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Representation of Alternative Sexuality in Bollywood: Performance, Appearance, and the Body

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Abstract

Hijras, considered to be a third gender, are the gender minority group of India, epitomised as a pessimistic emblem in Bollywood movies that misinterpret their identity and present them for the sake of comic relief or as villains. This paper examines the representation of alternative sexuality 'hijra' in the Bollywood movie *Laxmii* (2020). Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity' is applied, as it does not indicate any specific identity but addresses the performative nature of gender. Talia Bettcher's 'wrong body' concept helps to formulate the hijras idea of dwelling in the 'wrong body' through performance, appearance and body.

Keywords: Hijra, Bollywood, Laxmii, movie, performativity, wrong body

Introduction

The Bollywood industry, as India's major media organisation, serves a significant part in establishing and delineating paradoxes such as 'traditional/modern,' 'global/local,' 'western/eastern,' and categories like 'culture,' 'nation,' and 'Indian.'[1] Outside of India, the phrase 'popular Indian cinema' primarily alludes to Bombay-produced Hindi movies or Bollywood movies. The hallmarks of popular Hindi cinema are song-and-dance, dramatisation, opulent production budgets, and reliance on superstars and extravaganza. A conventional Bollywood movie commences with an adolescent storyline wherein the hero is passionately in love with the heroine; the pair subsequently encounters a slew of impediments that make their reunion improbable; nonetheless, real love ultimately prevails, and the movie culminates with a happy ending.[2] The storyline often features father-son disputes and intense mother-son connections, imitating oedipal concepts. For instance, 'noble' and 'sexual' female representations are segregated, resulting in 'the Madonna–Prostitute division,' which is ubiquitous in the Oedipal complex of the patriarchal psyche.[3]

[1] Tejaswini Ganti, 'And Yet My Heart Is Still Indian: The Bombay Film Industry and the (H)Indianization of Hollywood,' in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, ed. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (University of California Press, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520928169-017.

[2] Govind Nihalani Gulzar and Saibal Chatterjee, eds, *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema* (Encyclopaedia Britannica India Pvt. Ltd., 2003).

[3] Sigmund Freud, 'A special type of object choice made by men,' *Standard Edition* 11 (1910); 'On the universal tendency to debasement in sphere of love,' *Standard Edition* 11 (1912).

However, Bollywood movies recently have veered away from these stereotypical representations of good (noble) versus sensual (bad) woman, wealthy hero-poor heroine, family and society, and have instead opted to address unconventional and off-beat themes like selfhood, gender, desire, and sexuality. Indian movies assist in alleviating people's cognitive anxieties and might be regarded as 'addictive defence' against adversities as Bollywood movies are the perennial repository of enjoyment, instruction, and motivation to wider audiences in India and abroad.[4] Therefore, as Bollywood movies cover a broad spectrum, we may deduce that their representation of societal stigmas significantly influences the audiences' minds. For instance, in an interview with the *Media India Group* in 2021, Rahul Das, a 26-year-old transgender model, asserts that 'growing up in the late 1990s and 2000s as an Indian child who loved mainstream movies was an enigmatic experience—because the popular culture I ingested provided me certain distorted perspectives about gender and sexuality.'[5] Movies may be observed as 'cultural reservoir[s]' that mirror whatever is 'taken for granted' in the societies, as Gavin Cape asserts.[6] As a result, the movie industry may be an effective instrument for exploring and analysing social issues, prejudices, fallacies, and gendered subjects. For instance, the Bollywood movie *Laxmii* released in 2020,[7] illustrates the life and plight of the Indian alternative sexuality (*hijra*)—a film in which gender performativity and the trauma of dwelling in the wrong body can be discerned and understood. Two disconcerting polarities of representation render their way into numerous Bollywood movies featuring a transgender person, even in minor roles. Either the trans person is a terrifying monster or the weirdest sort of comedic cliché, subjugated to transphobic parody. Even Mahesh Bhatt's immensely acclaimed movie *Sadak* (Road) features one of the most brutal horrific images of a transgender in the portrayal of Maharani (queen), an unscrupulous brothel owner who torments and traffics adolescent women.[8] There is a consistent reiteration of the ugliest detrimental misconceptions and stereotypes aligned with the hijra (Indian trans) community in a movie where the trans character receives considerable onscreen presence. However, it clings to the stigma and condemnation against hijra that has, to date, been difficult to shrug off. Regrettably, *Laxmii* is the latest in a protracted sequence of Bollywood movies that have added to a gross misrepresentation of this community. Hence, this article incorporates the concept of space, Judith Butler's performativity and Talia Bettcher's wrong body to critically analyse and comprehend the representation of the alternative sexuality of the Indian Transgender, that is, hijra in the Bollywood movie *Laxmii*. The study explores the performance, appearance and body of a hijra who is neither male nor

[4] Salman Akhtar and Komal Choksi, 'Bollywood and the Indian Unconscious,' in *Freud Along the Ganges: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the People and Culture of India,* ed. Salman Akhtar (Other Press, 2005).

