

«ВО ВСЯКОМ СЛУЧАЕ, МЫ СУФИИ»: ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ДУХОВНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ СРЕДИ ХИДЖР В ЮЖНОЙ АЗИИ

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Являясь своего рода «безопасными пространствами», суфийские святыни на Индийском субконтиненте, как правило, открыты и для тех, кто не отождествляет себя с традиционными гендерными категориями. Могила (даргах) Аджмера Шарифа в городе Аджмер (Раджастан) на севере Индии является одной из таких святынь и известна своей особой «инклюзивностью». Здесь принимают всех паломников, включая представителей так называемого «третьего пола». Хиджры, известные также как киннары, не следуют социально определяемым, бинарным гендерным определениям. Маргинализованные и часто подвергающиеся социальной стигматизации, люди «третьего пола» естественным образом тянутся к пороговым пространствам, таким как суфийские святыни, которые поощряют преодоление социально-религиозных границ. В этой статье исследуются некоторые типологические аспекты традиционных суфийских ритуалов и верований, которые делают их особенно инклюзивными по отношению к хиджрам. Статья также анализирует то, как хиджры, в свою очередь, изменяют конфигурацию суфийских религиозных верований с целью преодолеть противоречие между лиминальностью собственного жизненного опыта и бинарностью общества («дунья») вокруг них. Помимо данных, собранных во время полевых исследований на 808-м фестивале Урс в 2020 году, в статье также используется опыт вымышленного героя Анджума из второго романа Арундати Роя «Министерство наивысшего счастья» (2017), а также история Моны Ахмед (1937–2017), самой известной хиджры Дели, ставшей источником вдохновения для романа Роя.

Ключевые слова: Хиджры, киннары, трансгендеры, суфизм, даргах Аджмера Шарифа, фестиваль Урс, Южная Азия, Мона Ахмед, Арундати Рой

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‘IN ANY CASE WE ARE SUFIS’: THE CREATION OF HIJRA SPIRITUAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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*Providing spiritual ‘safe spaces’, the Sufi shrine-world throughout the Indian Subcontinent is generally open to those who do not identify with conventional gender categories. Ajmer Sharif Shrine (dargāh) in the northern Indian town of Ajmer in Rajasthan is renowned for being particularly ‘inclusive’. It accepts all pilgrims without discrimination, including the so-called ‘third gender’, often referred to as hijras or kinnars, terms that transgress the socially-defined binary gender divide. Marginalized, and often socially stigmatized, these groups are naturally drawn towards liminal spaces such as Sufi dargāhs which encourage the transcendence of socio-religious boundaries. This paper explores certain typological aspects of traditional Sufi ritual and belief that make it particularly receptive to hijras, and the way in which hijras in turn appropriate and reconfigure Sufi religious belief to negotiate the tension between the liminality of their lived experience and the exclusive duality of the society around them. As well as utilizing fieldwork undertaken at the 808th ‘urs festival in 2020, the paper also draws upon the experiences of the fictional protagonist Anjum of Arundhati Roy’s second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, together with those of Mona Ahmed (1937–2017), the inspiration behind Roy’s novel and the most famous hijra of Delhi.*

Keywords: *Hijras, Kinnars, Transgender, Sufism, Ajmer Dargāh Sharif, ‘urs festival, South Asia, Mona Ahmed, Arundhati Roy*

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PROLOGUE

The *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the second novel of India’s most celebrated writer and social activist Arundhati Roy, begins by depicting the birth of Aftab, later known as Anjum, one of the novel’s protagonists. It was the happiest time of Jahanara Begum’s life when the midwife announced that after three daughters she had finally given birth to a baby boy. But when she later unswaddled the baby “she discovered, nestling underneath his boy-parts, a

small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part.” Jahanara’s world view is challenged for the first time in her life. She is terrified at the sight of her biologically intersex baby but thinks “that maybe the girl-part will close up, disappear.” “But,” the story continues, “month after month, year after year, it remains stubbornly there, and as the boy, Aftab, grows he becomes unmistakably girl.”

Aftab’s mother realizes that there are only two words to describe her child: “[i]n Urdu, the only language she knew,” as Roy contends, “all things, not just living things but all things—carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments—had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him—Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar.¹ But two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside language?” (Roy, 2017, p. 8). She is inwardly terrified of how her child will be able to exist outside language in contemporary Indian society.

Jahanara Begum instinctively seeks solace at the blood-red-colored shrine (*dargāh*,² lit. ‘threshold’) of the Sufi saint Hazrat Muḥammad Sa‘īd Sarmad Shahīd (d. 1661), an antinomian dervish of Judeo-Persian background who converted to Islam. She later learns all about Sarmad: he followed the love of his life, the Hindu boy Abhai Chand, to Delhi. He believed in the tolerant and broad-minded teachings of Sufism, the Islamic mystical tradition, an approach that was influenced by the humanistic concept of ontological monism, the essential ‘oneness of all existence’ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), a metaphysical doctrine that finds expression on the worldly plane in the unity of all humankind. Under the influence of divine love, Sarmad broke free from all religious conventions proscribed by Islam. Like other *faqīrs*, he had a reputation for provocative, socially deviant behavior directed against normative religious doctrines. Born out of the intensity of mystical love (*‘ishq*), which renders one incapable of functioning in mainstream society, he lived stark naked in a society that strictly prohibited nudity. Sarmad defied the last Mughal emperor Awrangzīb (1658–1707), who sentenced him to death for apostasy and, according to local lore, when beheaded, he picked up his severed head which continued to recite his poems on the eastern stairs of the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi (just a few steps from his *dargāh*).³ In an interview Roy states that she sees Sarmad as “the one who is the blasphemer among the believers, the believer among blasphemers, the person who doesn’t allow majoritarianism to shut out the possibility of something else” (Laloo et al., 2018). Then as now Muslims, Hindus and others come to pay their respects to the “insubordinate spirit” of this ‘friend of God’ (Roy 2017, p. 10). Jahanara Begum also brings her son to the *dargāh*: “This is my son, Aftab,” she whispered to Sarmad, “I’ve brought him here to you. Look after him. And teach me how to love him” (Roy 2017, p. 11).

1. Throughout South Asia, those who identify themselves as ‘neither male nor female’ are often placed in an ambiguous category, known in Hindi-Urdu by the umbrella term ‘hijra’ and in Punjabi as ‘khusra’. These terms transgress the socially-defined binary gender divide. But some prefer to call themselves ‘kinnar’, referring to mythological beings present in the Vedas, often depicted as half-bird, half-woman creatures, renowned for their dance, song and poetry. In addition, they are also known as ‘khwaja sara’, a Mughal term recently reclaimed by Pakistani hijras. Despite some overlap between these labels and ‘intersex’ or ‘trans*’ (generally male-to-female, or MtF, experience) in ‘Western’ LGBTQ+ terminology, these Western concepts of gender/sexuality cannot easily be transposed into South Asian contexts and vice versa (Roen, 2001, p. 255; Roy, 2016, pp. 412–432; Towle and Morgan, 2006). During the past three decades, the governments of India (1994), Pakistan (2009), and Bangladesh (2014) have legally recognized hijra/khusra as a so-called ‘third gender’, but in relation to and within the female-male binary; rights-based procedures for their recognition still need to be implemented.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, words in italics are Arabic terms and names, which are also used in Hindi-Urdu. Transliteration follows the system used in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, third edition (Fleet et al., 2016). Modern personal names are spelled according to the most common usage. Hindi-Urdu terms are rendered according to the romanization of The National Library at Kolkata.

