

# The Third Sex

**“The Gender Binary” is a misnomer; gender has always been a hierarchy.**



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## Introduction: This Machine Builds Fascists

Consider a mechanism whose sole function is to classify all inputs it receives as one of two categories: One and Zero. The inputs, it must be said, vary greatly in temperament, expression, embodiment, internality, and so on, but that isn't as much of a hurdle for the machine as it seems. It has been programmed with a few simple lines of code that enable it to differentiate between Ones and Zeroes within acceptable margins of tolerance. Ones tend to look and behave like *this*, Zeroes tend to be like *that*. These truisms are crude, simplistic, and even reductive, true, but they *work*. As such, the machine chugs on, happily reducing complex inputs to a blunt binary classification, its delivery-day code having been deemed “good enough”.

Of course, there is still the matter of how the machine should behave when its schema fails, when it is presented with inputs that do indeed prove to be too ambiguous to easily classify. For however high the correlation between traits, sometimes a specimen that simply defies easy categorization will confound its decision-making, often enough to pose a problem. Does the code need to be updated? Almost certainly, but legacy code is a stubborn thing, mired in dependencies and versioning faff, deeply resistant to the most perfunctory of edits. Too many now rely on this iteration of the machine, on this particular instantiation of its logic, and it is almost universally agreed that any changes are best handled downstream—at least, among those with the power to change it.

The machine and its users are thus forced to consider: In the case of an “error”, a “mistake”, so to speak, is it better to classify something as a One or a Zero?

Well, that's an easy enough decision. The Ones, you see, are quite important, are believed to play a rather critical role in the affairs the machine oversees. The Zeroes ... sure, they're certainly important too, in their own way, in the way everything worth categorizing is—but the Ones! It's really all about the Ones. You can't quite go around just calling anything a One, you have to be *certain*.

So the module is attached and business proceeds without interruption. The machine spits out Ones and Zeroes like it's supposed to, like it always has and supposedly always will, a binary system choosing between two options. Yet, anyone who knows a little too much about its inner workings is perfectly aware that the machine's neat bifurcation isn't all that neat. Truthfully, the machine has *three* outputs: One, Zero (with a degree of confidence), and “NULL”. It's just that the exceptions are caught and sorted into the Zero-category, because that method of handling the machine's limitations still keeps things running smoothly. It's not much of an issue at all, and there's no real need to examine the machine any further.

No need to pay attention to the way its NULL exceptions keep rising in volume.

No need to examine it for any shortcomings, oversights ... or any weaknesses.

## Part One: Neither Correct Nor Considerate

### The Contradiction

*Neither Man Nor Woman* is an ethnography of India's hijra, undertaken by anthropologist Serena Nanda. It is a text that has, in many ways, proved foundational to the West's understanding of so-called "Third Genders" and "Third Sexes" in non-Western cultures, providing an academic basis for the consideration of gendered expansivity and putatively non-binary gender systems the world over. Certainly, it is difficult to find a more-cited work on the hijra, and Nanda can perhaps be credited with setting the terms on which the Western academy—if not the West at large—has been made aware of hijra life.

Despite its own title, Serena Nanda's *Neither Man Nor Woman* states in the very second sentence that South Asia's hijras are "a religious community of **men who dress and act like women.**" (Emphasis mine.) It is a contradiction the book is either unaware of or uninterested in addressing, since it is repeatedly reasserted and reinforced throughout the remainder of the text. Therein, Nanda—a cis woman—takes a look at this community through the eyes of someone unfamiliar with the Indian cultural context, learning about them through both observation and testimony. The resulting ethnography triangulates and emphasizes several crucial details: that the hijra are a "religious cult" of "ascetics" centered around the worship of the goddess Bahuchara Mata; that hijras are often present at rituals and celebrations, usually weddings, to perform dances and bless the newlyweds with fertility and a firstborn son; that they grow their hair long, wear women's clothes and assume an "exaggerated and garish femininity"; and that they form their own community structure, living on the margins of Indian society.

Often, the undercurrent of the author's lurid fascination with the hijra bubbles to the surface, such as when she describes witnessing the results of the hijras' "emasculatation operation"—her needlessly grandiose euphemism for castration. Rhapsodic, meandering elaborations on Hindu myths and spirituality are jarringly interspersed with discussions of the hijras' "sexual impotence", their role as "homosexual male prostitutes", and their "grotesque, sexually suggestive parody of feminine behavior". Nanda seems morbidly fixated on resolving what seems to her the central paradox of hijra existence, namely their supposed religious asceticism juxtaposed against their involvement in sex work, or their desire for "husbands"—a term that always appears in quotation marks within the text. She maps their kinship structures, details their lives, and reproduces first-person accounts, all while insisting on their "maleness", frequently contrary to their own words.

Why, then, is the book *Neither Man Nor Woman* instead of *Emasculated Homosexual Religious Ascetics*? Nanda repeatedly alludes to the concept of a "Third Gender" or "Third Sex" without any degree of rigor, without explicating what such a term may connote. The belief in two biological, opposing, and non-overlapping "sexes" is confidently touted as "Western", but the basis for that differentiation is never unearthed or examined, nor any rationalizations provided for how the West's social strictures may deviate from those of societies with alleged "Third Sexes". The concept itself

rests on shaky ground and the book seems content to—ironically—allow the reader’s existing notions of “sex” to dictate the meaning they derive from this construction.

Chapter Two is the closest that Nanda comes to actually dissecting these concepts in the consecutive subsections *Hijras As “Not Men”* and *Hijras As “Not Women”*. These are fascinating subheadings, given that the *Hijras As “Not Men”* subsection contains a rather thorough listing of their similarities with *women*. Nanda herself notes just how much hijras stress that they are *not men* when discussing themselves, which makes her word choices throughout the book all the more confounding. For all of her disavowals of the West’s “rigid binary” that is purportedly unable to conceptualize a “third sex”, she is steadfast in tethering hijras to maleness, perhaps to offer herself as a shining example of the limited Western imaginary.

It is Nanda’s attempt to rhetorically distance hijras from womanhood, however, that proves to be the most revealing. Ignoring her own reporting of how hijras travel in “ladies” compartments on the trains and “periodically demand” to be counted as women in the census, she begins *Hijras As “Not Women”* by affirming that hijras behave in manners “in opposition to the Hindu ideal of demure and restrained femininity”. What follows is an amusing account of all the behaviors that set hijra apart from True Womanhood: “dancing in public”, “coarse and abusive speech or gestures”, smoking hookah or cigarettes, and openly exhibiting a “shameless” vulgarity that no “real” Hindu woman would indulge. No doubt many Indian housewives would be edified to learn how trivial it is to change sex, or how frequently they’ve done so in the process of haggling for cheaper vegetables.