[5] Richa Nigam, 'Trans Representation in Indian Cinema,' *Media India Group,* 8 Jan. 2021, https://mediaindia.eu/cinema/trans-representation-in-indian-cinema/.

[6] Gavin Cape, 'Addiction, Stigma and Films,' *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 107, no. 3 (2003), 167, https://doi.org/10.1034/j.1600-0447.2003.00075.x.

[7] Raghava Lawrence, Director, *Laxmii* (Fox Star Studios, 2020), 2hr 21min.

[8] Mahesh Bhatt, Director, *Sadak* (Vishesh Films, 1991), 2hr 14min.

female,[9] described as 'India's third gender'[10] and 'the oldest transgender community'[11] in the world—thus extending Judith Butler's assertion that gender is a cultural construct.

The term transgender concentrates a wide variety of 'gender variant people including transsexuals, cross-dressers, and drag queens.'[12] It also applies to people who reside indefinitely in a gender that is 'opposite' to their biological sex. Transgender 'Male-to-female (MtF) people in India are highly heterogeneous in terms of their self-identities, social structure, and subculture-specific practices and norms.'[13] Hijra's identification may be analogous to that of transsexuals in the West, with many proclaiming to have been born with the wrong sex in the wrong body. Therefore, the identity of hijra leads to unacceptance and violence, first at home and later by society. Hence, in this study the term 'transgender' applies to those individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex assigned at birth. For instance, this can include those born as male but transformed into female not only through surgery or hormonal therapy but through the adoption and performance of feminine traits and behaviours. Therefore, the usage of the term transgender in this research article refers to the Indian hijras, who are defined in the Indian judicial system as transgender or trans-women.

To understand the identity of hijra, it is imperative to locate them in the framework of India's broader transgender community. They are often considered to be 'man-bodied' persons who have their male genitals surgically removed as a sacrifice to the Hindu deity *Bahuchara Mata*, an ancient Hindu goddess especially connected with gender liminality, who is their protector and spiritual guide.[14] In Hinduism and Islam, there exist alternative or liminal gender roles. Despite the fact that both religions believe 'males and females are in complementary opposition in terms of anatomy, sexuality, and culturally acceptable roles,' yet they have established a space for a plethora of sex/genders. Hijras identify themselves with Hindu *sanyasis*, or hermits, who abstain from all sexual desire and conduct. They are conferred with the capacity to bestow fertility to others in exchange for this sacrifice, a power connected with the Hindu deity Shiva (God of death and unprecedented wrath) or *Ardhanareswara* (half man and half woman). *Hindu*, *Buddhist*, and *Jain* texts, as well as *Indian Epics* such as the *Mahabharata,* the *Ramayana, and* the *Puranas* document a 3,000-year

[9] Adnan Hossain and Serena Nanda, 'Globalization and change among the hijras of South Asia,' in *Trans Lives in a Globalizing World: Rights, Identities and Politics*, ed. Michael Ryan (Routledge, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201783-3.

[10] Sara Hylton, Jeffrey Gettleman and Eve Lyons, 'The Peculiar Position of India's Third Gender,' *The New York Times*, 17 Feb. 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/style/india-third-gender-hijras-transgender.html.

[11] Nick Francis, Claudine Spera, Liz Ford, and Jessica Edwards, 'Being Laxmi: I Belong to the Hijra, the Oldest Transgender Community,' *The Guardian*, 15 Sep. 2015. www.theguardian.com/globaldevelopment/video/2015/sep/03/being-laxmi-narayan-tripathi-hijra-india-transgender-community-video.

[12] Talia Bettcher, 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,' *Signs* 39, no. 2 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1086/673088.

[13] Gurvinder Kalra, 'The unique transgender culture of India,' *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health* 5, no. 2 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2011.570915; Serena Nanda, 'The Hijras of India,' *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, no. 3 (1986), https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v11n03_03.

[14] Jennifer Ung Loh, 'Narrating Identity: The Employment of Mythological and Literary Narratives in Identity Formation Among the Hijras of India,' *Religion and Gender* 4, no. 1 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-00401003.

history of third sex/gender acceptance in India.[15] As documented in mythologies and traditions connected with the hijra community, they have been a part of Indian cultural heritage since time immemorial. In contradiction to the contemporary western cultural and religious concept of an exclusionary binary sex/gender paradigm, Hinduism has celebrated the idea that the universe is endlessly diversified and all possibilities may exist without excluding one another.[16] However, after the arrival of colonial rule in India, things changed and hijras were treated as criminals. To the British, the hijras were an anarchic population that constituted a threat to colonial rule. Hence, a law (Section 377) that criminalised hijras was enacted by the colonial authority in 1871 with the explicit intent of 'exterminating' hijras.[17] This law was recently overturned by the Indian Supreme Court in 2018, thus decriminalising hijras.

Hence, acceptance by society is imperative for the betterment and upgradation of the Hijra community. Movies on injustice, discrimination and unacceptance of the hijra community have significant scope to reach a larger section of the population. Therefore, while writings, documentaries, and movies concerning the hijra community might enable common individuals to approbate them with deference, and acceptance, more harm and prejudice are brought to the community due to unrealistic and barbaric representations in Bollywood movies.