3. For a discussion of the motif of the beheaded saint, see Ernst, 2006, pp. 328–341; also the poetry of Sultan Bahu (d. 1691) in *Death before Dying*, trans. Elias, 1998.

When later in his teens Aftab chooses to leave his biological family and becomes identified socially as Anjum, her/is⁴ very characterization ruptures the traditional construct of the patriarchal heterosexual cisgendered who are pigeon-holed by marriage and procreation. It is assumed that when Roy designed her protagonist Aftab-Anjum, she was inspired by the life of a ‘real transgender’, namely the hijra icon Mona (the latter being her/is hijra name; Ahmed was her/is given name, 1937–2017).⁵

Mona Ahmed and Aftab-Anjum share the same backstory of someone who is “of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing” (Roy 2017, p. 4), a place where gender classifications of ‘he’ or ‘she’ are rendered null and void.⁶ Aftab-Anjum’s departure from the dominant and privileged sphere of masculinity (which signified power, honor, and status) and her/is acquisition of feminine traits (signifying submission and subordination) invariably incurs social scorn, forcing her/im to relinquish her/is family of origin, inheritance, and normative worldly ties. S/he takes up residence with a hijra community in a place called Khwabgah (‘House of Dreams’) in Shahjahanabad (a low-income Muslim neighborhood in Old Delhi). Her/is new home presents a social organization distinct from the rest of society (referred to as Duniya, the earthly concerns and possessions of the temporal, lived-in world). It is a cultural family based on reconstructed kinship networks (Hindi-Urdu *gharānā*) and ritual practices not based on blood ties. Their household contains hijras (often stigmatized as ‘eunuchs’ in literature)⁷ from Hindu, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds as well as members from different caste groups (Roy, 2017, p. 21; cf. Nanda, 1990; Reddy, 2005; Jaffrey, 1997) who all live defiantly outside traditional South Asian social structures and do not adhere to the associated conventional and rigid social roles.

Just as Jahanara Begum is drawn to Sarmad’s numinous presence at his *dargāh*, many members of hijra communities not only hold a deep reverence for the teachings of Sufism, but also practice and



Figure 1. Photograph of Mona Ahmed.
Screenshot from *Thakur and Khatoon*, 2011–12
[Documentary Film] on YouTube

4. Following Adnan Hossain (2012), I use ‘s/he’, ‘her/is’, ‘her/imself’ to reflect hijra gender performativity “beyond the binary.”
5. The volume *Myself, Mona Ahmed* (2001) comprises both a visual chronicle of Mona’s life, with a focus on her motherhood (and loss thereof), and her choice of living in a graveyard, as well as her correspondence with the book’s Swiss publisher Walter Keller.
6. Fieldwork observations have shown that hijra gender identity and sexuality are *not* synonymous; “[u]nlike sex,” argues David Halperin, “sexuality is a cultural production” (1989, p. 257) whereas ‘gender’ is performative (Butler, 1999, p. 185) referring to practice and social recognition. Cf. Kugle, 2010, p. 239.
7. Even though they were slaves, the majority of whom had been forcibly castrated, they are revered as mediators who cross boundaries. Eunuchs still are guardians of tombs and shrines, including the holy sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina, because they are believed to be undistracted by sexual desire and uninfected by ritual impurity and to be able to navigate both the male and female realms. It is noteworthy that these eunuchs inhabited and still inhabit an in-between position—they were legally and socially of neither gender (Bashir, 2007, pp. 144–146; Hinchey, 2017, especially ch. 6).

experience them at the affective level. So much that hijra/kinnar/transgender activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, born in 1978 into an orthodox Brahmin family in Maharashtra, states:

In any case we are Sufis—what do we have to do with religion? Rasool-Allah's [the Messenger of God's] khauf-e-ilahi [fear of God] is also ingrained in me—even if I am a Brahmin ka bacha ['Brahmin child']. Just because I wear a sari and a bindi, how does anyone know whether I have accepted Islam or not? We don't make a show of it. But the majority of all our gaddis ['seats'] are Islamic. All our gaddis had accepted Islam. This is a very big step (Sumbul, 2016).

While aspects of unconventional hijra socio-religious milieux dynamically engage with both Hindu and Muslim features and constantly reconfigure themselves along new contours, both in relation to self and other, Laxmi's bold statement relates to the fact that hijra transgression of socially-constructed gender boundaries overlaps with that of *antinomian* Sufi circles and the marginality implicit in dervishhood.⁸ Many hijras refer to people other than themselves as *duniyadar* (people of the mundane world). This detachment from the *duniya* (*dunyā*; 'world') fosters the activation of a 'spiritual gender performance', which is creatively endorsed by Sufi spiritual concepts and their inherent disjunctions "beyond the binary" (Haq Hussaini, 2012) of patriarchal South Asian social structures and conventional social roles. This affords an alternative space, an interworld, which in both Sufi and hijra understanding can be conceptualized as *barzakh*. Interestingly, it is at just this kind of liminal and indeterminate space that Homi K. Bhabha (b. 1949) posits hybridity,⁹ where acts of "translation and negotiation" occur and which he refers to as the "third space" (Bhabha 1996). Against this background, this study examines the multiple convergences between Sufi and hijra conceptualizations in a South Asian context. In so doing it intends to add a further piece to the dynamic and complex mosaic of hijra spiritual identity/ies.

My argument is based on preliminary field observations during the 808th 'urs festival (March–February 2020) of the hijra patron saint Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1236) at the Dargāh Sharif in the Indian town of Ajmer in the northwestern state of Rajasthan, combined with an analysis of archival, historical, and documentary materials. It is also informed by milestones in the life of Roy's trailblazing character, Anjum, in her second novel *Ministry* which follows in the footsteps of Mona Ahmed, Delhi's most renowned hijra.

PILGRIMAGE TO AJMER SHARIF DARGĀH

While some hijras like Laxmi Narayan Tripathi are born into well-to-do, upper caste families, most hijras belong to lower classes/castes, socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged. They are thus naturally drawn towards liminal spaces such as Sufi *dargāhs* at which both social and religious boundaries are generally conflated. Providing spiritual 'safe havens', the Sufi shrine world throughout the Indian subcontinent is generally open to those who do not identify with conventional gender categories. In Foucault's terms (1986, p. 24), these Sufi *dargāhs* serve as "something like counter-sites ... within the culture, [that] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." Ajmer Sharif Dargāh is known to be particularly 'inclusive' and is not organized on divisions of gender, religion, or caste. Unlike some other Sufi *dargāhs* in the subcontinent, women are allowed to enter

8. The present paper builds on earlier studies that discuss the relationship between Sufi concepts and hijra spirituality, especially Naqvi and Mujtaba, 1997; Kugle, 2007; Jaffer, 2017.

