

## **Bodies in Transition: Exploring Queer Sexualities in Indian Cinema**

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Representations of alternative sexualities in Indian popular culture are conspicuous through their absence and invisibility. This lack, especially in Bollywood, corroborates the critique that despite the increased visibility of the LGBTQ movement in post-liberalisation India, the transgender<sup>1</sup> subcultures of Indian society still inhabit the periphery of the social consciousness. Most films centring on queer themes portray middle class characters and are reticent on queer sexuality, quite understandably so, in order to avoid censorship of a rigid and unimaginative Central Board of Film Certification of India. This is because popular culture in Indian society functions mostly as an ideological state apparatus intent on upholding the normative structures. Representation of sexuality in mainstream Indian cinema is circumscribed to the heteronormative, more specifically to cater to the (perverted) sexual fantasies of the cisgender, heterosexual male. The female body is not only a source of visual pleasure for the voyeuristic Indian male audience, but this act of deriving pleasure from the sexual otherisation of the female is considered essential to establish the self as 'masculine'. This masculinisation of viewership has other consequences as well: it perfectly serves the patriarchal agenda of the heteronormative family in which the woman has to be tamed by the man to maintain the societal power relations and the sexual hierarchy.

If violation of a woman's privacy to gratify one's perverse desires is considered manly, homophobia or transphobia (think of the repulsion among men—and even women—when *hijras/kothis*<sup>2</sup> try to touch them and coax them into giving them money at traffic signals in many South Asian countries) in heterosexual males is also considered normal behaviour. In one scene of a raunchy Hindi sex comedy called *Masti* (2004), one of the lead characters, after kissing a woman, accidentally catches her urinating standing up. He is shocked on discovering her 'real' identity and acts as if he—or rather his masculinity—has been defiled

by kissing the transgender. The scene reinforces the stereotype of the trans person as a sexual predator, something which Janice Raymond in her damning essay on transsexuals had warned against. Raymond cautions ‘real’ lesbian-feminists in her essay against ‘transsexually constructed lesbian feminists’ because,

All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves...Rape can also be accomplished by deception.  
(Raymond 134)

Raymond views the transsexual body as a tool of dissimulation to attain power over ‘real’ women by sabotaging their femininity and re-establishing what might be called a warped patriarchy. Raymond’s transphobia and her misdirected fears for “a small group of vulnerable women” (Riddell 157) while ignoring the overarching mechanisms of patriarchal oppression end up legitimising the very structures of oppression she goes out to undermine. Indian mainstream cinema can also be said to have harped on this fear of the trans body. While the gay/lesbian individual threatens the patriarchal foundations of the heteronormative family structure, the transgender subverts the binary of gender identity by questioning “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 651). The body of the transgender, which eludes ‘defined-ness’, further intensifies the deep-seated male anxiety of castration and emasculation, relegating the trans body to the realm of the monstrous.

The parallel between the transgender and the figure of the monster is not, of course, a recent theoretical proposition. What is unfortunate, however, is that it has been expounded most vehemently by radical feminists such as Raymond, as quoted earlier, and by Mary Daly. Daly, while alluding to Frankenstein and his monster, labels transsexualism as “necrophilic invasion”: “...it is an example of male surgical siring which invades the female world of substitutes.” (Daly 71).

The trans body trying to pass off as the gender which it was not biologically assigned at birth is grotesque and treacherous. Susan Stryker explains why this is so:

The attribution of monstrosity remains a palpable characteristic of most lesbian and gay representations of transsexuality, displaying in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism. Because transsexuality more than any other transgender practice or identity represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends... (Stryker 246)

The liminal position of the trans body and trans sexuality invokes fear and subsequently an identity crisis for patriarchal and (certain) feminist ideologies which predicate gender on fixed notions of the body, i.e., for the exponents of biological essentialism. Furthermore, the trans body, by choosing to be defined by its sexuality, a 'private' sphere of existence, rather than by other 'public' identity categories such as race, class, caste, nationality, religion or even gender—all of which are imposed and not chosen by the subject themselves—poses a direct peril to the static bastions of power by attempting to own its identity.