Less amusing is the invocation of 18th-century legal codes that required hijra to wear men’s turbans or coats to “distinguish” themselves as not-women—as though decrees of state are an adequate source for settling the question of hijra identity—preceding the passage that lays Nanda’s ideological investments bare. She recounts two stories told to her that, she claims, serve as “testimony to the hijra view of themselves as ‘not women’, *at least not real women*”. (Emphasis mine). Both stories are reproduced here in full, with certain portions italicized to highlight them:

See, two people got into a fight, a man and a hijra. *The hijra said, “I am a lady”*, and the man said, “No, you are not.” The fight went so long that they went to the magistrate. The magistrate said, “I agree, you look like a woman, you act like a woman, but I’ll ask you a simple question—can you give birth to a baby? If that is not possible, then you don’t win.” The hijra answered, no, she could not give birth to a baby, so the magistrate said, “You are only a hijra, you are not a woman.”

In Ajmer, in North India, there is a holy place that belongs to the hijras. It is called Baba Darga, and it is on top of a hill. One time, during Urs [a Muslim festival], many people were going up the hill to pay respects to Baba. One hijra was also there. She saw a lady with four children and offered to carry one or two of them. The lady became very angry and told the hijra, “You are a hijra, so don’t touch my children.” This made the hijra feel very sad, so she asked Baba for his blessings for a child of her own. But she only asked for a child and didn’t ask Baba to bring the child out. The pregnancy went on for ten months, and her stomach became very bloated. She went to the doctor’s but they didn’t want to perform an operation [Caesarean section] on her. Eventually she couldn’t stand the weight any longer so she prayed to the Baba to redeem her from this situation. But Baba could only grant her the boon, he could not reverse it. When the hijra felt she could stand it no more, she found a sword at the darga [Muslim shrine] and slit herself open. She removed the child and placed it on the ground. The child died and the hijra also died. Now at this darga prayers are performed to this hijra and the child and then to the Baba.

What stands out the most is the startling lack of empathy. Rather than meditating on these tales as exemplary of the hijra’s struggle for legibility as women against a society that structurally and legally denies them that, Nanda is happy to cite them as “evidence” of hijras reaffirming their own degendering. Of the hijra who narrated the second story, Nanda has this to say:

“This story reveals an ambivalence: On the one hand, it expresses the wish of some hijras to have a child, yet on the other hand acknowledges its impossibility. The death of the hijra and the child suggests that hijras cannot become women—in the most fundamental sense of being able to bear a child—and that they are courting disaster to attempt something so contrary to their nature. Meera, the hijra who told me this story, was convinced it was true. She had many times expressed to me her wish for a child and said that she had read in a magazine that in America doctors would help people like her have babies. The other hijras sitting with us laughed at this suggestion.”

Leaving aside the casual cruelty for the moment, we are able to glean an equivocation that Nanda presents as neutral, but is very much ideological: the *equation of womanhood with gestational capacity*. Just as the book fails to comment upon Indian society’s repression of the hijra, or the hermeneutical injustice inherent to denying their self-understanding in favor of forcing them to accept a stigmatized categorization, it also neglects to consider how holding reproductive capacity as *the* essential characteristic of womanhood is thoroughly patriarchal. Nanda does not meaningfully inquire how such a view, deeply entrenched in Indian society, might impact even cis (or *real*) women, an incuriosity that leads to the book’s clearest example of cultural illiteracy.

## The Barren

We return to chapter one, where the author discusses her observations of a hijra troop performing at wedding ceremonies. Ignoring how eagerly she refers to this as a “grotesque, sexually suggestive parody of feminine behavior”—her predisposition towards treating hijra identity as simple mimesis is well-established—let us instead consider an interesting tidbit, buried under the overly-florid attempts to do the performances justice. On page four, the following sentence betrays Nanda’s motivated reasoning:

“Some more orthodox families do not allow the bride to be present in the courtyard with the hijras, however, believing that the hijras’ infertility will contaminate the girl and keep her from having a son.”

She revisits this on page six:

“Thus, the stout, middle-class matrons who are so amused by the hijras’ performances, and who may even pity them as tragic, hermaphroditic figures, also have an underlying anxiety about them. As mentioned earlier, this is translated into a taboo of orthodox Hindus that the hijras should not touch, or even see, a new bride, so that their impotence will not contaminate her reproductive potential.”

Here, the author uses “impotence” rather than “infertility”, a word choice that firmly calls to mind Nanda’s repeated assertions of the hijra’s ‘castrated manhood’. It is interesting primarily because anyone familiar with the Indian cultural context would be able to tell you that this superstition, this belief that infertility can spread, is not one that is usually applied to *men*.

*Baanjh* is the term used for an infertile woman, which translates rather directly to *barren*. Indian society’s reduction of women to their role of broodmare, mere vessels to further a man’s line, ensures that women who cannot fulfill this role [face harsh stigma](#) and censure. ‘Barren’ women are reduced almost to the state of untouchables, considered to be carrying ‘bad energy’ that could ‘infect’ and bring misfortune upon those they interact with. Their treatment calls to mind the reality of societies with intense patriarchal contradictions and demonstrates how women are accorded no humanity, no internality, and no autonomy outside of their reproductive roles.

It is telling that the book makes nothing of this observation, going so far as to reify the hijras’ supposed maleness, because the author does not understand that this is a belief firmly rooted in viewing the hijra as *barren women*. There is no clearer demonstration of how Nanda is clearly working backward from

a conclusion, rather than investigating the conditions of an abjectified population and reporting on their lives in a conscientious, sensitive manner. Her fixation is given primacy over evidence of how hijra are viewed and treated similarly to women who cannot fulfill their reproductive roles—evidence that she presents herself, without even understanding its implications.

All of which begs the question—what end do these omissions serve? Why, ultimately, is a cultural anthropologist invested in disregarding the affinity that the hijra display for legible womanhood in favor of propping them up as an “institutionalized third gender”, filling the ‘social role’ of “homosexual male prostitute”?

## The Omission

The first time in this book that Serena Nanda discusses transsexuality in-depth is in chapter *ten*.

“Unlike the alternative gender roles found in other cultures, the transsexual in American culture is not viewed as a third, or alternative, gender. Rather, transsexualism has been defined in such a way as to reinforce our cultural construction of both sex and gender as invariably dichotomous.”

Once more, Nanda places rhetorical distance between the hijra and a category that they would appear to bear more than a passing resemblance to—transsexuals, in this case. Here she espouses strangely familiar rhetoric of transsexuals as *medicalized*, regarding transsexuality as a by-product of the ‘Euro-American medical complex’ attempting to preserve the European understanding of gender as dichotomous. Transsexuality, she laments, is popularly understood as a liminal state between the two genders, leaving no room for gender-expansivity or third-sexes. While she does accurately convey the role medical practitioners played in enforcing gender norms upon transsexuals, allowing care only to those they deemed sufficiently conformist, Nanda nonetheless laments that the greatest champions of this “liminal view” of transsexuality were transsexuals themselves. Her characteristic inability to notice the compromises a hyperscrutinized population must make with the society repressing them thus once more rears its head.

Central to Nanda’s distinction between the Western transsexual and the Indian hijra is the issue of, as she puts it, “medicalization”. Regressive transsexuals do not challenge binaristic notions of Euro-American gender and seek ‘medicalization’ to cross from one sex to the other without disrupting the gendered hegemony, while noble third-sexed individuals inhabit an *expansive* cultural role, challenging the Western understanding of dichotomous sex on a fundamental level.