9. In this study 'hybridity' is understood as 'syncretic' in the sense promoted in postcolonial theory, such as in the work of Homi Bhabha. See also Burke, 2009; Ackermann, 2012, pp. 5–25.

and to pay their respects to the saint's tomb in the inner shrine and to touch his cenotaph.¹⁰ My respondents told me that while at some *dargāhs* hijras have to perform the pilgrimage (*ziyārāt*)¹¹ in male clothing (such as during the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca), they can freely visit Ajmer Sharif Dargāh in female dress. This *dargāh* thus serves as a bridge between differences, and offers a platform for the so-called Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb (Hindi-Urdu for 'Ganges-Yamuna Culture') which, in defiance of the strictures of contemporary religious orthodoxy, encourages a fusion of Hindu and Muslim religio-cultural elements to promote a feeling of mystic oneness of all religions.¹² It is here at Ajmer Sharif Dargāh that social norms are temporarily suspended. All pilgrims are accepted. There is no discrimination.

For those excluded from most forms of public life, such as the hijra community, the opportunity to engage in collective experiences through Sufi shrines is extremely significant. Like Anjum in Roy's *Ministry* and Mona Ahmed, most hijras in South Asia participate in the pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif Dargāh, where their presence has for centuries been part of local tradition (Tripathi, 2015, pp. 78, 98, 153). Particularly significant is the *'urs* (lit. 'marriage,' nuptial') held to commemorate the death of the thirteenth-century Sufi saint Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī, known as Khwāja Sa[h]ab ('Respected Master'), who is particularly revered by them. From across the subcontinent hijras are deeply attached to the saint. Celebrating his (re-)union with God at death, the *'urs* festival and marriage feast revolves around his resting place, the oldest tomb of the Chishtī Sufi Order in South Asia, which is attended by hijras from all over the subcontinent and beyond. Attending the *'urs* during the first six days of Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic calendar, is seen by many as a substitute for the *hajj*, the sacred pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca.

I interviewed ten respondents at the *'urs*, most of whom came from Delhi and three from Mumbai. Six wanted to be referred to as kinnars and four as hijras. Six out of ten identified as transgender. Some of the hijras I encountered looked stunning, like Bollywood actresses. At the Khwāja's *'urs* the largest number of hijras from the subcontinent gather every year. I was told that at least 3,000 hijras attended the 808th *'urs* in 2020 during which they also held a grand assembly (Hindi-Urdu *mahāpañchāyat*).¹³ Ajmer Sharif serves as *gaddi*, the place or seat where hijras meet from all over India and beyond and where they forge new or nurture existing ties, discuss new policies and formulate solutions to social problems. Just as they do not commit to any particular gender, most hijras, in the opinion of my informants, do not follow a particular religion. They are, however, especially attracted by the Khwāja's teachings on compassion and love of God, his service to humanity, and his concern for the poor and the marginalized. For all those I interviewed their pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif Dargāh and participation in the annual *'urs* lies at the very heart of their identity.¹⁴ As my informants told me, because the revered Sufi saint, known by the epithet Gharīb Nawāz ('Benefactor of the

10. This custom has always been in place and is contrary to the information given in Mathieu Boisvert (2020, p. 111), which states that "women are banned from entering the Ajmer *dargāh*," and that there is a dress code according to which hijras can only enter if they "cover their head" and remove "the bracelets, the *bindī*, and all that." This is not the case, even in the tomb of the saint, as I could observe during my fieldwork in March 2020 which postdates Boisvert's publication.

11. On the controversy surrounding the practice of *ziyārāt* to Sufi tombs in Islam, see Bigelow, 2010, pp. 164–170.

12. Tehzeeb literally means 'manners' (Safvi, 2014). The Turnerian paradigm of 'communitas' emphasizes how pilgrimages often blur religious, ethnic and class boundaries and instead create a sense of communality among the pilgrims (Turner, 1969; Bigelow 2010; Albera and Couroucli, 2012; for a more cautious position see van der Veer, 1994, pp. 196–211).

13. At least 500,000 pilgrims are estimated to attend the annual *'urs* at Ajmer Sharif Dargāh which is taken as evidence of the enormous 'spiritual power' of this sacred place.

14. Aside from Hajji Malang Baba Dargāh, an important hijra Sufi pilgrimage site at Kandivali East, Mumbai (Tripathi, 2015, p. 107; its importance for the hijra community still awaits scholarly investigation), see Boisvert (2020) for a brief description of other, non-Sufi hijra pilgrimage sites, including the important temple of Bahucharā Mātā at Becharaji, Gujarat, the temple of the Goddess Yellammā at Saundatti, Karnataka, and the cult of Aravan at Koovagam, Tamil Nadu. On Bahucharā Mātā, see also Sheikh, 2010, pp. 84–99; Tripathi, 2015, p. 177.

Poor’), is the one who transmits to them the sacred power to bless people, he thereby validates what my interlocutors called their “privileged status in Islam.”

During the Khwāja’s ‘*urs*’ hijras also gather to offer sacred silk cloth (Hindi-Urdu *chādar*) as votive offerings to his *sanctum sanctorum*. The ‘wedding’ processions of dancing hijras’ exultantly whirling their long hair, swaying their hips, and gesturing seductively underline the link between marriage, sexuality and death. Accompanied by beating drums (Hindi-Urdu *dholak*) they bear the pious offering and slowly proceed towards the *dargāh*. By means of such performances, hijras not only enact their chosen gender but nurture spiritual qualities. Their processions are also seen as an offering in connection with a *mannat* (Hindi-Urdu, ‘vow for fulfilment of wishes’) uttered in prayers of supplication. The colorful silken *chādars* inscribed with Quranic verses are spread out and held in such a way that other pilgrims can throw money and other offerings into them. People passing by respectfully lift the *chādar* with their right hand up to their eyes and lips to send their prayers to the saint. It is said that the wishes of those who offer the *chādar* are fulfilled by God.



Figure 2. Hijra procession towards Ajmer Sharif Dargāh during the 808th ‘*urs*’ in 2020.

Photo © Sara Kuehn

It is of great significance for the hijra community that they are the first to perform the *chādar*-laying ceremony, the central ritual of the ‘*urs*’. During the ceremony the sheet of cloth is removed that covers the cenotaph which marks the Khwāja’s tomb in the small inner shrine at the center of the *dargāh*. The sepulchral monument represents the marriage bed on which the divine union will (again) be consummated. It also symbolizes the bride in relation to God, the Khwāja. On this day, the intimate inner nucleus serves as the bridal chamber. Layer upon layer of silk coverings are slowly removed until the symbolic unveiling of the bride has been completed and the cenotaph uncovered. The ritual culminates in rubbing the ‘naked’ stone with red sandalwood paste, signifying the consummation of the spiritual wedding. The hijras are the ones who (re)cover the divine couple with the first layer of new silk cloth, the *chādar*. While in their daily lives they make a living by conferring efficacious

blessings to new-born (especially male) babies and the bridegroom at wedding ceremonies, their blessing of the Khwāja’s ‘nuptial bed’ – on which the intrinsically procreative divine union is consummated on the death anniversary – is categorically different: it is a ritually and so socially indispensable act. Vaibhav Saria recorded a local tradition which stipulates that unless a hijra places the first *chādar* on the Khwāja’s cenotaph, “the stove will not catch fire, nobody will be able to make the fire burn for the feast” (Saria, 2021, p. 39).¹⁵ It reflects the ancient Indian notion that woman is the hearth, while man is the fire (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 5, pp. 4-8; Knipe 1972) and so this creation, alluded to by the notion of the “feast,” will only happen when fire ignites the hearth. This is brought about when the hijra transfers her/is procreative *baraka* (‘blessedness,’ ‘spiritual power’) by laying the *chādar* onto the Khwāja’s spiritually alive body. The performance of a crucial ritual act during the ‘*urs*’ thus attributes an important role socially, culturally, and spiritually to the otherwise marginalized hijra community (Saria, 2021, p. 40).