The societal treatment of the transgender as the deviant 'other' is reflected in contemporary Hindi cinema. The handful of Hindi films which do have transgender characters either reduce them to comic caricatures (*Hum Hai Rahi Pyaar Ke* 1993, *Raja Hindustani* 1996); or to the demonised eunuch as the embodiment of evil (in *Sadak* 1991; *Sangharsh* 1999). Yet, to read the transgender body and sexuality as oppressed and ostracised would be to delimit its potential as an agent of change. Power, as Foucault has maintained, does not always operate top down,

Power comes from below: [...] there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations and serving as a general matrix... (Foucault 63)

Power does not operate only on bodies and subjects but also through them, and thus the trans body cannot and should not be seen as a mere object of a hierarchical system on which power is exercised but also as subjects working within that system. The stereotype of the abject victim is thus no less reductive than that of the comic caricature or the evil monster.

This paper analyses four films from the last decade which depict characters that are not merely queer in their sexual preferences but are also gender non-conforming, a term which encompasses people who identify as intersex, transgender, third gender and transvestite alike.<sup>3</sup> Out of these, one was directed by renowned queer Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh—*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012)—and the other one involves him as actor and as creative director—*Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010). This second one is directed by Kaushik Ganguly whose 2018 film *Nagarkirtan*, also a part of the analysis, was dedicated to Rituparno Ghosh after his untimely death in 2013. The other film is Thyagarajan Kumararaja's Tamil film *Super Deluxe* (2019) which interweaves four overlapping narratives, one of them dealing with the story of a middle-aged transgender woman. Through the comparative study, the paper will try to explore if, and how, the representations of non-normative sexualities have changed in alternative and in regional cinema. In the process, the questions of the performativity of gender, self and identity, desire and resistance of the queer subject and queer bodies will be addressed against the backdrop of queer theory and politics in global as well as in local contexts. Finally, the paper will propose an intervention of intersectional feminism into queer theory through a primarily thematic investigation of the

four films as contemporary narratives which deal with questions of performance of the self on the one hand, and the expression of desire on the other.

### **Self as performance: *Arekti Premer Golpo* and *Chitrangada***

Cinema has played a multifaceted role in Indian society: if it operates as an ideological state apparatus, it also serves as a political tool intended to undermine structural hegemony. When *Fire* released in 1996, the members of the Shiv Sena took to the streets to protest the attack on Indian culture. The objections against the film were made on various levels: it blatantly portrayed women's desire and sexuality, it threatened the heterosexual family structure<sup>4</sup> and it scandalized Hindu middle-class morality. The opposition was thus not only on the basis of 'alien' sexuality, but also on class and religion.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the counter-protests saw the LGBT communities marching for their rights along with the women's organisations led by director Deepa Mehta to lift the ban on the film. Before this, the *Aids Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan* (ABVA) had conducted protests in Delhi against the harassment of gay men by the police (Narrain and Bhan 11), but this was probably the first time that a film, a cultural artefact, had spawned socio-political protests on questions of alternative sexuality in India. The long-drawn controversy and the different statements of the Shiv Sena protestors underscored the inextricable connection between race, class, caste, gender, sexuality and desire, thus unwittingly initiating a dialogue that contributed to the full-blown LGBTQ rights movements in India. In 2010, Bengali filmmaker Kaushik Ganguly released the film *Arekti Premer Golpo* (*Just Another Love Story*) which not only had queer characters and relationships as its central theme, but also highlighted the tensions within queer identities predicated upon class, caste, profession and so on. Featuring the late Rituparno Ghosh, the queer filmmaker and actor, *Arekti Premer Golpo* juggles the parallel narratives of a Delhi-based upper-class documentary filmmaker Abhiroop Sen and the real-life thespian Chapal

Bhaduri, the well-known *jatra*<sup>6</sup> actor and impersonator of female roles of the 1960s who plays himself<sup>7</sup> in the film. The film employs the *mise en abyme* narrative style, in which a film plays within a film, a ‘metareferential’<sup>8</sup> technique revolving around the making of a documentary on the life of Chapal Bhaduri by Abhiroop Sen. In the process, the lives of the two queer characters—one established, articulate and sophisticated and the other submissive, marginalised and dispossessed—intersect to throw light on the dynamics of power between two classes of sexual minorities. *Chitrangada—A Crowning Wish*, also an example of a metareferential film—as it is an interpretation of Tagore’s play *Chitrangada*—traces the journey of an androgynous choreographer Rudra Chatterjee in love with a troubled drug-addict Partho who almost performs sex reassignment surgery in order to adopt a child and live as a family with his lover. In *Arekti Premer Golpo*, Abhiroop is confident of his androgyny and condescendingly dismisses Chapal Bhaduri’s claims that she is a woman trapped in a man’s body. Ghosh himself had declared that “sex reassignment surgery” was pointless because it conformed to the heteronormative notions of gender. (Ghosh 240) As Aniruddha Dutta rightly points out,