Robust as this thesis is, it would certainly face issues if any hijra were to express a desire for ‘medicalization’—as one of Nanda’s *own informants* did, candidly discussing her hormonal treatments and desires for ‘normative’ womanhood.

Later scholarship, such as Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex*, touches upon many hijras’ desire for secondary sexual characteristics corresponding to womanhood, with Reddy expressing concern about how they consume many birth control pills daily, or seek out unprescribed hormonal injections. Neglecting to mention the hijras’ desire for “medicalization” would be understandable if Nanda never encountered any hijra who trusted her with such information, but her own testimonials throw her attempted bifurcation of “third sexes” and “transsexuality” into question.

A particularly glaring oversight is the text’s refusal to distinguish between whether hijras lack the *desire* to transition or the *ability*. Despite frequently noting their impoverishment, marginalization, and ostracism from wider society, Nanda barely lingers on Indian society’s dehumanization and

mistreatment of the hijra, opting instead to wax rhapsodic about Hindu scripture, theology, and the supposed “enshrinement” and “veneration” of the hijra that in the final calculus amounts to less than a hunk of bread. That hijras attempt to justify their existence to a Hindu society in Hindu terms should not be seen as remarkable, given that their religious appeals for dignity *do not work*.

Indeed, the text fails at the fundamental level of affording hijras any agency while simultaneously refusing to reckon at any length with their material circumstances. It chases the ghost of “reverence” without once situating the hijra as individuals constantly negotiating with a hostile and eliminationist regime that barely acknowledges their existence and strenuously denies them the means to self-actualize. To Serena Nanda, the hijra are an exotic prop, a key to the puzzle of undermining European gender norms without resorting to the ‘barbarity’ of transsexualist ‘medicalization’. Her whitewashing of a non-Western culture’s bigotry and brutalization of a demographic is only marginally less bizarre than her confounding distaste and seeming resentment towards transsexuals.

On that note, we ought to touch upon one of the most sinister omissions regarding this book, tucked away in endnotes on page 166. In the fourth numbered endnote there, Nanda suggests a slew of texts critiquing the “cultural construction of transsexualism by the medical and mental health professions”. Among them is Raymond (1979)—*The Transsexual Empire*.

The foundational text of anthropological third-sexing of the hijra affirmatively cites the most famous transmisogynist in existence, laundering her bilious, fervent hatred of transsexuals into the annals of the queer academy.

## **Part Two: Fool Me Once**

### **Diversity, Inequity, Exclusion**

In *Neither Man Nor Woman*, Nanda extensively discusses the years she spent doing fieldwork, interviewing hijras, translating their testimony (twice) and all in all attesting to a level of attempted rigor that makes her misfires nigh inexcusable. If the reader is left wondering how much she is capable of bungling without such preamble, her book *Gender Diversity* leaves no room for doubt.

*Gender Diversity*’s first edition was published in 2000, after the first and second editions of *Neither Man Nor Woman*. It takes what can best be described as an algorithmic approach to analyzing gender expansivity in various non-Western cultures, reproducing the third-sexing framework applied to the hijra in its initial chapters and applying them in turn to various nations. The text aggregates scholarship on Brazil, the Philippines, Indonesia, Polynesia, Thailand, and more. In every instance, it ponders what the existence of these disparate categories could imply for the limited ‘Western’ view of gender, living up to anthropology’s voyeuristic and orientalist roots.

While there are some attempts to incorporate transmasculinities (what the book refers to as “female genders”), it remains fixated on transfeminized populations, as is the academy’s wont. There are broad similarities amongst the demographics it studies, including but not limited to being “born male” while expressing a desire for womanhood and femininity, associations with “male homosexuality” oriented around taking up the penetrable “feminized” role in sex, as well as marginalization, ostracism and stigmatization that results in precarity, being locked out of the formal economy, and high rates of survival sex work. We also, once again, see the text attempt bizarre contortions and invocations of

cultural relativism, theology, and ‘reverence’ in order to cast self-evidently abjectified identities as ‘institutional genders’ in some way, despite the systemic, societal pressures to exclude and expel them.

The fundamental failure plaguing both *Gender Diversity* and Nanda’s work on the hijra is the same: a refusal to apply a materialist, empirical, and *feminist* lens to obvious cases of gendered oppression. Nanda appears desperate to romanticize and idealize these exotic, foreign peoples and their enlightened, post-gendered ways, steadfastly ignoring how they exist within extant patriarchies without having toppled the misogynistic regimes that abhor them. Mere observation ought to have indicated that “third sexes” are perfectly compatible with ideologies of male-supremacy and sexual-reproductive exploitation, but we are regaled with florid paeans to Hindu scripture and non-Western ‘wisdom’ over honest and rigorous scholarship. These texts do not *discuss* third sexes, but seek to *invent* them, to shape the Western understanding of non-Western transfeminized demographics in particular terms.

As before, Nanda’s agenda is clarified when the text finally discusses the ‘Western’ transsexual, this time in chapter eight of *Gender Diversity*.

Transsexuals, then, far from being an example of gender diversity, both reflected and reinforced the dominant Euro-American sex/gender ideology in which one had to choose to be either a man or a (*stereotypical*) woman. [Emphasis mine.]

Nanda’s anti-transsexual inclinations are, frankly, difficult to overstate. While she was shrewd enough to not cite Sister Raymond affirmatively in this text, the core thesis of *Transsexual Empire* nonetheless finds its way into her arguments, accompanied by a bevy of cis scholarship speculating on the motives, intentions, and desires of transsexuals. Her words are shot through with what can only be described as a revulsion towards ‘medicalization’, deriding the transsexual as the product of psychiatric and medical interventions intent on preserving Euro-American patriarchy. Similar to Raymond, she displays an awareness of the surveillance and hyperscrutiny that transsexuals are subjected to by institutions intent on denying them care, yet still sees it fit to denounce them as an equal party to their own policing and suppression.

Her claims that transsexuality reifies gender norms are thrown into particularly sharp relief when she narrates the following tidbit:

The availability of the sex-change operation and the emergence of the “transsexual” helps sustain the dominant Euro-American sex/gender system based on binary opposites (Kessler and McKenna 1978). The new male or female sex status may be supported by the construction of a revised life story and certain legal changes, such as revising one’s sex on the birth certificate, though this has been repudiated by some American courts. In 2002, for example, a Kansas state court rejected the claim of a transsexual to inherit her husband’s property on the basis that her transsexual status did not meet the Kansas legal requirement that only recognizes marriage between persons of the opposite sex. The court acknowledged that, “While [the defendant though] born male, wants and believes herself to be a woman . . . her female anatomy is all man made . . . and thus as a matter of law, [the defendant] is a male” (quoted in Norgren and Nanda 2006:200).

In other words, Nanda holds fast to her claims of transsexuality ‘sustaining’ the dominant gender paradigm, even when describing institutional delegitimization and denial of transsexual identity! Observing where the power lies and how transsexuals run the risk of recognition being revoked even when they conform to every stricture imposed upon them is, apparently, beyond the author’s ability.