Besides offering *chādars*, hijras make generous *nazrana/shukrana* (Hindi-Urdu ‘offerings’/‘thanksgiving’) to the saint. These include sandalwood paste, rose and jasmine flowers, perfumes, incense, gold, silver,¹⁶ and, above all, cash. Some hijras reputedly offer up to their entire annual earnings. During the ‘*urs*’ they provide free food (Hindi-Urdu *langar*) to pilgrims and offer scholarships to orphans to come and study at institutions such as the Sufi Saint School, an interfaith project associated with Ajmer Sharif Dargāh.

Queer rights activist Lesley Esteves visited the Khwāja’s *dargāh* in October 2014 in the company of a hijra pseudonymously named Nagma, a survivor of a custodial gang rape at Ajmer Police Station during the 2012 ‘*urs*’. Two years later s/he and her/is *chelās* (Hindi-Urdu ‘disciples’) went for a court hearing at Ajmer. In his pilgrimage journal Esteves expresses his amazement that when Nagma and her/is *chelās* arrived to offer a *chādar*, a *khādim*, or hereditary caretaker of the shrine, who received them at the *dargāh* respectfully asked: “Should I treat you as a *mard* (‘man’) or an *aurat* (‘woman’)?” Since Esteves, although born female, identifies with the male gender, a pink *safa* (turban) was tied around his head (instead of a purple *dupatta*, or shawl; Esteves, 2014).¹⁷ He was filled with wonder, given that such respectful demeanor vis-à-vis his gender identity is rarely encountered outside the *dargāh*.

FAQĪRĪ-HIJRA PARALLELS

IN their self-understanding as dervishes or faqīrs—an identification confirmed by all respondents – hijras creatively appropriate and re-deploy Sufi discourse to help legitimize their alternative lifestyle, to make sense of their social position in spiritual terms, and also to acquire spiritual power (Jaffer, 2017). The *faqīrs* are frequently intertwined with sub-orders of institutional Sufi communities such as the Chishtī-Qalandarī Sufi group who accommodate a *faqīr* mode of socially deviant piety. Often they are attached to the socio-religious fabric of Sufi *dargāhs* such as Ajmer Sharif, although some lead an itinerant lifestyle. Hijras and *faqīrs* generally converge only at Sufi centers (especially during festivals such as the ‘*urs*’ at Ajmer Sharif Dargāh). Even so, the uncanny resemblance between hijras

15. Saria (2021, p. 39) notes that hijras are the first to perform the *chādar*-laying ceremony after breaking the Ramaḍān fast on 1 Shawwāl during the ‘*īd al-ḥijr*’ festival; however, according to my informants this takes place at the occasion of the ‘*urs*’ festival.

16. At the 2013 ‘*urs*’, the hijra community offered 7.5 kg of silver to the Ajmer Sharif Dargāh (Singh, 2014).

17. FtM (‘Female to Male’) individuals are usually not referred to as hijras (Tripathi, 2015, p. 173).

and *faqīrs* (often referred to as *malangs*)¹⁸ provides an inspiring framework through which hijras seek to affirm their spiritual identity.

This is buttressed by the fact that *faqīr-malang* mysticism embraces an antinomian vision of selfhood and gender identity which resists dominant patriarchal models. As a result, androgyny and *gender-transgression*, which includes religious cross-dressing, can be observed among some of these dervishes. Some *faqīrs* communicate this aesthetically (permanently or for a period of time) by dressing in women's clothes and wearing jewelry, a religious performance which has the capacity to deconstruct gender (Digby, 1984, p. 65; Karamustafa, 1994; Basu, 1994, pp. 13, 22, 138, 193–206; Ernst and Lawrence, 2002; Jaffer, 2017).

Like these dervishes, hijras adopt an asocial lifestyle in that they exist outside the traditional kinship structure of the family (and caste; cf. Das, 1977, p. 45, for the complementary case of Hindu ascetics, or *sannyāsīs*) and embrace the perils of the unknown in which detachment and renunciation are both material and spiritual. They thereby tap into the long history of reverence for ascetic renunciation in both Islamic and non-Islamic traditions in South Asia, in which sacrifice is portrayed as an extraordinary and superhuman achievement only made possible by intense spiritual passion.

The concomitant practice of sexual abstinence and celibacy as a demonstration of the ascetic rejection of the Duniya is also held in high regard by certain schools of Sufi thought. Antinomian Sufis, such as the Ḥaydarī *faqīrs*, engaged in painful rituals of corporal modification, such as passing iron rings through their penises, a physical expression of abandonment of the Duniya and rejection of society's claims on their minds and bodies. To indicate their deliberate renunciation of sexual pleasure and gratification, some even castrated themselves to ensure that they do not break their vows (Digby, 1984, p. 65; Bashir, 2007, pp. 135, 143).¹⁹ Hijras too, in order to 'ensure' complete bodily asceticism, sometimes submit to an important ritual act of bodily transformation,²⁰ seen as a central rite of passage into the hijra community: ritual castration²¹ (Hindi-Urdu *nirvāṇ*, lit. 'to blow out', a spiritual awakening, separation from the Duniya; Cohen, 1995; Nanda, 1990, pp. 28–29, 118; Reddy, 2005, p. 94; Tripathi, 2015, pp. 156–157, 175–176; for colonial accounts see Preston, 1987, pp. 375). This life-altering change reinforces their femininity, while at the same time reducing sexual desire and libido. Mona Ahmed, on whose overall life story Roy's protagonist Anjum is modelled, underwent voluntary castration in a back-room surgery in Belapur, a small village near Mumbai. In the late fifties, sexual reassignment surgery was illegal in India. No anesthetic was used when all Mona's "private parts" were removed. "I hated all those male genitalia," s/he said. "Afterwards I felt an enormous sense of liberation ... But at the time all I could think of was the pain." At the same time, although s/he wanted to be 'female', the ritual operation physiologically clearly marks a person as hijra. S/he had not been prepared for the finality of the *nirvāṇ* but there was "no going back" (Butalia, 2011; Sing 2001, pp. 50–52).

18. Both *faqīr* and *malang* are fluid umbrella terms of non-conformist antinomian dervish groups characterized as *bī shār* ' (outside religious law).

19. Even so, renunciation need not entail celibacy. Cf. the work by Kristin Hanssen (2018) and Lisa I. Knight (2014) on the Bāul Muslim faqirism of West Bengal and Bangladesh whose followers encourage synthesis between Hindu and Muslim devotions.

20. Not all hijras perform the surgery. Some of my Muslim-born respondents mentioned that they believe that Islam forbids them from altering their God-given gender. But Mona Ahmed, for instance, who was born Muslim, decided to undergo ritual castration. Cf. Hossain 2012.