...the films thus establish a *double* distancing from lower class/caste narratives of gender variance, and construct a script of gender choice and fluidity premised on bourgeois trajectories of modernisation. (Dutta 173)

Dutta contends that Ghosh’s films, instead of engaging with the intersectional categories of class, caste and gender, tend to confine notions of gender non-conformity to the understanding of the liberalised Bengali *bhadrolok*. Resistance to patriarchy is comfortably couched in drawing and dining room conversations about gender fluidity, individual identity and choice. As a result, even among sexual minorities, the gaping chasm between the different classes is exposed. For instance, when Abhiroop begins filming Chapal Bhaduri’s

life, zie is portrayed as sympathetic and protective of his filmic subject, getting infuriated when an interviewer asks him if he would be exploring Chapal Bhaduri's sexual preferences in his film. While Abhiroop's anger is righteous, he does focus on Chapal's (played by Ghosh himself in the film within the film) personal life, mostly on his relationship with other men, than his career or his contribution to Bengali theatre.

While this seems to be a commentary on the character of Abhiroop, it also turns about to be a self-reflexive comment on the film itself. The title of the film seems to be corroborating this idea. Evidently, the director Kaushik Ganguly was conscious of the film feeding the public imagination of Ghosh's identity and sexuality as was Ghosh himself when he was directing *Chitrangada*. In an interview to Kaustav Bakshi, Ghosh reveals,

Kaushik (Ganguly) had a very romantic understanding of homosexuality. I really had to bring in my 'lived' experience of the same. Therefore, as evident from the title cards, I looked after the production design of the film; and was also the creative head. Perhaps that's why the film might be mistaken as a Rituparno Ghosh film. It isn't.  
(Ghosh 244)

Ghosh was probably suggesting that in addition to a sympathetic portrayal of the queer characters, incorporating his 'lived experience' within the film's fabric would make it more authentic. However, Ghosh must have also been aware that his lived experience did not encompass that of all queer persons, such as that of Chapal Bhaduri, on account of the former's socio-economic privilege. Ghosh probably fails to take into account the other categories of identity which pre-empt solidarity among different LGBTQ communities; those of class, caste, race, religion and even profession. A commercial theatre actor like Chapal Bhaduri would not of course have access to the same cultural capital as a Rituparno Ghosh, and would therefore never have his voice heard. The unidimensional portrayal of

Chapal as oppressed and disenfranchised is indeed counterintuitive to the idea that the queer subject's 'lived experience' is necessary to authenticate one's story because in the film, Chapal is hardly given any narrative agency. When it is made clear in the film itself that the documentary is becoming a love story and that Abhiroop is merely using Chapal's life narrative to present his own story, it inevitably raises questions of the self, subjectivity and the performativity of the self. The 'conflation' of the identity of Ghosh and those of the characters in the films is probably a conscious act, and therefore 'self-reflexive'. In *Chitrangada*, when Subho, Rudra's imaginary counsellor asks if the dance drama choreographed by Rudra was becoming too 'autobiographical', the latter replies, "That's because you're in the know." (*Chitrangada*) Bakshi and Sen observe: "In Rudra's rejoinder, one might read an auto-reflexive irony directed at the audience of *Chitrangada* who has entered the theatre with extradiegetic knowledge of Ghosh's personal life and is expecting a confessional narrative" (Bakshi and Sen 210).

In the domain of cinema, self-reflexivity is construed in terms of the self-referential nature of the media. Jean-Marc Limoges differentiates between self-reflexivity and reflexivity in the following manner: "The latter [reflexivity] refer to devices that do not reveal 'the' device (i. e., the film itself), but rather 'a' device (such as, for example, a film within the film)" (Limoges 392). According to Limoges, self-reflexivity is achieved when the illusion of the diegetic autonomy of the filmic world is intended to be broken. Although neither *Arekti Premer Golpo* nor *Chitrangada* can be called cinematically self-reflexive, they contain what can be called narrative self-reflexivity owing to Ghosh's public declaration of his sexuality and the transformation in his physical appearance<sup>9</sup> when he was making these films. The illusion of the audience (that the film is a fictional product) is broken because they can immediately identify the on-screen protagonists with that of Rituparno Ghosh's off-screen persona; they no longer remain fictional characters but become cinematic extensions of