By contrast, the book’s subsequent section on “Transgenderism” is much more positive and ultimately clarifying.

Transgenderism has its foundation in the ancient tradition of androgyny, a view that has made the *crosscultural data from anthropology*—with its descriptions of the positive value of androgyny in some other cultures—particularly relevant to the transgender community (Bolin 1996b:39; Connor 1993; Feinberg 1996). [Emphasis mine.]

Unlike transsexuals, **transgenderists (transpeople)** do not consider themselves limited to a choice of one of two genders. Transgenderism includes a wide continuum of options, from individuals who wish to undergo sex reassignment surgery to those who wish to live their lives androgynously.

Transgenderists can be narrowly defined as persons who want to change gender roles *without undergoing sexual reassignment surgery*; they can also be defined as “persons who steer a middle course, living with the physical, social, and psychological traits of both genders.” [Emphasis mine.]

*Unlike transsexuals* of the 1970s and 1980s, transgenderists today *challenge and stretch the boundaries of the American binary system of sex/gender oppositions* and renounce the American definition of gender as dependent on a consistency of genitals, body type, identity, role behaviors, and sexual orientation. [Emphasis mine.]

Plainly, Nanda espouses an ideological opposition to bodily transition, *venerating* supposed cross-cultural traditions of androgyny and “embodying *both* genders”. (Her own reification of a dualistic gender paradigm, in a book awash with what she calls “third sexes”, is surely clever irony.) Her attitudes towards ‘transgenderism’ closely mirror the way she speaks about “third-sexes”, pedestalizing a pure gender “disruption” untainted by medical technologies.

Of course, there remains a singular, burning question that yet remains unasked due to the author’s framing.

Are these non-Western third sexes “refusing medicalization” *by choice*?

Not once does Nanda care to interrogate whether inaccessibility, impoverishment, and stigma play a role in keeping the option of bodily transition out of reach. Not once does she care to simply *ask* whether, given the ability to avail of bodily transition, any of her subjects would do so. Such queries would *disrupt* the carefully-constructed antagonism between transsexuals and third-sexes, proving that this, too, is a false binary propped up by zealots to serve their own ends. In addition to Nanda’s own informants, later work by Reddy details how hijra consume birth control pills by the handful in their pursuit of breasts, and A. Revathi’s autobiography *The Truth About Me* explicates the connection between hijra identity and trans politics. Across the globe, transfeminized individuals from disparate cultures are united by their shared struggles for legibility, set against hegemonies that seek to dehumanize, delegitimize, and degender us, keeping crucial healthcare and the very means of survival out of our hands.

There is very much worth in juxtaposing the Western transsexual and the hijra, but Serena Nanda is far too transmisogynistic to accord that endeavor its due dignity. She does not seek the emancipation or actualization of any of her subjects, pursuing instead a mythical third-sex that can serve as an avatar for “expanding” the West’s gendered possibilities.

How ironic, then, that she set off around the world in search of this third sex, when she could very well have found it right at home.

## **Whipping Third-Sexed Individual**

In *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano defines and discusses “third-sexing” as follows:



Cissexual people who are in the earliest stages of accepting transsexuality ... will often come to see trans people as inhabiting our own unique gender category that is separate from “woman” and “man.” I call this act *third-gendering* (or *third-sexing*). While some attempts at third-gendering trans people are clearly meant to be derogatory or sensationalistic (such as “she-male” or “heshe”)...

Serano here touches upon a core aspect of transmisogyny, central not only to the many ways in which we are denigrated and slurred, but also characteristic to how we are often depicted and sexualized in media. Terms like “trap”, “futa”, “dickgirl”, and others regard transsexual women as an exotified amalgam of discrete sexual characteristics while simultaneously refusing to name us as *women*, or even *human*, reducing the transsexual body to an object for consumption. *Whipping Girl* also notes how transsexual women in non-pornographic media are still often either degendered or hypersexualized—sometimes both—routinely employing cissexual male actors in drag to represent a garish, parodic approximation of us, or featuring transsexual sex workers who are accorded no humanity and treated as little better than props, frequent disposed of in simultaneously violent and titillating ways.

We thus serve as objects of macabre fascination for cissexuals, either a hypersexualized fantasy with no autonomy or agency of its own, or a monstrous creature whom it is permissible to abhor, violate, and brutalize. Our transgression of gendered strictures, our demonstration of sex’s mutability and unfixity is a capital offense that most react to with an irrational fury. Our existence is itself an abomination to a heterosexual, male-supremacist regime, one that must be stamped out and denied at every turn.

Therefore, we are only ever subconsciously regarded as women. We are *womanized* in the way everything considered beneath a Man is feminized, yet our womanhood is repudiated, even as those who seek to destroy us bring the full force of misogynistic degradation to bear. We are assaulted and told we invited assault, that our *deviancy* and *perversion* and pretensions to womanhood carries implicit permission for deviants and perverts to treat us like women. We are discriminated against in employment and housing, frequently impoverished and turned out onto the streets, pushed disproportionately into survival sex work, and routinely face stringent access barriers to transition technologies.

The Enlightened West, in all its wisdom, already has a Third Sex: the tranny.

## Part Three: After Nanda

### Gender Imperialism

In their paper *Begging for change*, Vaibhav Saria speaks about the Indian Supreme Court’s 2014 opinion on the petition filed by National Legal Services Authority, or NALSA, concerning India’s transgender and hijra populations. Saria notes that the judgment argues for the hijras’ “right” to self-identify as a “third-gender”, stating:

‘Hijras/Eunuchs, therefore, have to be considered as Third Gender, *over and above binary genders* under our Constitution and the laws’ [para. 74] [Emphasis mine]

It becomes imperative to first assign them their proper “sex”. As TGs in India are *neither male nor female*, treating them as belonging to either of the aforesaid categories, is the denial of these constitutional rights. [para. 119] [Emphasis mine]

Saria herself observes that:

The concept of *tritiya prakriti* (third nature/sexuality/gender) and myths from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are marshalled as evidences for the hijras' historical presence in South Asia, *while the two ethnographies on hijras by Serena Nanda (1991) and Gayatri Reddy (2005) are cited to refer to the religious and political significance of hijras in everyday Hindu lives and the Mughal royal courts.* [Emphasis mine.]

Here is a morbid, maddening irony: anthropological scholarship, distinctly *Western* anthropological scholarship, that for decades has touted the maxim of 'binary gender' being an 'imposed', 'colonial' concept, has now been cited by an Indian court in an opinion that explicitly third-sexes the hijra and purports that recognizing them as women would 'violate their constitutional rights'. It is seemingly only imperialism when populations who seek the technologies of transition and legible womanhood are granted access to them, while the opinions of Western academics shaping local politics is merely sparkling scholarship.

For it must be stated that Nanda's work is not by any means the sole culprit implicated in the academic third-sexing of non-Western demographics. Rather, it is the basis upon which a corpus of such work rests, spawned by institutional interests that seek self-aggrandizement at the expense of orientalized, exotified, and degendered people. The inexplicable demonization of the transsexual and of transition itself undergirds attitudes that demand transfeminized individuals trap themselves in gender-ambiguous amber, over and above heeding their own desires to reshape their sex.