21. Castration is associated with the mother goddess Bahucharā Mātā. She is viewed as a patroness and protectress of the hijra community, who herself achieved deification through self-mutilation and self-sacrifice (according to one story, she sacrifices her femininity by cutting off her breast and offering it to thieves in place of her virtue). <http://bahucharajtemple.org/>. Accessed September 25, 2021. Cf. Sheikh, 2010, pp. 84–99.

Associated with transformation, metamorphosis, fertility, and empowerment, this paradox of emasculating oneself in order to be healed or 'redeemed' is actualized through the ritual of sacred pain, the *nirvāṇ* ceremony. In such a religiously framed context, pain is experienced as meaningful and empowering. Indeed, the operation positions hijras as supernatural beings who undergo sacrifice to assume 'sacred powers.' The *nirvāṇ* ceremony has been likened to the principle Sufi task of subduing the lower self (or 'soul,' *nafs*; Naqvi and Mujtaba, 1997, p. 264; Frembgen, 2011, p. 61). The lowest form of the soul is the *anima bruta* or 'commanding soul,' encapsulating the negative qualities of the lower soul (*nafs ammāra*; Qur'an 12:53) that find symbolic expression in the battle between soul and body. In Sufi discipline, *nafs* is understood as desire, especially sexual desire. The term *nafs* can in fact refer to the male genitalia. In this way the *hijra nirvāṇ* is a physical demonstration of sacrifice and spiritual devotion (Naqvi and Mujtaba, 1997, p. 264): the "chosen pain of asceticism is thus the instrument of combat, the weapon used against one's own soul" (Glücklich, 2001, p. 24).

The *guru-chelā* ('teacher-student') relationship of hijra communities likewise shares many features with the fundamental Sufi concept of the master-disciple relation between the *pīr* (alternatively, *murshid* or *shaykh*) and the *murīd* ('seeker'). Both 'systems' impart knowledge and reflect the importance of following the mystical quest, or rather the process, as a road taken, and the journey on which, as mentioned earlier, the prospective disciple embarks to cultivate and to train her/his soul under the guidance of a spiritual master. Just like in Sufi practice, the novice renounces her/his former identity and places her/himself into the hands of the new master. New entrants into the hijra community thus acknowledge in ritual form their submission to the authority of their *guru*, the most senior hijra of the 'nuclear' hijra family, confirming their separation from mainstream social structures and the entrance into a liminal state. Not only in hijra but also in Sufi contexts "disciples were stripped of their previous identities and accustomed gender roles" (Malamud, 1996, p. 331). Just as in the hijra world where the *guru* serves as substitute for the biological parents (mother or father, or both) and sometimes as symbolic lover or husband, the *pīr* in Indian Sufism takes the place of a father, mother, lover, husband and bride (Malamud, 1996, pp. 316–317; Bashir, 2011, pp. 136–137). In both Sufi and hijra communities, becoming a disciple is thus often referred to as 'spiritual birth.'

In a rite of passage known as *rīt* (Hindi; cf. Reddy, 2005, p. 154; Tripathi, 2015, pp. 42, 158–160, 175), hijra novices transition from a male gender to that of a hijra in the course of which a complex web of social and economic ties between the initiated, or *chelā* ('disciple'), and a *guru* is established.²² The new recruit then adopts (in most cases) a Muslim female name and receives new female clothes and other female gender signifiers. This too is clearly analogous to the *pīr-murīd*, or spiritual master-novice bond in Sufism, a fundamentally hierarchical relationship in which the guide is also seen as the adept's "bride-dresser" (Malamud, 1996, p. 324). During the spiritual initiation ceremony in Sufism, a pact (*bay'a*) is made in which the disciple submits to his or her master and pledges absolute loyalty. The *murīd* is invested with a cloak (*khirqā*) and other items of clothing and in turn presents a gift to his master.

Pīrs/gurus mentor and instruct their *murīds/chelās* *in situ* in the respective knowledge traditions of centuries-old performative practices. Foremost of these practices for hijras is *badhā*. The Hindi-Urdu term alludes to rituals of transition and regeneration (such as births, circumcisions, weddings), in which hijras play an important role. Their ritual per-

22. In the past hijras probably used *pīr* or *murshid* and *guru* as well as *murīd* and *chelā* interchangeably (Hinchy, 2017, p. 150). At the same time, the terms *guru* and *chelā* are also used in a Sufi context (Ewing, 1984, p. 367).

formances—most of which have recently been curtailed due to the Covid-19 pandemic—are perceived as auspicious blessings of male fertility and financial prosperity for patrons, granted in exchange for material offerings. Some hijras also perform healing for a wide array of illnesses. Conversely, by uttering wrathful curses they can inspire fear in those who question their sacred power and who show disrespect, for instance, by withholding payments. The fear of punishment forces (some) wrongdoers into submission (Pfeffer, 1995, p. 31). Both *pīrs* and *gurus* transmit their authority to their disciples who in turn become the next link in the chain. They also protect their *murīds/chelās* from dangers and temptations both within and outside the community. Most hijras in India live in groups organized into seven ‘houses’ or ‘schools’ (*gharānās*), the founders of which are all said to have been Muslims (Nanda, 1984). Some hijras also trace back the complex social structure of the *gharānā*—based on discipleship lineages with an extensive set of rituals, duties and obligations — to Sufi *silsilas* (‘chain of spiritual masters’).²³ Even though there seem to be no written records of hijra ‘*silsilas*’, some *gurus* began to keep records of the succession of *gurus* and *chelās* in “hijrotic books” (Rushdie 2008, p. 115). While some individual hijras travel a lot, *hijra* households have their own topographically designated areas, or ‘ritual jurisdiction’, in which they collect alms at traffic-lights and on trains, an occupation they share with those wandering renunciant *faqīrs* who also beg for their living. By thus transposing and realigning such Sufi practices, hijras appropriate (aspects of) the legitimacy of Sufi saints and *dargāhs* to valorize their distinct gender identity and their own alternative social organization.

BRIDE MYSTICISM AND MOTHERHOOD

IN line with the ‘bride mysticism’ that lies at the heart of the Khwāja’s ‘*urs*’ is the creative act in which all male dervishes strive to be united with the (male) divine beloved. To realize this vital goal, they adopt a female gender to assume the inverted role of a ‘bride of God’ (Schimmel, 1979, pp. 136–139; Kugle, 2007; Frembgen, 2008).²⁴ Just as in South Asian society the relationship of a wife to her husband is conceptualized as one of submission, surrender, and dedication, a male seeker of the Sufi path expresses his subservient devotion to an all-powerful (male) God by dressing as a woman, symbolically expressing his relationship with God as a marital relationship. As God’s bride or wife, the soul of a departed Sufi is believed to depart for its eternal abode, the house of the divine groom or husband. Here too the ultimate goal is spiritual union of the human soul with the divine (from the Persian *shab-e-urusi*, ‘night of union’ celebrated during the ‘*urs*’), the consummation of the divine marriage. In this conceptualization—to use the words of Scott Kugle (2007, p. 121) — “men become saints by tapping ‘feminine’ qualities that are normally hidden or repressed in men.”

Like these dervishes, whose androgynous, gender-fluid behavior has historically contributed to their spiritual charisma, hijras similarly defy convention by conflating masculine and

23. The correspondence between Islamic Sufi and devotional Hindu *bhakti* expressions are seen in the *guru-sīṣya* relationship of *bhakti* (‘devotion’) to the *guru* and which extends from the expression of *bhakti* to the ego-destroying principle of *prapatti* (‘self-surrender’). Cf. the Sufi principle of the training of the *naḥṣ* discussed below.