The primary objective of this study is to reconnoitre and analyse the representation of Laxmii's performance, appearance, and wrong body concept in the 2020 Bollywood movie *Laxmii*, which was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic when hijras were straining to satiate their essential requirements.

Representation of Hijras in Bollywood movies

Due to their gender non-conforming status, hijras endure discrimination, economic marginalisation, poor lodgings, threats to their personal safety and medical assistance. Hence, they are compelled to live by begging and sex work. They are subjected to assaults from bystanders and even the cops, who frequently acknowledge them as perpetrators of theft or violence. Moreover, they seem to be the target of a pervasive practice of police violence, sexual and other forms of assault, and extortion. Only a few Bollywood movies have endeavoured to portray the hijra persona and their narratives of suffering and resilience. For instance, hijras were represented as protectors or courtiers of princesses and courtesans in the movies *Umrao Jaan* and *Jodhaa Akbar*.[18] Their presence ensured that women were protected against forced sexual encounters.

Tamanna (Desire) associates with a true narrative of hijra life, who raises an abandoned girl child.[19] *Darmiyaan* (In Between) demonstrates the sensitive aspect of hijras, attempting to

[15] Rekha Pande, 'Being Eunuch, the Violence Faced by Hijra's Involved in Sex Work—A Case Study,' in *Marginalities in India*, ed. Asmita Bhattacharyya and Sudeep Basu (Springer, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5215-6_15.

[16] Hossain and Nanda, 'Globalization and change among the hijras of South Asia,' 36.

[17] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 33.

[18] Muzaffar Ali, Director, *Umrao Jaan* (Integrated Films S. K. Jain & Sons, 1981), 2hr 25min; Ashutosh Gowariker, Director, *Jodhaa Akbar* (UTV Motion Pictures, 2008), 3hr 33min.

[19] Mahesh Bhatt, Director, *Tamanna* (Pooja Bhatt Productions, 1997). 2hr 28min.

move the spectator by evoking sympathy.[20] This movie illustrates a mother's affection for her hijra son Immi and her unwillingness to relinquish the child to the hijra community. *Shabnam Mousi*, another real-life based movie, deconstructs the mainstream myth that hijra can survive only by begging, badhai or sex work. It advocates that hijra can achieve significant positions like Shabnam Mousi, who served as an elected member of the Madhya Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1998 to 2003.[21] The political success and then murder of Munni, a hijra who contested an election for village Sarpanch is well documented in *Welcome to Sajjanpur* through the song *Aadami aazad hai* (Man is free), represents the hatred and violence hijra confronts in society.[22] The hijra murder is evident as late as 2021, in the case of Sumana Dhar, a trans activist, who was assassinated by four youths on a motorcycle in West Bengal as a result of transphobia and 'sends disturbing signals to the community'[23] as affirmed by popular media. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a famous hijra asserted in her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* that 'a hijra's death, nay murder; didn't seem to matter anyone.'[24] In fact, Revathi, in *The Truth about Me,* stated that there are no safe spaces for non-binary at home or outside recalling an incident when her brother thrashed her until her, 'skull cracked and there was blood all over, flowing warm.'[25]

The hijra community has long been on the periphery of civilization, surviving in abysmal destitution due to unacceptance by family and society. Devoid of fundamental human rights such as equality, education, healthcare, and shelter, they are prohibited from surviving with respect, hence subjected to transphobia and hate crimes that include severe physiological, sexual, and psychological assaults. It has been deduced from contemporary hijra literature, narratives, documentaries, and movies that hijra people battle psychologically to comprehend their sexuality outside binary from childhood. In this process, they are susceptible to physical violence (rape) by relatives and other men in school and society. As a consequence, they refuse to attend school and either escape from home or are discarded by their families, hence they survive by begging or sex work.

The misrepresentations of the portrayal of hijra in popular Bollywood movies add extra to the prejudice and discrimination they have been battling throughout their lives. In *Sadak* and *Murder2*[26] hijras were represented as the cruellest villains, serial killers and psychopaths engaged in sex trafficking. A hijra is sentenced to imprisonment in *Rajjo*, for chopping the genitalia of a man who unlawfully seized her brothel.[27] In these movies, hijras are represented as caricatures, experiencing catastrophic poverty and afflictions, and they appear in sequences designed to make the audience laugh. This representational technique also promotes a truncated portrayal of hijras, undermining their sentiments. Movies like *Soorma Bhopali*, *Maine Pyar Kiya*, *Masti*, *Nayak* illustrate the depiction of hijras in

[20] Kalpana Lajmi, Director, *Darmiyaan: In Between* (Pan Pictures, 1997), 2hr 8 min.

[21] Yogesh Bhardwaj, Director, *Shabnam Mousi* (2005), 2hr 30min.

[22] Shyam Benegal, Director, *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (Faces Pictures UTV Spotboy Bindass, 2008), 2hr 13min.

[23] Correspondent, O. S, 'Transgender activist gunned down outside Nimta home,' *The Telegraph*, 3 Aug. 2021, https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/calcutta/transgender-activist-gunned-down-outside-nimta-home/cid/1825014.