Ghosh's self. In the interview mentioned earlier, when asked if *Chitrangada* was autobiographical, he says,

Rudra contemplates sex-change, but abandons it eventually. ... he chooses to stay the way he is, reveling in his in-between-ness... That's the best way of celebrating gender fluidity. This is where Rudra is closest to myself ... the resemblance ends there. (Ghosh 241)

The marked similarity between the queer characters portrayed by Ghosh and the real-life Ghosh himself reinforces not only the performativity of gender, but also that of self. Performance is a leitmotif in both the films: Chapal is an actor who impersonates female roles on stage, and Rudra in *Chitrangada* is not only the choreographer but also plays the role of Madan in the adaptation of Tagore's dance drama in the film. Apart from the theatrical references in the films, the gender performativity of the queer subjects underscores the sexual politics of selfhood. The queer subjects project their selves through their body and their sexuality, and in this way, destabilise and defuse the boundaries between the public and the private spheres of existence. Robert A. Padgug elucidates how

Sexuality is the realm of 'nature', of the individual, and of biology; the public sphere is the realm of culture, society, and history. Finally, sexuality tends to be identified most closely with the female and the homosexual, while the public sphere is conceived of as male and heterosexual. (Padgug 23)

The queer subject, by putting up the performativity of gender and sexuality on display, undermines the dualistic notions of 'private' and 'public', 'pure' and 'impure', 'natural' and 'unnatural' upheld by the heteronormative forces. Moreover, as discussed in the introductory section, the queer subjects define their identity through their sexuality, demonstrating the inherently fluid, mutable and performative nature of the body as soon as it is released from

the social, biological and cultural language of normativity thrust upon it at the moment of its materialization. The deconstruction of the Tagorean text in *Chitrangada* subsequently leads to a deconstruction of the fixed notions of the body, gender and the construction of the self.

At the beginning of the film, Rudra interprets the play as the fulfilment of a wish: a wish that one can choose one's gender. Ghosh's collation of the transformation of *Kurupā* to *Surupā* (which happens with divine intervention) with Rudra's sex reassignment surgery (which would happen with medical assistance) underscores that the body, like all other identity categories, is always in transition. The manner in which hegemonic structures try to appropriate the body within the heteronormative discourse is also a prominent trope in the film. Unless and until Rudra biologically 'becomes' a woman, zie and Partho cannot legally adopt a child and start a heteronormative family. For the law, biological attribution of gender is essential to be accepted as male or female. On the other hand, in *Arekti Premer Golpo*, the gender-fluid Abhiroop is repeatedly identified as female. The conflict between social constructionism and biological essentialism is distinctly played out in the two films; if the first one is encountered on a daily basis, the latter is an ideological tool enforced by the state machinery to preserve the sanctity of heteronormative institutions such as marriage and family. Rudra's withdrawal from the sex-change surgery is perhaps due to Partha's refusal of hir feminised body, but the decision also signifies a self-acceptance as well as a strong resistance to the norm. If the body is mutable, so is the self, and by embracing their sexual identities as integral and inextricable part of their public selves, both Abhiroop and Rudra critique the sexual/non-sexual; public/private; nature/culture binaries upon which the self is believed to be predicated. Moreover, by refusing to be co-opted into the heterosexual duality of the self, they combat power with desire, not erotic or romantic desire which they feel for their lovers, but a different life-affirming force. Chapal, on the other hand, is not allowed to make such a political statement of resistance through hir life choices and hir journey, and

chooses to go back to live with Kumar as his domestic help despite his exploitative treatment. Yet, Chapal's narrative and the treatment of his narrative raise critical questions: does the queer self need to be publicised in order to be political? Does resistance always have to come in terms of bold iconoclasm or open activism? Can merely the public proclamation of one's sexuality be termed as radical? These are the questions raised by the next two films discussed in the paper.