24. One model for a temporary gender transformation is the famous mystic poet Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325). He sung for his Chishti Sufi master, Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā’ (d. 1325; who himself refused to marry or raise children, see Kugle, 2020, p. 237) from Delhi, in a woman’s voice just like a bride longing for her bridegroom. The fifteenth-century Sufi Shaykh Musa (d. 1449) of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, who adopted the sobriquet ‘Sadā Suhāg’ (‘eternal bride’), is an example of a permanent androgynous lifestyle caused by a profound spiritual experience in a state of androgyny. Up until today, his devotees of the Suhāgī branch of the Suhrawardiyya, who cross-dress in the red dress of a bride and observe celibacy, are closely associated with castes of transsexuals and transvestites (Frembgen, 2008, pp. 73–4, 100–1, 135–6; Kugle, 2007, ch. 4).

feminine characteristics. In Sufi devotional tradition this is reflected in the synergy of the two opposing but complementary spiritual principles of *jamāl* ('beauty', 'beneficence') and *jalāl* ('power', 'wrath'), both qualities of the most *perfect* being, God. Hence Sufis refer to *kamāl* ('perfection') when discussing *jamāl* and *jalāl*, often seen as a 'gender complementarity' of the divine attributes or Names of God (*asmā' -i ilāhī*) within the divine unity. This transcends 'male' and 'female' by articulating an ideal of complementary perfection through the merging of opposites. This perfect symmetry is attained in the ultimate goal of all Sufis, the obliteration of the soul or individual self within the divine (*fanā' fi 'llāh*), a simultaneous cessation of being and absorption into the essence of the Absolute (the divine reality) (cf. Shaikh, 2012, pp. 173–175, 219).

In striving for this goal, the practitioner sees her/himself as an embodiment of *barzakh*, which signifies, in both Sufi and hijra understanding, an interworld that separates two things (in this case male and female sex or gender) while at the same time, paradoxically, serving to unify them as a 'spiritual gender identity' (Jaffer, 2017, pp. 175, 182–183; Hussaini, 2012; Hamzić, 2016, p. 272). In her novel Roy explains this paradoxical fusion by drawing upon two archetypal love stories, Layla and Majnun, the famous Sufi allegory of mystical love, and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:

Long ago a man who knew English told her [Anjum] that her name written backwards (in English) spelled Majnu. In the English version of the story of Laila and Majnu, he said, Majnu was called Romeo and Laila was Juliet. She found that hilarious. "You mean I've made a khichdi ['hotchpotch'] of their story?" she asked. "What will they do when they find that Laila may actually be Majnu and Romi was really Juli?" The next time he saw her, the Man Who Knew English said he'd made a mistake. Her name spelled backwards would be Mujna, which wasn't a name and meant nothing at all. To this she said, "It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman [Hindi-Urdu; 'gathering']. I'm a mehfil [from the Arabic word mahfil], I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited" (Roy, 2017, p. 4).

According to Chishtī tradition, God's attributes are divided into two complementary sets: those related to *jamāl* and those related to *jalāl* (Behl, 2012, p. 77). Self-cultivation of particular interior qualities such as *jamāl* and *jalāl* is also attained through bodily practices (cf. Mahmood, 2005; Hirschkind, 2006). This training of the soul (*nafs*) can release certain capacities which are reflected in both Sufi and hijra conceptualizations of the body. During the *qawwālī* Sufi musical performances performed during the 'urs, hijras along with other devotees revel in the multivalent expressiveness of the compositions. This pious commemoration is also seen as an offering in connection with a *mannat* uttered in prayers of supplication. Members of the audience may fall into a spiritual state of trance (*hāl*; lit. 'state'), sometimes referred to as the 'unveiling of the bride' by God, their ecstatic gestures/signs (Hindi-Urdu *mast*) embodying a sense of being enraptured by the divine. This ecstasy liberates the followers from social convention and gives sanction to exaggerated and even lewd or camp behavior redolent of the *faqīrs*, notorious for their unruly behavior and haranguing of people.

Since in Sufi belief creation as a whole is a manifestation of the divine attributes, *jamāl* and *jalāl*, it is characterized by these two opposing poles of beauty and power, respectively incorporating beneficent and awe-inspiring emotional states. The depiction of the divine be-

loved as equally beautiful and awe-inspiring, merciful and cruel, is reflected in an allegorical verse by the celebrated Sufi poet Ibn al-Farīd al-Sa‘dī (d. 1235) about an encounter between a mystic and God, in which the mystic declares passionate love for and surrender to a tempting (male) divine butcher:

I said to a butcher: “I love you, but oh how you cut and kill me!” He said: “That’s my business, so you scold me?” He bent to kiss my foot to win me, but he wanted my slaughter, so he breathed on me, to skin me (Homerin, 2001, p. 55).

The powerful image of the divine as a butcher is further elucidated by a verse attributed to the eighteenth-century Qādirī Sufi poet Syed ‘Abdullāh Shāh (d. 1758), known by his poetic alias Bullhe Shāh—who cross-dressed and danced and sang in public in front of his *pīr* Shāh ‘Ināyat to convince him of his devotion:

*The lover is the goat and the beloved is the butcher.
Saying “Me, me,” it is slaughtered.
The more it says “Me, me,” the deader it is²⁵
(Bullhe Shāh, 2015, poem 58, p. 107).*

It is worth noting that renowned Sufi singers, or *qawwāls*, like Abida Parveen, the Waddali Brothers, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, have sung *qawwālīs* from the compositions of Bullhe Shāh, which contend that gender does not limit access to the divine (Dalrymple, 2005).

Along with the spiritual marriage of a male dervish’s soul with the divine, in Sufism the act of spiritual parturition is of central importance. Female procreative power is symbolically appropriated by male spiritual guides who give birth to their own progeny. This is achieved through the training of the adepts’ souls, followed by the rite of initiation. The *guru-chelā* relationship has a similar spiritual dimension. Yet at the same time, ‘physical’ procreation is also much desired, as reflected in the hijra founding myth of a hijra who was a true disciple of Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī when he first arrived in India. There are many different versions of this story, all revolving around the fact that, even though as hijra s/he was incapable of conception, s/he desperately wanted children of her/is own. So s/he went to Ajmer Baba and begged him to grant her/im the power to conceive (Sinha, 2013; Reddy, 2005, pp. 134–135; Hall, 1995, pp. 48–50; Nanda, 1990, p. 19).²⁶ Through the intercession of the saint s/he finally became pregnant. But after ten months s/he was still unable to give birth, not having a vagina, and her/is stomach became more and more distended, the pain more and more intense. Finally, her/is stomach burst apart, and both s/he and her/is baby died. All my respondents, in addition to paying their respects to Ajmer Sharif Dargāh, also took the time to visit her/is tomb, located a few kilometers south of the *dargāh*.