[24] Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 57.

[25] A. Revathi, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (Penguin, 2010), 55.

[26] Mohit Suri, Director, *Murder2* (Eros International, 2011), 2hr 7 min.

[27] Vishwas Patil, Director, *Rajjo* (Four Pillars Entertainment, 2013), 2hr 7 min.

exaggerated feminine roles with a trace of blatant masculinity.[28] Hijras' performances are hysterically exaggerated female impersonations, as Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms point out. Their entertainment appeal originates from the difference between themselves playing as women and the real women they imitate.[29] Drag performers function and performance in the West might be aligned to hijra. Drag queens perform in private social locations such as clubs and bars, whereas hijras perform in conventional socio-cultural settings. 'Drag queens and hijras both minimize gender to a philosophical construct, what one performs rather than what one is!'[30] Hence, through the 'repeated performance' of self as a female who is imprisoned in the erroneous body of a male, Laxmii demonstrates the evidence of incongruity between the body and mind that illustrates 'the wrong body concept' leading to violence and transphobia. Therefore, hijra deserves equitable representation in the Bollywood scenes that have misconstrued their identity and shaped them as vicious villains for the primary purpose of cheap laughs and reinforcing the status of the protagonist.

Laxmii: A case study

Laxmii is a horror comic Bollywood movie directed by Raghava Lawrence and a remake of the Tamil movie *Kanchana*[31] released amid the COVID 19 pandemic. The remake of South Indian movies is a trend that most filmmakers experiment with and adopt because the film has previously succeeded with a particular group of viewers; therefore, such movies are considered to have a higher possibility of success with Hindi cinema viewers. *Laxmii* was scheduled to be released in theatres, however, due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, the filmmakers opted for the digital release (Disney+ Hotstar) to reach wider audiences.[32] But even before its release, a boycott on the movie was called due to its initial title *Laxmii Bomb* which is relatable to the Hindu Goddess *Laxmi*, the Goddess of wealth, fortune, and power.[33] However, according to a Google Trends survey in 2020, it ranked sixth on the list of the most googled movies in India (Maru), and on the streaming platform Disney+ Hotstar, it became the most-watched due to extensive advertising and marketing prior to its debut.[34] Even though Bloomberg's *Quint* rated this movie half out of 5, stating it is a brainless comedy that undermines the credibility of the optimum things it professes to be commemorating. *News*

[28] Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed Jaffrey, Director, *Soorma Bhopali* (J. N. Entertainers, 1988). 2hr 30 min; Sooraj Barjatiya, Director, *Maine Pyar Kiya* (Rajshri Productions, 1989), 3hr 12min; Indra Kumar, Director, *Masti* (Maruti International, 2004), 2hr 46 min; S Shankar, Director, *Nayak* (Sri Surya Movies, 2002), 3hr 7min.

[29] Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms, *Cultural Anthropology,* 10th ed. (Cengage Learning, 2010), 75.

[30] Sandeep Bakshi, 'Comparative Analysis of Hijras and Drag Queens: The Subversive Possibilities and Limits of Parading Effeminacy and Negotiating Masculinity,' *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3 (2004), https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v46n03_13.

[31] Raghava Lawrence, Director, *Kanchana* (Raghavendra Productions, 2011), 2hr 40min.

[32] Divyanshi Sharma, 'When is Laxmmi Bomb Releasing on Disney+Hotstar? Akshay Kumar Wants You to Keep the Popcorn Ready,' *India Today*, 2 Oct. 2020, www.indiatoday.in/binge-watch/story/when-is-laxmmi-bomb-releasing-on-disney-hotstar-akshay-kumar-wants-you-to-keep-the-popcorn-ready-1727699-2020-10-02.

[33] Meenketan Jha, and Oscar Holland, '"Laxmii" Critics Say Bollywood Blockbuster Offers a Problematic Transgender Portrayal,' *CNN,* 13 Nov. 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/laxmii-bollywood-film-transgender/index.html.

[34] Entertainment, Quint, 'Akshay's Laxmii Breaks Viewership Record, Beats Dil Bechara.' *TheQuint*, 11 Nov. 2020, https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/bollywood/akshays-laxmii-breaks-viewership-record-on-disneyhotstar-beats-dil-bechara.

Bytes' Niraj, in 2020, stated that on IMDb, the movie received a '2.2 out of 10-star rating, claiming *Laxmii* is one of Bollywood's worst movies in recent years.'[35] As per the research by Stutee Ghosh in 2020, it is 'neither entertaining nor inspirational, but a nightmare.'[36] The movie fails to represent the prejudice endured by the hijra community in India and their struggles in mainstream society by paving the way for a supernatural ghost story. Though the movie concerns transgender people, the filmmakers did not cast any trans actors for the role of Laxmii. Both actress and activist Vidya, and the hijra community question 'why they couldn't recruit a trans woman for a lead role?.'[37] In Desk Entertainment, Abhishek Kapoor, a filmmaker asserts that 'since fans are captivated and expect to watch popular actors on the big screen, we cast big stars in order to address the story to a wider audience.'[38] Discrimination and lack of career opportunities in the glamour industry lead to a barbarous situation that might dissuade trans individuals from acting. Though Bollywood represented hijras in its movies by using cisgender actors, they miserably failed to provide the trans actors with career opportunities.