### **Politicising Desire: *Nagarkirtan* and *Super Deluxe***

While visibility among queer communities has empowered some, it has also endangered others who have neither a community nor socio-cultural privilege to fall back upon, subjecting them to increased discrimination. Moreover, the demand that all queer people must feel a sense of solidarity and participate in their kind of consumerist extravaganza undercuts the very concept of 'choice' that queer politics so strongly advocates. The Australian queer comedian Hannah Gadsby wryly wonders, "Where are the quiet gays supposed to go?...The pressure on my people to express our identity and pride through the metaphor of party is very intense." Although the identity of the Western urban queer is nowhere remotely similar to that of the marginalised transgender communities in South Asian countries, the urbanisation of the queer movement in India propels similar questions: would people like Chapal Bhaduri and Puti (the transgender woman played by Riddhi Sen in *Nagarkirtan*) feel comfortable flaunting their lifestyles in the Gay Pride Parade held in the metropolitan cities? And would it be fair to denounce them as 'closeted' or as living in 'self-denial' if they chose not to? For Chapal and Puti, the ability to undergo sex reassignment surgery and become a woman would indeed come as a boon. They cannot, even if they wanted to, "revel in their in-betweenness".

Parimal<sup>10</sup> (the name that Puti is given at birth), a young boy living in a semi-urban area in Bengal, would not be familiar with the queer vocabulary of the English-speaking middle-class and upper middle-class gay men and thus would consider changing their sex to dispel the constant confusion and anxiety with one's own body and self. Although the class conflict within the queer community is not highlighted in *Nagarkirtan* or in *Super Deluxe*, both the films underline the struggles of the transgender subject in the society and even within their own community. If Parimal aka Puti shows signs of 'effeminacy' at a very young age, Manickam aka Shilpa (played by Vijay Setupathi) runs away from home and becomes a transgender even when zie is married with a grown-up son. Puti joins a ghetto of *hijras* in Kolkata, and in order to be accepted, zie has to adapt to their lifestyle, after which some of them opt for 'Nirvan' or castration, a rite of passage for most *hijras*.

The uniqueness of the *Hijra* community lies in the extraordinary blending of the biological body, gendered identity and sexuality in complex permutations and combinations within a specific social and cultural milieu. (Goel 537)

Despite the security and protection offered by the community to its individual members, life in the *hijra* community is by no means utopic. Brought up in a middle-class suburban Bengali household, the coy and shy Puti clearly faces difficulties adapting to the loud and garish lifestyle of the *hijras* of hir *dhera*<sup>11</sup> at first. Apart from the fact that they live in constant deprivation, the *hijra* community also has an inviolable power structure. If the community provides the *hijra* with security, its rigid hierarchy could also smother one's individuality and individual desires, as happens with Puti. Hir 'Guruma' Arati succinctly sums up their condition through a dark analogy:

They (people like Puti) aren't sent by anyone. They come on their own...Once the Sole fish enters the well, it doesn't go back to the river. (*Nagarkirtan*)

Once initiated within the community, it is rather difficult for the *hijra* to return to the mainstream, which underscores the stringent demarcation between the centre and the periphery. If Puti has to be tutored into ‘performing’ like a hijra, Manickam aka Shilpa’s transformation in *Super Deluxe* appears almost seamless. In a brilliantly shot scene, a balding, overweight middle-aged Manickam drapes a saree, dons a wig and magically turns into a voluptuous and beautiful middle-aged transwoman, as hir wife watches in dismay. Puti looks longingly at Madhu’s (hir male lover, played by Ritwick Chakraborty) sister-in-law while she changes her clothes, evoking a deep desire for possessing a female body.<sup>12</sup> What they experience is termed ‘gender dysphoria’ by Western medicine and biological sciences. While neither Puti nor Shilpa have access to the vocabulary of Western medical science, what they have access to is the language of desire because it is gender that predates desire, and not the other way round. And since the transperson too is not exempt from normativity; they too are affected by prevalent socio-cultural standards which associate beauty with femininity. This is further accentuated by the reaction of the men in their lives, men like Madhu who tell Puti, “Always come to me dressed...I don’t like patchwork.” (*Nagarkirtan*). *Super Deluxe*, in a similar but perverse demonstration of male sense of entitlement, shows SI Berlin telling Shilpa when he says his male name before he sexually assaults hir, “Don’t ruin my desire with a man’s name.” (*Super Deluxe*)

The illusion that these men require the transsexual women to maintain the façade of femininity in order to desire them, for consensual or non-consensual sexual acts, underscores the central argument of McKenna and Kessler’s 1978 study that for heteronormative society, gender is more of a cultural attribute based on superficial elements such as hair, clothes, and other visual markers of identity than it is a biological fact (McKenna and Kessler 297). Gender is thus presented as an illusion, a fiction to preserve normativity. Butler has famously established that:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler 44)