Reddy, for example—whose ethnography is cited alongside Nanda's—is frequently credited with building upon Nanda's work and rectifying her most egregious flaws. It is a fascinating characterization, given that Reddy herself is exonerative of Nanda's work, limiting her critiques of the ethnography only to the first edition and stating of the second:

However—and this is particularly germane to my characterization of changing representations of hijras in the literature—Nanda's own thinking and work on hijras appears to have shifted during the last decade. In the second edition of her ethnography, published in 1999, not only has Nanda omitted the preface by Money, she has also reframed her analysis in line with recent developments in gender theory and anthropological modes of inquiry and representation, paying greater attention to the historicopolitical contexts of current scholarship (Nanda, pers. comm.). Perhaps, in addition to signifying changes in hijras' lives over the course of this past decade, these shifts in analytic frameworks and ideologies of representation are a testimony to changing theoretical winds and modes of ethnographic crafting.

Given that I have based my prior estimation of Nanda's work very much on the second edition, my concerns remain unallayed.

Reddy, furthermore, is prone to reproducing the worst of Nanda's flaws, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

Perhaps more deleterious to their health than this unrestricted use of oral contraceptives is hijras' recent habit of injecting themselves with estrogen and progesterone concentrates, bought illegally from the local pharmacies. Not only were they completely unaware of exactly how these products affected their hormone levels and more generally their bodies, none of them would go to a doctor or nurse either to get a prescription or in order to be injected. Shanti claimed to know how to give an injection, having "watched a doctor many times," and it was to her that hijras under the tank went for their weekly injections. Shanti not only had no training, but she used the same needle for multiple injections, facilitating the transmission of HIV (among other infections). Although hijras had heard that these *golis* and *sudis* (injections) were bad for them, they also knew that these substances produced results. Given their strong desire for a *chati* [breasts], they felt this risk was worth taking. The yearning to possess womanly attributes—breasts being one of the most visible and significant of these—was an extremely important motive for such practices.

While concerns over needle hygiene are more than warranted (and easily solved by making syringes more readily available), acquiring unprescribed hormonal treatments is far safer and more commonplace than most believe. Most transfeminized people languish under regimes that refuse to prescribe us essential transition care, leading many to rely on alternative sources of treatment and community networks of knowledge. Reddy comes across as ignorant of how difficult it is for most of us to acquire prescriptions, of how common it is for us to be under-dosed and placed on dangerous regimens that effectively induce menopause—*by medical professionals*—or indeed avoid mistreatment from doctors, belying the absence or omission of a transsexual perspective that could have proved clarifying. At the very least, meditating on whether this refusal to meet with medical professionals is based on prior experiences could have proved fruitful.

The very next section after this discussion of hormones is entitled “The Mimesis of Femininity and Parodic Gender Subversion”. Reddy’s reproduction of Nanda’s framing does not end here, as her justification for referring to hijras as “mimetics” is also rooted in gestational capacity, and relies on *the same story that Nanda related!*

“There was once a hijra named Tarabai who desperately wanted children of her own. So she went to Ajmer Baba and asked for this wish to be granted. Only, she said, “I want a child to be produced in my womb,” and did not explicitly ask for it to be born. So her pregnancy continued for several months and finally, unable to bear the pain and burden any longer, Tarabai slit her stomach and removed the baby, killing herself and the baby. But to this day, hijras who go to Ajmer Baba’s dargah [tomb] inevitably pay homage to Tarabai as well.” This story was recounted by hijras as “proof” that they “cannot have children,” and by virtue of this fact “are not women” (Nanda 1990). [Note—this is the renounced *first* edition of Nanda’s book]

Like Nanda, Reddy’s callous detachment stems from fundamentally viewing the hijra less as an oppressed group whose conditions are a product of a patriarchal society and more as potential *subversives*, whose ‘performance’ has edifying potential for how others can think about and navigate gendered systems. As she puts it:

In the case of hijras, for instance, does their gendered performance constitute parodic subversion, or does it merely constitute a resignification of normative gender ideals and practices? Hijras clearly express an overwhelming desire for the accouterments of femininity. Does this imply that hijras are merely reinscribing given, normative patterns of gender ascription and aspiration? Equally clearly in many contexts, hijras appear to perceive their identities as outside the binary frame of gendered reference. Given hijras’ realization of the constructed nature of their (gendered) identities, does this in itself constitute their performance as parody and therefore as potentially subversive? What constitutes resistance in such a scenario? *In other words, are hijras primary agents of gender subversion in the Indian cultural context, or are they uncritically reinscribing gendered categories through their desires and practice?* [Emphasis mine.]

The hijras’ material conditions, positionality under a heterosexual regime, or even their activism and resistance to their society’s stigmatization come second to the navel-gazing solipsism of cissexual academics, rendering judgment from on high. It is a thoroughly hegemonic gaze, a fetishistic view in the original sense of the term, where the hijras’ symbolic value as either “gender-insurgents” or “upholders of patriarchy” matters more than their literal humanity, dignity, and survival. This parasitic, extractive impulse towards a marginalized population is frankly sickening, to say nothing of the sheer temerity required to postulate that people who are so thoroughly rejected and repressed by their society might be active agents in reinforcing the very institutions depriving and dehumanizing them—a conclusion only an academic could dream up.

The 2014 NALSA opinion that cited Reddy was not legislation, as such, but was to form the basis of a draft bill. Saria goes on to discuss how the opinion did not consult India’s transgender or hijra communities, nor did further legislation based on it. A series of legal missteps culminated in a ghastly

2016 bill, named ‘The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2016’, which dramatically expanded the state’s role in gender recognition, requiring all trans people to first obtain a ‘Transgender Certificate’ and submit themselves to institutional scrutiny as a precursor to legal recognition. This proposition tore up all previous discussions on the right to self-identification, resulting in the mobilization of Indian trans communities in protest of a bill that was putatively meant to secure their rights. From Raymond to Nanda to Reddy to NALSA, we can trace a path from Western transmisogynistic fundamentalism to the legal, institutionalized Third-Sexing of all Indian trans people.

*That* is the legacy of Western academia, of cultural anthropology, of a field playing at decolonialism proving to be an instrumental imperialist accomplice to India’s codification of degendering.

## **The Truth About Me**

*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* is an autobiographical novel by A. Revathi, translated into English from Tamil. It is a blunt, harsh, and oftentimes difficult account of the life of a hijra, a population so thoroughly marginalized that such firsthand accounts are a remarkable rarity. Revathi discusses her childhood as a feminine ‘boy’, her lifelong identification with girlhood and womanhood, and the arduous journey she had to undergo in order to live authentically. She is candid about various aspects of her community and their way of life, and attests to the pursuit of surgical and hormonal treatments by hijra, so that their embodiment may match their identity.

In other words, she conclusively describes the ways in which hijra experiences parallel so-called “Western” transsexuality.

