorite chapter (chapter 9), near the conclusion of the book, Reddy lets the ethnographic subjects speak for themselves in two extended personal narratives told by a hijra Surekha and a koti Frank. Through these emotive examples, I believe Reddy most successfully demonstrates her argument that 'each subject-position is variously determined' (210). By the narratives speaking for themselves, a life story demonstrates best the perspective that axes of difference are in a constant state of flux across time, categories, and space. These narratives and their embodied individual experience enable the mind to be cast away from disembodied theorization such as that of quintessential third sex to, instead, a local image of what is at stake. The story of Frank, a koti who marries a panti to whom he falls in love with at the cost of not only all his working income but his blood and his kidneys, only to be rejected, engaged not only my understanding of her multiple differences in ambition, but also emotionally. This was a prime example of what anthropology has to offer – the connection of people

on a level of subjective understanding through the experience in this case of love and respect, whilst highlighting how these lived experiences are complexly embedded in difference.

In conclusion, despite leaving un-addressed some important axes of consideration, and the book benefiting from an even more vigilant reflexive approach, Reddy's difficult challenge in rejecting rigid gender categories and theoretically repositioning hijras as an identity embodied through multiple axes of subjective difference, is an overall success due to the careful application of data and theory through relevant means of data collection and presentation within the text. Due to the heavy weighting of its theory, I would recommend it to any student of Social Anthropology or South Asian studies and as a must-read to those interested in gender and sexuality studies to which it is a great contributor to the current theoretical evolution.

REFERENCES

- Reddy, Gayatri. 2005. *With Respect to sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press