Although Butler's theories on the performativity of gender have broken new ground for feminism and queer theory, transgender studies scholars would contest those because they insist on the materiality of the body. Jack Halberstam elaborates on this idea in her work *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, quoting Jay Prosser:

Queer's alignment of itself with transgender performativity represents queer's sense of its own 'higher purpose,' in fact there are transgendered trajectories, in particular transsexual trajectories, that aspire to that which this scheme devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to be. (Qtd. in Halberstam 121)

For both Puti and Shilpa, the inner physicality of being female is important because it offers them a sense of self-affirmation required for self-definition and self-determination. Moreover, it is through this that they can fulfil not only their erotic desire of becoming desirable to someone else, but also of reclaiming their own body from the hegemonic systems that name them and their bodies without their consent. Sandy Stone succinctly sums up the relationship between the trans body and this nexus:

Here on the gender borders at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the faltering phallocratic hegemony and the bumptious appearance of heteroglossic origin accounts, we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived, gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body: a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type. (Stone 223)

The trans subject tenaciously hangs between the normative discourses of gender and the radical understanding of sexuality, promised liberation by both but given by none. When Puti's wig comes off during a *Kirtan* ceremony<sup>13</sup> in Nabadwip on the eve of Holi, zie runs away from Madhu and his family, unable to face the humiliation. Another group of *hijras* mistake her as an imposter trying to collect money from shopkeepers. Zie is stripped naked in public and lynched, until the police come and rescue hir. The police officer later tells Madhu how gangs of men often impersonate as eunuchs and commit crimes. The fear of intrusion into women's spaces that Janice Raymond expresses in her essay (see above), is inverted in this case as in reality, it is men who invade the *hijras'* spaces and violate their identities. The shame of public humiliation is unbearable for Puti and zie commits suicide in the police lockup. As if in response to the abuse Puti is subjected to, Madhu dresses up as Puti and goes to hir *dhera* at the end of the movie, giving up his manhood and becoming a transgender. The scene, though artistically moving, might appear politically problematic and unconvincing because of the closed nature of the *hijras'* spaces and selves. What was probably intended as a subversion of heteronormative notions of gender as fixed and permanent could signify a violation of the secure space of the *hijras*.

In *Super Deluxe*, self-assured and confident in hir body, Shilpa seems perfectly at ease until zie reveals how she had unwittingly participated in child trafficking when she was asked to drop two children at a designated place for a measly sum of money after she had run away from home. Zie is caught by a police officer who erroneously assumes that zie is sexually assaulting a child (hir son Raasukutty) in a public toilet. Despite being bigger than SI Berlin, Shilpa is forced to perform sexual acts with him in the police station in broad daylight. Without the protection of their communities, both Puti and Shilpa become vulnerable not only to enforcers of power like the police but also to the communal mistrust of

the other *hijras*. The films demonstrate how the trans body becomes an instrument as well as a site of violence, both epistemic and systemic, affirming their status as sexual subalterns.

In charting the individual journeys of Puti and Shilpa, both the films tend to evade a deeper exploration of the lives of the *hijra* communities which they belong to. Shilpa barely talks about her life in Mumbai as a *hijra*, although zie takes money from a shopkeeper as one, as if performing a magic trick for hir son. Puti treats hir community as an oppressive space quashing her individual desires, rarely acknowledging the protection they provide hir. Neither of the films shows the distinct subculture of the *hijra* communities, their coded language or their religious practices and ritualised way of life. *Nagarkirtan* sets the last part of its narrative in Nabadwip, the native land of Sri Chaitanya.<sup>14</sup> The film repeatedly employs the symbolism of Sri Chaitanya's androgynous persona perhaps to emphasise the inherent androgyny of Bengali culture, accessible to the *bhadralok*, instead of referring to the subaltern myth of the Goddess Bahuchara Mata.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Puti is never seen to adapt to the customs of the *hijra* community, and is mostly shown as disgruntled or anxious in hir *dhera*, while more at ease with Madhu and his family. Both Puti's and Shilpa's decisions to leave their families behind and then again leave their 'adopted' family, their respective *hijra* communities behind, highlight their status both as victims and as users of the same power that exploits them.