Laxmii 'supports Islamophobia and transphobia at the same moment,' remarks Rahul Desai, a film reviewer as the narrative condones a *love jihad*—the religious conversion of a Hindu girl to marry a Muslim for the sake of love in India.[39] Asif, a Muslim protagonist portrayed by Akshay Kumar, elopes and marries Rashmi, a Hindu girl leading to their parents' disapproval and later acceptance. The movie then turns towards asserting that supernatural power exists in hijra leading to transphobia and asserting the claims that hijras possess both masculine and feminine identities and have 'the strength of five men' as Devdutt Pattnaik stated to CNN. Asif, who is sceptical of paranormal powers, is subsequently possessed by the ghost of Laxmii, who penetrates and dwells in Asif's body. In this procedure, he acquires feminine attributes such as donning a sari and bangles, applying make-up, kajal, bindi, and so on. Asif's family is petrified and bewildered by the predicament and consults an exorcist to purge the ghost from his body. Later, the spirit divulges that she is a hijra who was ostracised by her family and deprived of education, employment, and social acceptance. Somehow, she bought a plot to construct a hospital for transgender people that was fraudulently seized by a politician Girija, who barbarically murdered Laxmii and her non-biological family, that is her hijra clan when she confronted him. Hence, the ghost Laxmii proclaims herself a hijra and vows to avenge her death.

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[35] Shruti Niraj, 'Akshay Kumar's "Laxmii" Flooded with 1-Star Rating on IMDb,' *News Bytes*, 13 Nov. 2020. https://www.newsbytesapp.com/news/entertainment/akshay-kumar-s-laxmii-receives-2-2-rating-on-imdb/story

[36] Stutee Ghosh, 'Laxmii Review: Akshay Kumar's "Laxmii" is the Worst Film of 2020,' *The Quint*, 10 Nov. 2020, https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/movie-reviews/laxmii-film-review-akshay-kumar-kiara-advani-kanchana-bollywood-laxmmi-bomb.

[37] Meenketan Jha and Oscar Holland, 'Laxmii Critics Say Bollywood Blockbuster Offers a Problematic Transgender Portrayal,' *CNN,* 13 Nov. 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/laxmii-bollywood-film-transgender/index.html..

[38] Entertainment Desk, 'Abhishek Kapoor Talks about Not Casting Transgender Actor in Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui: "This Fascination Is Incorrect,"' *Hindustan Times,* 11 Dec. 2021. www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/abhishek-kapoor-talks-about-not-casting-transgender-actor-in-chandigarh-kare-aashiqui-this-fascination-is-incorrect-101639223441854.html.

[39] Jha and Holland, 'Laxmii Critics Say Bollywood Blockbuster Offers a Problematic Transgender Portrayal.'

Nevertheless, Asif deconstructs the belief of his folks in supernatural occurrences in the beginning scene, which gradually switches from rational to irrational. A tantric in order to affirm an evil spirit has possessed a woman's body, performs a gimmick to deceive the crowd by turning transparent water red and demonstrating with a handful of ash from an empty aluminium vessel. Asif intervenes and verifies both strategies practically, for instance, aluminium reacts with mercury chloride to form an aluminium amalgam, hence, ash is the amalgam, and methyl orange when reacted with acidic water turns red. Therefore, he emerges a hero, discarding supernatural existence and declaring, 'If I see a ghost, I will wear bangles,' representing the prevalent sexist stereotypical notions that bangles are the emblems of feminine fragility in north India.

Laxmii eventually proclaims that the spectators believe that the rationalist is mistaken, superstition is reasonable, and that supernatural powers exist. Asif is possessed by Laxmii's spirit and begins to act bizarrely, disregarding society's binary conventions when he wears a sari and bangles, applies turmeric, and walks like a woman. The hijra spirit emerges to the family, vowing revenge on her assassins and then departing from Asif's body paving the way to 'hyperreality'[40] that comprises more than simply confusing or merging the real with the unreal or illusion to represent an unrealistic concept in the movie. However, we analyse Laxmii's performance, appearance, and body to construct and deconstruct the stereotypical myth related to the hijra.

Performance, appearance, and the body in *Laxmii*

In this movie two characters perform as hijra: one is Laxmii, who immaculately performs her part, and the other is Asif, who is possessed by Laxmii's ghost and plays his part. The movie demonstrates the hijra character in a petrified form, starring a cisgender that impersonates a trans character through cross-dressing. 'Cross-dressing has a longstanding heritage in both East and West that reveals gender by performance.'[41] In accordance with the above assertion, we contend that Laxmii has remained hijra in the audience's eye since her appearance in the movie. She reveals her gender identification to the audience by performance, appearance, and even through her body—for instance, loud clapping with two hands, swaying hips while walking, being seated with legs crossed in a fashionable manner all mark her performance. Donning glittering saris, applying excessively smeared make-up, bindi, kajal, and bangles states her appearance; and her masculine physical features, deep voice, facial hair, wrapped in feminine clothes exposes her body.