Her own words on the subject, excerpted from a speech she delivered at a Koovagam festival, express it best:

... The feelings I have are natural and they should be recognized as such. We want those like us, born as men, but with feminine feelings to have the right to sex-change surgery. All I ask is that you accept as worthy of respect what you’ve all along considered unnatural and illegal. ... If there is something wrong with a woman’s uterus, you don’t hesitate to surgically remove it. If you happen to know that your child-to-be is a girl, you don’t mind destroying the foetus. Thus, each one of your acts falls foul of the law, of nature. But you bring up issues of nature and law only where certain things are concerned. *Listen, I am not diseased. I consider myself a woman. But I possessed the form of a man. I wanted to rid myself of that form and live as a complete woman. How can that be wrong?* [Emphasis mine.]

*In some countries, government-run hospitals counsel people like me, put us on a course of hormones, carry out sex reassignment surgery and acknowledge our right to change our sex. Such women go to work, get married, do as other women do. We want the Indian state to do the same: provide us with counseling, put us on a course of hormones and assist with sex-change surgeries. Since law and society in this country do not acknowledge our right to live as we wish, we are forced to beg, take up sex work, and suffer as a consequence. Today, sex-change operations are carried out in a few private clinics, where surgical procedures are seldom followed, and which do not extend the sort of care we require afterwards. Many of us end up suffering all sorts of infections. We want to live as women, and if we are granted the facilities that will enable us to do so, we’ll live as other women do. We were not born to beg or do sex work.* [Emphasis mine.]

My nation, my society, my state and its blighted culture, rarely allow women like Revathi to speak.

Heed her words, and heed them well.

## A Too-Short History of Transmisogyny

*A Short History of Transmisogyny*, authored by Jules Gill-Peterson, aspires to a cross-cultural, historical reckoning with global regimes of transmisogyny.

Gill-Peterson's work is fiery and insightful, lucid on the topic of transsexuality and its stigmatization. Her book's introduction firmly situates the struggles of trans women alongside the hijra, travesti, street queens, Two-Spirits, and others, attempting to articulate a unified politics of resistance against the worldwide suppression of transfemininity. I eagerly anticipated this book's release earlier this year, both due to my familiarity with her scholarship and because I had high hopes that, as a desi transsexual woman, Gill-Peterson would do the topic justice.

I am grateful to her for the stark reminder that identity is not the sole determiner of outlook.

To understand what happened in the wake of Bhoorah's murder, it's important to say that hijras were not then—and are not today—transgender. Even though the story of the global trans panic weaves through their experience, it *doesn't mean they should be interpreted as trans women*. Hijras, for one thing, are arguably *much older than the Western concept of gender* through which trans emerged as boundary crossing. [Emphasis mine.]

This is, ultimately, an argument with its roots in academic decolonial feminism, a school that considers the “rigid gender binary” to be a colonial export. Much ink has been spilled condemning colonial regimes for their corruption of precolonial, prelapsarian non-Western cultures, whose ‘expansive gender-systems’ allowed for populations like the hijra to ‘flourish’. It is a familiar song and dance, though a wearying one by now, if you've been paying attention.

In an [interview for The Cut](#), Gill-Peterson makes her views on this explicit:

“There are many people who don't necessarily share this Euro-American definition of “trans woman”: two-spirit people in the United States, hijras in British colonial India, travestis in Argentina.”

And so the band plays on.

It is difficult to know where to begin when contesting such a naive, idealistic view of precolonial societies, precisely *because* it is so trivially contradicted by the most perfunctory empirical observations. Hindu scripture, predating the very concept of a “West” by millennia, codifies the inferiority of women and the necessity for wives to subordinate themselves to husbands. Even during colonial times, the outlawing of widow burning was a pitched battle between Indian activists and the upper-caste Hindu elites. (The edict was eventually reverted to appease that selfsame elite.) I do not know how to explain to learned academics that sexual objectification and reproductive exploitation were not innovations that the West pioneered, nor do I know how to explain that a historical record of “asceticism”, of hijra being prescribed a livelihood of begging for alms at ceremonies, is not “reverence” or an “institutionalized gender-role”, but marginalization.

Bubbles Khanum, a member of the Pakistani khwaja sira community, has this to say on the topic:

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, commonly known as a hero for reforming education for the Indians, wrote a letter to the British demanding an action being taken against the Hijra community. Our lives before all that are often glorified excessively in attempts to convince the modern transphobic society that we belong here but the truth is, patriarchy has existed for thousands of years, where women have been subjugated, the Hijras were no exception and were not seen as equals. They were still victims of gendered violence, were ostracized to live in their own communes, had to heavily rely on religiosity and spirituality to get whatever respect they did, and at most all those efforts managed to get some of them secondary roles in the society such as advisors

or harem guards. Moving forward the over glorification of the past does more harm than good as that is not what we want to go back to just to undo the damage the colonizers have done.

I wish to reiterate her message, grim though it may be: There is no salvation awaiting us in a glorified past that does not exist. If we are to advocate for our humanity, our legibility, and our liberty, it will be as a part of something new, something unprecedented, something we do not as yet have names for. You do not want the ‘veneration’ that the holy men of my culture reserve for us.

Oh, save my sisters from the “reverence” of this cursed land and its misbegotten people.

## Part Four: A Tale of Two Genders

### It’s the Power Differential, Stupid

Ostensibly, cultural anthropology’s gender odyssey is motivated by a desire to undermine and denaturalize the dualist, dichotomous nature of the Western gender system. Nanda’s elevation of “transgenderism” over “transsexuality” invokes a rosy view of anthropology’s role in unearthing a rich cross-cultural history of androgynous traditions, while Reddy’s meditation on “gender performance” seeks to gauge the subversive potential of hijra existence. These are, at least nominally, *feminist* goals, which make the neglect of feminist frameworks in their pursuit all the more confounding.

For the idea that a “Third Sex” could shake the very foundations of patriarchy is not merely misguided, it is unfathomably naive. While “the gender binary” is a good shorthand for summarizing many aspects of the heterosexual regime—namely the division of humanity into exhaustively two naturalized non-overlapping sexes—it does not convey the most important characteristic.

Succinctly, mere categorization does not constitute violence and injustice. Rather, the *aggrandizement of one category at the expense of the other(s)*, enforced and upheld at the socio-cultural and institutional level, is what makes “the gender binary” unjust.

In even plainer terms: “It’s male-supremacy, stupid.”

The existence of a third sex does no more to challenge societal male-supremacy than does the existence of a fourth, fifth, or even *second* sex. Every sex that is not the First Amongst Sexes, that is not the Most Vaunted, Most Esteemed, and Most Adored Sex, simply becomes another sexual resource to be exploited. Patriarchy’s basis is not inherently a *dichotomy*, and the “rich history” of transfeminized populations across cultures—including *the West*—ought to have illustrated that plainly. The existence of hijras did little to challenge Hinduism’s enshrinement of male-supremacy, and the existence of transsexuals has only made the West’s ideological commitments to a dualistic sex model more pronounced.