This aetiological tale problematizes the status of hijras by underlining the fact that giving birth is restricted to women. Yet many hijras, including Mona Ahmed (or Roy’s Anjum, 2017, pp. 30–44), yearn to experience motherhood. “Why,” s/he once mused [...], “do people think motherhood can only be biological?” Mona’s desire was so intense that during her/is *hajj* pilgrimage s/he prayed for a child. Her/is wish was miraculously granted, if only for a few years. In 1990, Mona Ahmed’s *guru* permitted her/is to adopt a baby daughter, Ayesha, whose mother had died during childbirth (cf. Sinha, 2013). In order to become a mother

25. The Punjabi words *main, main* (‘me, me’), are onomatopoeic representations of the goat’s bleating. Cf. Bullhe Shāh, 2015, poems 5, p. 11, and 105, p. 183.

26. Cf. the hijra celebration of *simni*, a Sufi-identified religious practice commemorating Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī in Bangladesh (Hossein, 2012, pp. 508–510).

Mona visits pediatricians and midwives who teach her how to care for and bring up the child. Ayesha became the center of Mona's existence. "I distributed sweets in the neighborhood and recited the *azaan* [Muslim prayer] in her ears," Mona writes in a letter to her/is Swiss publisher Walter Keller, "I wanted to give her all the world's happiness." For Ayesha's early birthdays, the proud mother hosts lavish three-day long parties, inviting hijras from across the subcontinent. Until the age of six Ayesha was raised by Mona (Singh, 2001, pp. 12, 83–85).



Figure 3. Mona Ahmed holding the book *Myself Mona Ahmed* and looking at a photo of herself with her daughter Ayesha. Screenshot from *Thakur and Khatoon*, 2011–12 [Documentary Film] on YouTube

Being a mother through adoption is not, however, an option available to many hijras. Most hijras continue to bestow their *baraka* (power of blessing in the widest sense) on expecting mothers or women with offspring. Popular legend has it that there lives a hijra at Ajmer Sharif Dargāh who in a *faqīr* way is a *sadā subāganī* (eternal bride) saint. The sobriquet intimates that on the spiritual level, hijras such as her/im are likened to dervishes that "are male seekers of God who cross-dress as 'true brides' (*sadā subāgan*) of God" (Frembgen, 2008, pp. 100–101; cf. Kugle, 2007, pp. 208–209; see, for example, Sultan Bahu, 1998, p. 75). When pilgrims ask for this *sadā subāganī* hijra, the *khādim*, or shrine custodian, guides them to the 'bride of God'. Saria recorded the following exchange between the supplicants and the hijra:

"Subaagan, we don't have a child, please ask the khwaja to bless us with a girl or boy, whichever they want. ... the subaagan will then start to implore Allah, Ya Allah, look, this woman has come, asking for a child. It's been so long since she's married, why haven't you given her a child? She will become very passionate in her pleadings. She is very beautiful, more beautiful than women. She will not leave till it becomes Allah's wish to give the woman a child. She will remove her jewelry and break her bangles in josh [sic], asking Allah, Tell me, are you going to give a child or not? Finally, Allah will change his mind and say, Go, girl, go home. In nine months you will have a child in your lap" (Saria, 2021, p. 39).

While most hijras bless pregnant mothers or women with children, this ‘bride of God’ (a time-honored bestower of fertility her/himself) transmits – by invoking the Khwājā’s intercession – her/is life-giving force of male procreative energy to heal infertility and bless a woman with offspring. Children born through her/is *baraka* are presented to the *dargāh* along with *shukrana*. According to my informants there is, moreover, a tree in the *dargāh* compound that grows little berries, which they called Maji. Eating the fruit is said to make one’s wish come true and to bless hijras with ‘motherhood’.



Figure 4. Hijras in front of Ajmer Sharif Dargāh during the 808th ‘urs in 2020. Photo © Sara Kuehn

TARGETS OF VIOLENCE

While hijras are respected and even revered within the *dargāh*, they are at risk of violence, harassment, and abuse based on the discriminatory ideology of cisgenderism in the Duniya.²⁷ Without access to basic human rights, hijras are frequent victims of police brutality in addition to being vulnerable to sexual assault on the streets (cf. Tripathi, 2015, pp. 53–57).²⁸ This was experienced by 24-year-old Nagma and her/is group of *chelās* when they visited Ajmer Sharif Dargāh to offer a *chādar* at the ‘urs in June 2012. When police stopped their auto rickshaw near Ajmer Gate to demand a bribe from the driver, the police officer sexually assaulted Nagma, and when her/is *chelās* came to her/is defense all were arrested and detained at the Dargāh Police Station. While Nagma and her/is *chelās* identify with women, their hijra status meant that they did not have that protection under law. While in police custody they were violently assaulted, brutally gang raped (recorded on police mobile phones), and all their money was stolen. Conversely, government doctors who medically examined them to collect evidence of the rapes and the jail guards were almost

27. On “[t]he long history of criminalising Hijras,” see Hinchy (2019).

28. Hijras face similar discrimination, stigmatization, and abuse in Pakistan. Cf. the 2009 hijra demonstration outside the Taxila police station in Rawalpindi District, Pakistan, during which *guru* Almas Bobby gathered with over one hundred hijras to protest against ongoing police violence (Pamment, 2019).

reverential towards them because they — like most Indians—believe that their sexual status is linked to divinity and that they have special powers to cause misfortune. When they went back to Ajmer two months later to give their statements and record their appearance in court on the assault charge, patterns of discrimination and mistreatment were repeated. They were assaulted and intimidated and told that “none of them should dare to come back to Ajmer, and to miss the further dates of the court hearings” (Press Statement, 2014; Singh, 2014). Even though the medical report confirmed injuries, the rape case continues to drag on. Nagma had to undergo treatment for depression, questioning why s/he had to go through such extreme brutality. Yet, in spite of this traumatic experience in Ajmer itself, not far from the Dargāh Sharif, s/he still continues to visit the *dargāh* to pay her/is respects to her/is patron saint.

Here we might add that after her/is pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif Dargāh, Roy’s protagonist Anjum visits Ahmedabad — perhaps to visit the temple of the mother goddess Bahucharā Mātā in the Gujarati village Becharaji, Mehsana district, 140 km northwest of Ahmedabad. S/he did not, however, reach her/is destination. On her/is way s/he fell victim to the anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002 by vigilante *Hindutva* mobs, abetted by the Gujarat police, and barely escaped with her/is life.²⁹ S/he is spared only because, when encountered by a mob, s/he is identified as a hijra. It is this identity that saves her/im. S/he is the only survivor because, according to Hindu superstition, “killing hijras brings bad luck,” while letting her/im live might bless the fanatics with good fortune. Anjum discovers that the “Indo-Pak” war of gender — that s/he is subjected to and which plays upon her/is body and in her/is heart — is “Butcher’s Luck” (Roy, 2017, p. 23), and would have meant certain death for the Muslim in her/im. Beyond this sad fact in the Indian Hindu context, hijras continue to be the targets of serious violence by the Muslim majority in Pakistan, as Laxmi Narayan Tripathi laments in an interview given in Pakistan in March 2016:

[W]hen I see the condition of the khawaja saras in Pakistan, I feel like crying. So many of them have been murdered. Even last month one of them was shot here. The situation of the hijra is no better in India, but nobody has the guts to kill us (Sumbul, 2016).