Bernice Hausman in 1999 affirms that the body is a tangible signifier, hence 'a reflection of identity.'[42] As the body does not fit into the gendered clothes, mainstream society uses derogatory statements like 'are your breasts real?' and calls them 'fake women,' which leads to transphobia and violence.[43] Nicholas Mirzoeff in *An Introduction to Visual*

[40] Eugene L. Arva, 'Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1: (2008), https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.0.0002.

[41] John Philips, *Transgender on screen* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 51.

[42] Bernice Hausman, 'Virtual Sex, Real Gender: Body and Identity in Transgender Discourse' in *Virtual Gender: Fantasies of Subjectivity and Embodiment*, ed. Mary Ann O'Farrell and Lynne. Vallone (University of Michigan Press, 1999), 191.

[43] A. Revathi, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (Penguin, 2010), 211.

Culture states those 'who could be observed could be controlled.'[44] In 2014, Vikramaditya Sahai remarks on hijras' bodies by stating that 'bodies are bodies only as much as they are intelligible to the norms of recognition, i.e., the body must conform to the norm of the body else it is not recognized as a body.'[45] Hence, the hypervisible androgynous body of the hijra becomes a convenient aim for legitimising one's masculinity: violence and aggression are always 'the single most marker of manhood' (Kimmel 150). To date, we have come across different narratives of hijra who faced extreme violence by the mainstream people. For instance, A. Revathi, in her autobiography '*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*' states her struggle in search of her identity. The violence starts at home and then in society and perturbs hijra physically and psychologically. The violence at home was stated by Revathi, when she was beaten by her brother. The same incident of verbal, physical and psychological abuses occurred with Laxmii. Laxmii was mercilessly beaten and verbally abused by her father for appearing feminine. Her repetitive proclamations that 'I am a woman trapped in the wrong body,' accentuate her desire to become a hijra. She performs hijra in multiple ways, for instance, she dons feminine attire, desperately desires to talk and behave like women and be referred to with a feminine pronoun repeatedly. Hence, recitation is a discursive process that lays the foundation for identity construction. As a result, the identity is repetitively constructed, and repetition and performativity perpetuate in the need to be recognised.

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble,* asserts 'performativity must be understood not as a singular act, but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'[46] The concept of 'performativity' was introduced by J.L. Austin, a language philosopher, during a lecture sequence at Oxford and Harvard. He further classified language between 'constative' or 'perlocutionary' actions and 'performative' or 'illocutionary' actions. He described 'constative' as 'statements and affirmations concerned with presumed facts about specific events that might not be real' and 'performative' as utterances that concentrate on performing/doing instead of elucidating[47] through articulation. The 'performative' component of language is represented by the action done in the articulation processes. Therefore Judith Butler, applied this performativity to gender. Hijras are considered to be a subgroup of transgender identity or a community that embraces hybridised gender identity. 'The experience of a person as a man, woman, neither, or in between, has been regarded as gender identity.'[48] 'Transgender identity as a "gender" identity is conceptually separated from "sexual" identities, such as MSM (male having sex with male).'[49] Laxmii was biologically born male, but carried the attributes of a woman, hence contradicting the gender she chooses and the sex, she is born with. Judith Butler affirms that, like gender, sex is a culturally formed normative conception possessing prescriptive and proscriptive traits. She utilises this to argue that the dichotomy between sex and gender is insignificant, pointing out 'perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as

[44] Nicholas, Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Routledge, 1999), 51.

[45] Vikramaditya Sahai, 'Bodies Beyond Rights,' *Plainspeak*, 1 May 2014. https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/author/vikramaditya-sahai/.

[46] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.

[47] Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages (English and French Edition)* (Cornell University Press 1983), 15.

[48] Reid Vanderburgh, *Transition and Beyond: Observation on Gender Identity* (Q Press, 2007), 73.

[49] Loh, 'Narrating Identity.'

gender; indeed, it was always a gender with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.'[50]

Anne Fausto Sterling in her work *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* states that even biologists who historically regarded the body as innate and pre-discursive, later argued that a binary view of human sex is oversimplified and that sex should be interpreted as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, in terms of anatomical, hormonal, and even cellular sex.[51] Human beings are separated into two types in the idealised, Platonic biological world: a perfectly dimorphic species and a perfectly heteromorphic species. Males have an X and Y chromosome, testes, a penis, and all the necessary internal plumbing to transport urine and sperm to the outside world. They also have a muscular frame and facial hair, which are well-known secondary sexual traits. However, those with two X chromosomes, have ovaries, entire internal plumbing to transfer urine and ova to the outer world, a system to support pregnancy and foetal development, as well as a number of distinct secondary sexual traits are all present in women.[52] Butler does not assert that 'biological processes do not exist or touch variations in hormones or anatomy' instead, she contends that 'bodies do not exist outside cultural interpretation and that this interpretation leads to overly simplistic, stereotypical sex beliefs.'[53] To put it another way, biological mechanisms do not produce two 'natural,' separate, and significant groups of individuals. Since we reside in a gendered environment, the two sexes appear normal, apparent, and essential. The presence of two normal, innate, pre-discursive sexes seems plausible due to the 'repeated performance of two polar, opposite genders.'[54] To put it differently, Butler considers 'gender as a performance' in which we participate frequently and build the idea of binary sex. Therefore, gender identification is the manifestation of repeated behaviours, and transsexuals establish command over their preferred gender identity by performative features, as demonstrated in Laxmii's case. Her reiterative clapping of hands while performing is an embodiment of the hijra culture and marks her identity as hijra, who perform hand-clapping while worshipping, begging, dancing, crying and celebrating and the 'loud clapping demonstrates the unanimity and authenticity of the hijra culture.'[55] Kira Hall in 1997 notes, 'hijras have a special clap—what they refer to as dedh tali, or one-and-a-half clap-that signals the onset of a particular discursive performance for the benefit of the public.'[56] The movie's climax scene metaphorically exhibits Laxmii with other hijra performing near the *Ardhanareswara* statue with clapping of hands. *Ardhanareswara* is deciphered as the divine power with the