Therefore, it would be simplistic to perceive sexual subalterns such as *hijras* and *kothis* always as helpless subjects at the receiving end of the power spectrum. The term "sexual subaltern" was probably introduced by Kapur in her article on sexual minorities and the law in India:

The term sexual subaltern is at one level intended to capture the extraordinary range and diversity of the counter-heteronormative movement...The subaltern subject is not simply a member of a minority group. By virtue of her subaltern location and

performance in a postcolonial space, the subaltern subject resists the assimilative gestures of the imperial and liberal project. (Kapur 38)

It should not be assumed that transgender subjects like Puti opt for sex reassignment surgeries because they do not have a choice; on the contrary, the choice to live as a *hijra* or the choice to undergo surgery and change one's gender is self-assertion that automatically becomes a political statement against the mechanisms that suppress desire. Shilpa dramatically puts a death curse on Berlin like a traditional *hijra*, which comically comes true later. Yet this is not the only so-called agency Shilpa is shown to have. Hir act of leaving hir family behind, especially hir son, is portrayed as selfish and inconsiderate. After zie finds Raasukutty at home, zie asks him why he had run away and says "Did you even think of the trauma I would go through?" and he replies, "That's exactly what we have been suffering, asshole!... Be a man or be a woman, just be with us, damn it!" and hir wife Jyothi says, "Did you think only your life was difficult?" (*Super Deluxe*) stressing on her condition as a woman abandoned by her husband. *Supr Deluxe* captures the complex dynamics between a subject, in this case a sexual subaltern subject, and the hegemonic structures which shape its subjectivity. Oblivious to the trauma inflicted on hir wife and son, Manickam finds himself in a similar position to that of other men who abandon their families for other women or for selfish reasons. The narrative thus endows Manickam aka Shilpa with agency where zie thought zie had none.

Nevertheless, empowerment of the trans subject remains a polemical subject that requires intersectional intervention. Western scholarship on transgender subjectivity is more attuned towards the brand of revolutionary gender non-conformity propounded by the likes of Rituparno Ghosh. In her rejoinder to Janice Raymond's article, Sandy Stone argues that

The transsexuals must take the step of problematizing the concept of the ‘wrong body.

Under the binary phallocratic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized, only one body per gendered subject is right. (Stone 232)

However, while publicly acknowledging one’s gender fluidity is one form of resistance, combating social forces to negate biological determinism and social constructionism is no less an act of subversion. Puti compares the disparity between her desire and her reality as an error of calculation, whereas Shilpa calls it divine oversight. For both, it is something that can be fixed, a wrong that needs to be righted. The films show how sexual subalterns like Puti strongly desire either to erase their past or to live closeted lives to escape social stigma and ostracism. Despite the introduction of the transgender bill<sup>16</sup> and the inclusion of the ‘third gender’ as a category, the Indian society still has a long way to go as far as social acceptance of transsexuals is concerned.

By engaging with the diverse lived experiences of queer subjects, the films illustrate the various ways in which they negotiate with their identity in a society that is still latching on to the gender binary as absolute and non-negotiable. Even within the LGBTQ movement, the *hijras* occupy a liminal space because of the barriers of class, caste and language. Instead of universalizing the experience of the trans body and presuming the ‘appropriate’ ways of resistance, the queer movement in India should focus on studying and theorising the lived experiences of the peripheral transgender communities and individual subjects by engaging in multiple dialogues over extended periods of time. The transgender body is ‘akin to the ‘inappropriate/d other’, which according to Donna Haraway means,

to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality-as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination. To be inappropriate/d is...not to be originally fixed by difference. (Haraway 2004: 69)

On the one hand, Haraway's notion of the cyborg and the monster representing the non-essentialised world of synthesis between animal and machines shows promise for transgender studies and its attempts to debunk the problematic dualisms of heteronormative society, but on the other, Haraway's "utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender" (32) tends to ignore the material conditions of class, caste, religion and other identity politics that shape the subjectivity of queer individuals in the global south. Susan Stryker's reclamation of the 'monstrous' perhaps offers a more enabling approach to queer studies owing to its emphasis on the trans body and trans rage as the armour as well as the weapon against the machinations of the social cohorts rallying against transgenderism. Stryker appeals to all transsexuals to wrest their selves and their identities from the medico-legal and state apparatus and become like the Frankensteinian monster with an independent individuality (Stryker 251). Stryker's work could serve as an excellent entry point into transgender studies in India. What is required therefore is a coalition between intersectional feminism and queer theory to address the specific subjectivities in different societies and communities. Though a lot still remains to be done, by foregrounding the body and sexuality as essential identity categories, these films attempt to redefine ways of negotiating identity and subjectivity beyond the given parameters of heteronormativity. They also situate global queer politics within the local sites and queer identities in individual contexts to throw light upon the lesser known sexual minorities of the world.