Thus Third-Sexing, far from being a *challenge* to patriarchy, seems to be a surprisingly historical feature of its operation.

Systems of repression, ultimately, do not revise their most cherished imperatives based on democratic feedback. What they cannot extinguish entirely, they repurpose or recuperate.

In many ways, Nanda's work *did* have the potential to rectify various failures of the second wave and push further our understanding of the social construction of sex. Had she not been ideologically committed to seeing the hijra as male ascetics, had she looked at Hinduism's repressive edicts with a feminist instead of an orientalist eye, and if she had been willing to connect the plight of the hijra to that of the transsexual and even cissexual woman, all rendered sexual resources under regimes of heterosexuality, we might have arrived at transmisogyny theory decades early.

Instead, we have the romanticization of a faith under whose auspices a nationalistic, theocratic government is today fomenting religious fascism and attempting to eradicate the hijra way of life entirely.

Hindus, it would appear, have little reverence for the hijra after all.

## **Towards a Feminist Understanding of Third-Sexing**

Cultural anthropology may have coined and codified "third-sexing" to legitimize the degendering of transfeminized populations in the Third World, but that does not mean that the term is inherently without value, or is not an observation of a real phenomenon. After all, the treatment of the hijra as something outside of gendered duality, as "possessing the qualities of both", as well as misconceptions of hijras all being born "hermaphroditic" or intersex, are rooted in Indian and Hindu culture.

Indeed, in the eyes of Indian patriarchy, "hijra" is an expansive category, one that is meant to encompass all those deemed—bluntly—sexually 'defective'. Girls who do not menstruate may be considered hijra, and while intersex individuals were the minority amongst them, they too are stigmatized and ostracized into hijra communities. The "third sex", such as it is, is not a prescriptive category, but a dumping-ground, a landfill in which to deposit everyone that a society organized around the reproductive imperative considers extraneous and aberrant.

Such an attitude is predictive of prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality, a subject on which India's track record is indeed abysmal. It must be recalled that historically in the West and in many cultures even today, homosexuality was first and foremost conceptualized as *gendered deviance*, rather than as an aspect of one's identity independent of sex. Bizarre myths of lesbians as androgenized "tribades" with massive, penetrating clitorises existed alongside a corrective, curative fixation on "male effeminacy", because patriarchal regimes do not care for the reality or the granularity of an expansive queer existence.

Simply put, under patriarchy, *heterosexuality is the only legitimate mode of existence, and all deviations from it are similarly punished.*

Nor is this contempt for all those who contravene the reproductive imperative limited to queer individuals. In India, infertile women—or even women who bear their husbands only daughters and no sons—face mistreatment, violence, treatment as "untouchable", and expulsion from their families, as do widows. Womanhood being synonymized with gestation means that it comes with an *expiration date*, past which a woman who either could not perform the one function that accorded her any worth, or cannot do so anymore, becomes yet more offal to discard and sweep out onto the streets. Dworkin, in her essay *The Coming Gynocide*, observes a similar phenomenon in the West, where underfunded and overflowing care homes are disproportionately comprised of old *women*, as is the composition of elderly individuals on state or medical assistance.

“Old women do not have babies; they have outlived their husbands; there is no reason to value them. They live in poverty because the society that has no use for them has sentenced them to death.”

If you are not of the First Sex, pride and heir to your line, Third-Sexing will come for you sooner or later.

None of this is to attempt to collapse all forms of gendered oppression into a singular category, to erase distinction and equivocate between related yet distinct forms of patriarchal violence. Nor do I believe it is edifying or productive to try to determine whether a woman forced to bear children for a family that reviles her, or a woman expelled from society and forced to live on the margins, suffers more.

Rather, this is an explication of the underlying *root* of patriarchy, its core mechanisms and systems that constitute the guiding principles of (trans)misogyny, lesbophobia—all instances of gender-marginalization. Sex is not quite as *binary* as advertised, because the heterosexual regime has always regarded people as one of *human*, *broodmare*, or *freak*. If you are not a person with autonomy, then you are a vessel for those who are ... and if you cannot even be *that*, then you are a waste of flesh, something to be *fucked*, *killed*, or *both*.

The butch derided and beaten as a delusional “he-she”, the tranny who can be endlessly violated, and even the woman who merely refuses to have children, are bound by this commonality. If we cannot participate in reproduction, we must be *fixed* ... or disposed of.

## **Subversivism and Transition**

A disturbing and recurring theme in the literature regarding both supposed third-sexes and “Western” transsexuality is the positioning of transsexuality as an inherently less subversive, more regressive, and unquestionably *patriarchal* practice. Oftentimes, the justifications for these audacious claims refer to “medicalization” in terms no less stigmatizing and fearmongering than Raymond herself, or the modern Gender-Conservative movement that echoes her. Nanda makes this core to the distinction between the “transgenderist” and the “transsexual”, elevating the former at the expense of the latter, a view grounded entirely in considering bodily transition an artificial and fundamentally assimilationist process.

If we are to humor this viewpoint at all, we are forced to admit that such a conception of transsexuality does not survive any length of empirical scrutiny. Not only have transsexuals been historically *barred* and *gatekept* from transition care, forced to play dress-up and memorize cribbed responses for doctors who would arbitrarily and gleefully revoke their rights to the care they desperately needed, our identities have time and time again been subject to challenge, denial, and contestation by others. Nor can a population so thoroughly stigmatized, impoverished, and routinely subject to patriarchal violence “uphold” the very system stripping them of humanity and personhood.

This categorization of transition and revulsion towards those who avail of it seems particularly distasteful and irresponsible in today’s climate, with a global reactionary moral panic scapegoating and vilifying transsexuals and seeking to criminalize all transition technologies. Morbidly, many justifications for outlawing transsexuality rely upon these decades-old tropes and popularized notions of “untested”, “mutilating”, “medicalizing” processes that will never be accorded legitimacy no matter how many positive outcomes are cited.



Even the widely-discredited Cass Review, a document that is being used to justify outlawing transition care despite its glaring methodological shortcomings, gallingly invokes the constructed opposition of transsexuality with “true” gender nonconformity on page *fourteen*.

Secondly, *medication is binary*, but the fastest growing group identifying under the trans umbrella is non-binary, and we know even less about the outcomes for this group. Some of you *will also become more fluid in your gender identity* as you grow older. [Emphasis mine.]

It is a testament to the utter depravity and cataclysmic negligence of solipsistic academic literature that deeply entrenched conservative attitudes towards bodily transition, attitudes that make life harder for marginalized transsexuals at the institutional level, have for so long been repackaged and propped up as some manner of far-sighted feminist ethos. In reality, transsexuals are routinely denied *bodily autonomy* and the *right to our own sex*, systemically prevented from accessing the care that would allow us to take our sex into our own hands due to cissexist anxieties around ‘fertility’ or reproductive capacity. The modern anti-transsexual moral panic stems from a conception of reproductive viability being the prime determiner of individual worth, over and above individuals’ own wishes, regarding every transitioned person as a societal failure and a “lifelong medical patient”. It underwrites the notion that parents who abuse queer and trans children have more of a right to their children’s bodies than queer and trans children have to their own, and relies upon thoroughly eugenical logics in order to devalue and dehumanize all those who pursue bodily transition.