[50] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10–11.

[51] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (Basic Books, 2000), 66.

[52] Thekla Morgenroth and Michelle K. Ryan, 'Gender Trouble in Social Psychology: How Can Butler's Work Inform Experimental Social Psychologists Conceptualization of Gender,' *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: (2018), 3, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01320.

[53] Morgenroth and Ryan, 'Gender Trouble in Social Psychology,' 57.

[54] Thekla Morgenroth and Michelle K. Ryan, 'Gender Trouble in Social Psychology: How Can Butler's Work Inform Experimental Social Psychologists' Conceptualization of Gender?' *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, (2018), 3. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01320 .

[55] Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago Press, 2005), 136.

[56] Kira Hall, 'Go suck your husband's sugarcane: Hijras and the use of sexual insult,' in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (Oxford University Press, 1997).

amalgamation of both male and female worshipped by the Hindus and for many hijras, the characteristic of being half-man and half-woman is a manifestation of perpetual energy, granting them the divine competence to spell a *shraap* (curse), analogous to Shiva, who cursed the cosmos.[57] While performing, the appearance and body become hypervisible. Laxmii's feminine gestures, donning sari, wearing bright make-up, and facial hair, appearance, and body marks her as hypervisible and hyper(in)visible. When Laxmii enters a scene where her hijra clan is subjected to public verbal abuse, she chases the rowdy while lifting her sari above her knee in a display of aggression analogous to the hijra's propensity that marks the 'display of shamelessness signified by the potential exposure of (mutilated) genitalia.'[58] Hence, she becomes hypervisble due to her walking and conversing style, clapping loudly, and appearing masculine irrespective of wearing feminine apparel. Therefore, due to her hypervisibility, she suffers hyper(in)visibility. For instance, Laxmii was repudiated and ostracised first by her family and later by society due to her gender identity, performativity, appearance and body leaving no safe spaces for her to perform her gender.[59] Society overlooks the necessity of a person if he/she is a hijra, and impedes their education paving the way for them to have to beg, dance or do sex work, denying them health and judicial facilities. They are labelled hyper(in)visible when their identity, existence and fundamental rights are disregarded.

Visibility, according to Michel Foucault is deceiving, because, in certain contexts it might be a source of admiration, but when it culminates in a contemptuous glare, it can be a symbol of 'othering.'[60] 'When one is 'othered,' [they] are provided visibility,' and this visibility is often related to surveillance, voyeurism, and power.'[61] Laxmii suffers unfavourable gazes in public spaces and bears the attitude of an outsider in the mainstream. When she protested after her property was illegally confiscated by a politician, Girija no one came to rescue or support her. While resisting, Laxmii and her family were assassinated by Girija and his family. The murder was overlooked and no justice by Law was served. As evident in the case of Mastud, a hijra who was mercilessly assassinated with axes and a hammer in broad daylight in Mumbai in February 2021. She was declared dead, but no one intervened as reported by TNN in the *Times of India*.[62] Hence the existence of Laxmii, Mastud and other hijras are hyper(in)visible. The hypervisibility and hyper(in)visibility work together in the case of Laxmii's performance and appearance leading to the wrong body concept. Bettcher in 2014 demonstrates that the concept of the 'wrong body' entails a misalignment of gender identity

[57] Alf Hiltebeitel, 'Siva, the Goddess, and the disguises of the Pandavas and Draupadi,' *History of Religions* 20, no. 1 (1980), https://doi.org/10.1086/462866.

[58] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 55.

[59] Neha Kumari and Rajni Singh, 'Gender Performativity in (Un)Safe Space: The Narratives of Male to Female Indian Trans* Revathi and Vidya,' *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 47 (2022), http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue47/kumari.html.

[60] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage, 1995), 34–45.

[61] Meredith A. Love and Brenda M. Helmbrecht, 'Teaching the conflicts: (Re)engaging students with feminism in a postfeminist world,' *Feminist Teacher* 18 (2007).