### **Notes**

1. The usage of the term 'transgender' in this paper is similar to Stryker's in her essay 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein'. Stryker uses it "as an umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries." See works cited for reference.

2. The *hijras* are a sexual minority community living in the margins of mainstream cities. The term *hijra* is used as an umbrella term to refer to the institutionalised ‘third gender’ in India. The English term for them was ‘eunuch’, but human rights activists have included them within the category of ‘transgenders’. *Kothi* is a term used across southern India to refer to MSM who take a feminine role and impersonate women in public events such as theatres, dances etc.
3. The paper uses the term ‘queer’ to refer to non-normative sexualities and politics, and does not intend to homogenise the lives and experiences of sexual minorities. The paper argues against such universalisation of ideas and politics, and believes in a more individualised and inclusive understanding of queer politics.
4. Shiv Sena member Mina Kulkarani had remarked: “If women’s physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, reproduction of human beings will stop.” (Qtd. in Mehra, Joseph and Menezes)
5. Then Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray commented that if the names of the women were changed from Radha and Sita to Muslim names, he would withdraw his objections.
6. *Jatra* is a folk theatre form popular in Bengal, Odisha and other parts of the Indian subcontinent such as Bangladesh. Chapal Bhaduri was a renowned *jatra* performer who played many legendary female roles at a time when women were allowed to perform in theatres.
7. The paper uses the pronouns ‘zie’ and ‘hir’ to designate the gender non-binary individuals. See, Anon., ‘The Need for a Gender Neutral Pronoun. The Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog or The Search for a Polite Specific Gender-Neutral Third-Person Singular Pronoun.’
8. Wolf describes metareference as a transmedial phenomenon, and uses the term ‘metareferentiality’ as “a heuristically motivated umbrella term for all meta-phenomena occurring in the media.” See Wolf.
9. Rituparno Ghosh had publicly declared himself as ‘third gender’ by the first decade of 2000 and embraced his androgyny through his sartorial choices. See his 2010 interview in *The*

*Telegraph*, Anon. 'I don't want to become a woman.' *The Telegraph online*. Published 22.12.2010, 12 AM.

10. The name 'Parimal' is shortened to a female name Pari meaning fairy. Chakraborty's *Holde Golap* is probably the first novel in Bengal language that extensively documents the lives of the marginalised sexual minorities and also genderqueer people from different socio-economic backgrounds.
11. The spaces inhabited by *hijras* have various names like *dheras*, *mahallas* or *gharanas*, according to their culture. See Mal and Mundu.
12. In *Holde Golap* (Yellow Rose) Swapnamoy Chakraborty relates the experience of a young gay boy, perhaps inspired by the scene in *The Danish Girl*, looking at himself in the mirror and concealing his penis between his legs to feel like a 'real' woman.
13. See note 14 below.
14. Sri Chaitanya was a 15<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali saint born in Nabadwip, Nadia district of Bengal, whom many consider to be an incarnation of Lord Krishna. He was the founder of Gaudiya Vashnavism, a religious movement which propagated equality and harmony among all individuals and communities, opposing the casteist and hierarchical nature of Brahminism. He introduced the *Kirtan* tradition of singing and dancing in public places and streets as a way of worshipping Lord Krishna, and his movement formed a part of the bigger Bhakti and Sufi traditions that had swept large parts of South Asia at that time. In *Arekti Premer Golpo*, Rituparno Ghosh's character Abhiroop calls him the epitome of the cultural androgyny of this country due to the belief that he was the synthesis of Radha and Krishna, the male lover and the female beloved. See <http://jagadanandadas.blogspot.com/2007/02/chaitanya-mahaprabhu-and-androgyny.html>
15. Bahuchara Mata is a female deity, an incarnation of Goddess Sakti, and the patroness of the hijra community. In most of the legends, she appears as an empowered figure who either castrates men who abuse her or identify impotent men and command them to serve her. Her temple is located in Gujarat.

16. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights Act) 2019 fails to take into account the demands of the queer community such as the right of the transgender person to declare their self-determined gender identity without undergoing sex reassignment surgery, and reservations in jobs and educational institutions.

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