In the final calculus, how “subversive” bodily transition is should not matter to anyone more than the fact that transition care is an absolute necessity for many, many people, but the pretense that transition is in any way “normative” or “regressive” under patriarchal regimes hell-bent on eradicating it—morally mandating it out of existence, one might say—is facile, absurd, and an exercise in idealist sophistry. The normalization and elevation of this idea is not merely abhorrent, but actively eliminationist.

## **Hermeneutical Injustice and External Observers**

In *Neither Man Nor Woman*, Nanda engages in a particularly damaging rhetorical sleight of hand. The book is careful to declare its reliance on testimonials, to stress its reproduction of meticulously translated firsthand accounts, and to overall give the impression that Nanda’s conclusions are based upon an impartial and neutral observation of the facts and details presented to her. As we saw several times earlier, this is a farce, given how the author selectively emphasizes some details while minimizing others, presents the information through a thoroughly ideological lens, and at times fails to even realize the significance of some of her observations. Nor are the mistakes and misrepresentations covered so far in this essay by any means exhaustive, and Nanda’s inability to connect the hijra engaging in both Hindu and Muslim practices to India’s caste system and islamophobia, or her surprising credulity when narrating a “myth” that “permits all hijra to travel on trains for free”, could be the subjects of essays just as long.

Her ethnography acutely demonstrates the hollowness of academic ‘objectivity’, revealing it to be nothing but an additional facet of the epistemic violence marginalized populations are confronted with. When Serena Nanda is allowed to set the discursive tone of hijra understanding in the West—and apparently in Indian Supreme Court opinions, too—the inclusion of testimonials is so much theater, gesturing towards the participation of marginalized demographics while maintaining a strictly hegemonic outlook. It reflects exactly how Indian society already treats the hijras: denying their every

attempt to claim womanhood and insisting on third-sexing and stigmatizing them, while relying heavily on damnable religious rationalizations that are already routinely invoked to sanctify so much patriarchal violence.

I do not pretend to be able to definitively claim that every single hijra thinks of herself as a woman. However, when hijras engage in activism to advocate for legal recognition as women, when they participate in *Aurat Marches* (*aurat* means *woman*) holding signs that say “Hijras Are Women” and “Trans Women Are Women. SHUT UP”, it is safe to state that presenting hijra identity as mystical, complex, and utterly beyond any affinity to “Western” transsexuality is deliberate silencing and a baldfaced attempt to further the hermeneutical injustice desi cultures already subject them to.

Most reprehensible, however, are the attempts to paint any desires for solidarity between hijras and transsexuals as “Western imperialism”, or to enshrine their degendering as a valiant “decolonial” effort to preserve non-Western cultures in all their bloodstained glory. As a disowned daughter of this culture, I wish to state in no uncertain terms:

*If a culture’s preservation depends on the violation and degendering of and denial of dignity to my sisters, then it should join every other extant regime that thrives on injustice, upon the ash-heap.*

(Trans)misogyny is not a cultural value worth preserving. The development of a cross-cultural transsexual and transfeminist consciousness, rooted in the recognition of how our identities and struggles are similarly shaped, is not imperialism. It is a struggle for liberation, one that queer academia is heinously eager to oppose, and one whose proponents shall no longer be spoken over.

## **Conclusion: Voices of the Damned**

I am not, by any means, a perfect representative of all hijra, all desi trans women, or even of all desi transfeminists.

*Hijra*, I am told, and as some of the above scholarship notes, is less an identity and more a community. Most, if not all hijras are transfeminized, but not all who are transfeminized desi individuals are hijra. Indeed, as Saria notes, the emergent trans identity in India has a certain class character to it, with many affluent trans women seeking to distance themselves from the abjectified hijra and advocate for themselves as a more respectable breed of queer.

Their treasonous politics will not soon be forgiven.

Personally, I am very much a transsexual desi dyke, a distinction I draw not as disavowal, but out of respect. I have no house, no kin, and do not have the honor of calling any hijra my family. I suffered the closet alone, quietly, biding my time until I could make good my escape. I am not as brave as most hijra, and I am significantly more privileged, able to leverage material advantages most of them will never have access to. I speak in the tongue of our colonizers, a bloodsoaked gift that can by itself determine our ability to cross the borders that confine us. I avoided a fate, a prison with saffron bars, that so many of my sisters will never have the opportunity to. This is a knowledge—a certainty—that sears at my soul in ways I don’t have names for.

Do you understand?

Sometimes, more often than I’d like to admit, *I* don’t understand. I don’t understand how I can live with myself.

Knowing this ... attempting to comprehend the scale of it, the enormity, the sheer totality of the torture my society puts women like me through ... do you understand what it feels like to encounter queer dogma in the West that touts the hijra as a “recognized Third Gender”?

How can I express to you how hysteria-inducing it is to see the hijra described as *revered*, when I grew up immersed in the toxic miasma of that ‘reverence’?

I am not, by any means, someone with an extensive background on this subject. I am simply a trans woman from the nation in question, who speaks this language, who was exposed to this scholarship, and who, first and foremost, *cares*.

Because so many of my own countrymen, whether cis or trans, whether aligning perfectly with my politics or opposed on every count, simply *do not care*.

All I really did was read shoddy, orientalizing texts that mystify and mangle what it’s like to exist under the crushing heel of Third World patriarchy, and I called bullshit.

This is a point I desperately wish to drive home, because I must ask ... why me?

Why did *I* have to make the connection between Sister Raymond’s Troonmadness Bible and an anthropological text that launders its ravings into the queer academy’s canon?

Why did *I* have to be the one to point out that texts that describe gender-marginalized people as “exaggerated, garish parodies of femininity” was perhaps not an ideal vector for understanding their plight?

I ask because it seems improbable, bordering on impossible, that a book that treats its subjects with such open scorn and derision could go over three decades without its blatant, inhumane cruelty being remarked upon, and yet that seems to be the case.

Then again, it’s not like the derision of trans women is new to the hallowed halls of the academy.

Perhaps this is ultimately why the learned ones see us as nothing but costumed natives, putting on a show for their amusement. They are a pantomime, a parade of pretenders in drag, trying to pass off solipsistic, bigoted drivel as an intellectual pursuit, seeing their own artificiality reflected in all they behold. Peel back the curtain, and witness how quickly the mask slips, how the masturbatory indulgences give way to corrosive, hateful screeds.

I ask, but I already know the answer.

And I am not interested in their answers anymore.

No, the charlatans with far too much ink to spill have said enough. Now is the time for the transsexual, the third-sexed woman, the third-world lesbian, and all those who have been reduced to rhetorical props to speak, to *scream*, to ROAR, to raise their voices in a cacophony. Now is the time for the damned to have their due, for the wails of the forgotten to echo above the “civil”, silencing din. Now is the time for all those whose struggles have been erased, co-opted, recuperated, disrupted, and sanctified to make themselves known.

Now we will speak, and you will, for the first time, **LISTEN**.