[62] TNN, 'Mumbai: Transgender Person Found Killed,' *Times of India*, 24 Feb. 2021, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-transgender-person-found-killed/articleshow/81193414.cms.

and the sexed body.[63] The perception that one's body is not a part of one's self is acknowledged by the term 'wrong body.' Laxmii, throughout this movie declares that she is a woman *trapped in the wrong body* identical to the narratives of Revathi, Vidya, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. For instance, Revathi emphasised that she is 'A woman trapped in a man's body.'[64] Similar narratives are asserted by Vidya: 'My irrepressible femininity,' 'I felt like a woman inside,'[65] and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi stating, 'Yes, it is true that I was a woman. My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine.'[66]

Hence the framework for these narratives is 'a woman trapped in a man's body' (Vidya; Revathi; Laxmi) to what Jodi Kafmann claims, 'Sex gender misalignment fabulla.'[67] This concept *trapped in a wrong body* is a platonic language that illustrates the soul (or mind) may be caged by the body. It also obliterates the reality that Laxmii's transition is intentional, and therefore her gender is determined. The transparency is achieved by employing 'conventional binary' gender terminology. Individuals are expected to be 'authentic men' or 'real women.'[68] Hence what Laxmii experiences and what she desires to become contradicts the conventional binary system. In this process of becoming a hijra and advocating the wrong body concept, Laxmii states that she feels like a real woman and intends to establish her identity as real and authentic similar to the binary male or female sex. Therefore, performing femininity becomes essential for Laxmii and that turns out to be traumatic. She is living a lie and therefore experiencing a living death when she is unable to express her gender. Via this framework, hijras have innate femininity, thus they become hijra to express and fulfil that femininity. However, this designates them a stigmatised title 'fake women' leading to transphobia and hate crimes against hijra.

This hijra community worked diligently to dispel the fallacious assumptions asserted in the movie that provoke negative perceptions about the hijra community in mainstream individuals. To illustrate, a commercial video *The Seatbelt Crew* garnered a plethora of appreciation and admiration for representing hijra characters as they are. The video's intent was to promote both road safety and a positive portrayal of the hijra community as stated by Aditi Shorewal in 2014.[69] However, *Laxmii* fails in representing the significant struggles of the hijra community, such as lack of school education, unemployment, unacceptability and violence and instead presents a ferocious face, supernaturalism and mocks the judiciary.

[63] Bettcher, 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory.'

[64] Revathi, *Truth About Me*, 15.

[65] Living Smile Vidya*, I am Vidya: A transgender's journey* (Rupa Publications, 2007), 33.

[66] Tripathi, *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*, 4.

[67] Jodi Kafmann, 'Transfiguration: a narrative analysis of male-to female transexual,' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20, no. 1 (2007), https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390600923768.

[68] Naomi Zack, 'Transsexuality and Daseia Y. Cavers-Huff,' in *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie J. Shrage (Oxford University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195385717.003.0005.

[69] Aditi Shorewal, 'Your Attention Please: The Transgender "Seatbelt Crew" Has a Message for You,' *NDTV*, 6 May 2014, https://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/your-attention-please-the-transgender-seatbelt-crew-has-a-message-for-you-560414.

Conclusion

The Bollywood movies based on hijra have a significant influence on spectators and their psychological state by accelerating awareness, hence cultivating empathy, interrogating stereotypes, encouraging empowerment and action, and finally facilitating the development of a more comprehensive and tolerant society. The relevance of these entities rests in their capacity to shape ideas and decisions of the mainstream to stimulate societal transformation. The movie *Laxmii* failed to demonstrate the miserable life of those who embrace an alternative sexuality. It did not utilise the chance to serve as a constructive proponent for the rights of those with an alternative sexuality, nor did it address pertinent problems. Instead, it prioritised sensationalism and consumerism. Although the Bollywood industry confronts the transgender challenges, it did so insensitively and erroneously thereby raising the risk of further marginalising the hijra community and fostering inaccurate assumptions about their way of life.

This study has questioned the hijras' existence through the concepts of performance, appearance, and the body in the mainstream Bollywood industry through the movie *Laxmii*. The hijra construct is observed as a performative phenomenon characterised by multiple acts such as castration, apparel, make-up habits, and the symbolic gesture of clapping hands. These practices have a crucial significance in the formation and expression of hijra identity. The essential indicators of hijra identification are expressed and demonstrated through the body's non-verbal cues. The body is perceived as the surface on which such bodily adjustments for conformity are carried out. The propensity of hijras to emulate women's attributes manifests an urge to establish a feminine identity that they perceive as intrinsic to their existence. Through their emulation, individuals engage in a subversion of gender conventions that gives rise to a form of burlesque femininity that is not inherently feminine but is characterised by an explicit display of femininity.

This study delves into the process of enacting and producing gender as witnessed in *Laxmii* and a series of movies and autobiographies. It examines gender performativity through practising, emulating, and displaying femininity. This article not only demonstrates 'phantoms of the opera'[70] but rather offers novel insights into gender, sexuality, and cultural politics, while also exploring the evolving dynamics of the Bollywood industry and mass media within the context of global and capitalism. This research has integrated various perspectives on hijra performance and their representation as hypervisible and hyper(in)visible in *Laxmii.*

[70] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992), 33.

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