‘OUR LIVES ARE LIVING GRAVEYARDS’

Shattered to the core, Anjum sheds her/is brightly colored clothing for a more masculine Pathan suit (Roy, 2017, p. 39). S/he decides to leave the Khwabgah, harbor of dreams, to completely forsake the social and material world of the Duniya, and instead to dwell in a graveyard (Roy, 2017, pp. 57–91). This abnegation of worldly ties is echoed by the Lahori *guru* Ashee Butt who likens hijra life to being “buried in living graveyards” (Pamment, 2019, p. 306). By doing so, Anjum rejects a public system that recognizes her/im only for her/is symbolic value. Even so, although s/he decides to abandon the organized, publicly recognized hijra community, s/he continues to “stubbornly insist on calling herself a Hijra”.³⁰

Through Anjum, Roy distinguishes between the individualized experience of gender alterity and the political distortion of sacred symbols. Her/is deep trauma leads Anjum to perform a living death by living alone in a graveyard in which — as s/he answers the mu-

29. Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and current Prime Minister of India, is accused of fueling the *Hindutva* tide and initiating and condoning the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

30. It is noteworthy that, unlike Anjum, Saeeda, a younger resident of the Khwabgah who is educated and speaks English, refers to herself as a “transperson” and employs denominations such as cis-Man and FtM (‘Female to Male’) or MtF (‘Male to Female’). Cf. Roy, 2017, p. 38.

nicipal authorities who argue that s/he is “strictly prohibited from living in the graveyard” – s/he “wasn’t living ... she was dying in it.” In doing so s/he takes up a time-honored dervish practice of acquiring an intimacy with death by living in cemeteries, as spiritual preparation for the final return to God by renouncing conventional social and material ties to the world. Likewise, for Mona Ahmed, as we will soon see, the graveyard becomes, paradoxically, a space for living. This tradition is reflected in one of the most popular Sufi *ḥadīths*, containing the imperative ‘die before you die!’ (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*), implying a metaphorical death to the cares and concerns of the material world, or Duniya, by reigning in the desires of the self prior to physical death. To achieve ‘death before dying’ to attain spiritual union with the divine beloved (Karamustafa 1994, pp. 21, 41).

Roy’s Anjum was dead to the world while still living in it – s/he “...lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home” (Roy, 2017, p. 3). The graveyard eventually turns into Jannat (Paradise) Guesthouse, Jannat Funeral Services and an animal shelter, and ultimately a place of refuge offering the possibility of perfect happiness. At the end, Anjum’s graveyard home comes to function as a multifaith sanctuary of *qubūri* (‘grave dwellers’) where – protected from the restrictions and oppression of the Duniya – a “gathering” (*mahfil*) of “fall[en] people” develops. When asked if she was implying that the ideal of perfect happiness could be found only in the company of the dead, Roy vehemently retorts:

It is the opposite. In that space of the dead, the border between life and death is also being challenged. It is not a submission to death. They are standing their ground and living their lives (Jayaschandran, 2017).

Mona Ahmed, Anjum’s real life model, did not experience the horrors of the Gujarat programs her/imself. S/he was expelled from the tightly controlled network of her/is *gharānā* of famous Old Delhi hijras when her/is *guru* grew jealous and so critical of the growing



Figure 5. Mona Ahmed at her living quarters at Mehmediya graveyard. Instagram post, 2020

affection between her/im and her/is adopted daughter, feeling that it undermined her/is authority. Despite Mona's hard-fought efforts to keep her/is daughter, s/he did not succeed. No *chela* dares to go against her/is *guru*'s authority, the undisputed head of the household. While s/he was on pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif Dargāh, her/is *guru* moved the hijra household to another city, effectively cutting her/im out. Her adopted daughter was taken to Pakistan. The *guru*'s punitive actions may also have been influenced by the fact that, by fulfilling her ambition of motherhood through adoption, Mona had inverted the hijra custom of castration and celibacy as mark of dissociation from mainstream society's claim on their bodies. By becoming a mother, by feeling that she was "now a complete woman" (Singh, 2001, p. 83), in the eyes of her/is *guru* she had become part of the Duniya.



Figure 6. The graves of two Sufi saints at Mehmediya graveyard, Delhi, where Mona Ahmed lived for the first years until she built living quarters next to it above the grounds of the graveyard of her ancestors. Screenshot from *Thakur and Khatoon*, 2011–12 [Documentary Film] on YouTube

Reduced to being an "outcast among outcasts," Mona—just like Anjum in the novel—begins to live in a graveyard. S/he lives first at the *mazār* ('shrine') of two Sufi saints (Singh, 2001, pp. 88–89) at Mehmediya Qabristan behind Maulana Azad Medical College in Central Delhi. Later she constructs a room in a corner above the grounds of the graveyard of her ancestors, the back wall of which borders on the morgue of the Medical College. During her time at the Qabristan, Mona is constantly switching between genders. "Speaking to the men she became, or assumed, the male persona of Ahmed-bhai, and many of the men present addressed her as such. Speaking with the women she was Mona, or *baji*, or *beben*—all female terms" (Butalia, 2011). She also alternated between male and female clothing. Her decision to

live at the Qabristan was a provocative move because hijras, like women, are conventionally not supposed to visit graveyards (Singh, 2001, p. 102). Nonetheless, even at the graveyard, she continues to counsel women from all over the neighborhood who arrived in need (Singh 2001, p. 13). She also counsels hijras, some of whom come to live with her for periods of time (Thakur and Khatoon, 2011, p. 12). Mona wrote that she came to the graveyard because she “could not bear the false glamour of city life ... and hated the pretense that people put on” (Singh, 2001, p. 100). Urvashi Butalia recounts that Mona used to say “knowing full well the possible impact of her words – ‘I have the dead behind me and the dead beneath me.’” “I’ve cut all connections now,” s/he declared, “with my real family and with my hijra family. There’s really nothing left to live for. I used to think the dead were only around me, but now I think they’re inside me as well” (Butalia, 2011). She continued to live her life among the dead for over thirty years.



Figure 7. Wall painting featuring Mona Ahmed at her later living quarters at Mehmediya graveyard, Delhi. Screenshot from Thakur and Khatoon, 2011–12 [Documentary Film] on YouTube

LANDSCAPES OF THE SPIRITUAL SELF IN A NON-BINARY RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

This process of socio-religious entanglements with *bī shbar* ‘Sufi devotional traditions briefly outlined in this paper suggests that it allows hijras not only to counterbalance structural and systemic socio-cultural barriers but also to formulate strategies to achieve spiritual empowerment and self-determination. Their special position is endorsed by Gharīb Nawāz (or the Benefactor of the Poor, as the revered Sufi saint Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī is

commonly referred to) himself in that he has transmitted to them the power to bless people. Their “privileged status in Islam” permits them to present themselves as dignified human beings endowed with sacred power.

The statement “In any case we are Sufis” reveals hijra identification with Sufi religious discourse. According to this discourse, the synergy of the two opposed yet complementary spiritual principles of *jamāl* and *jalāl* is referred to as *kamāl*, or divine perfection. As allegorical embodiment of *barzakh*, or interworld, they are able to generate a ‘spiritual gender identity’. This religious discourse allows hijras – whom Salman Rushdie (2008, p. 109) calls “contemporary gender benders” – to fashion their spiritual self, or soul (*nafs*), within a non-binary religious context. This uncommon spiritual path “beyond the binary” on the socio-religious margins of society entails a liminal social position that imbues hijras with a status that is ambiguous. This ambiguity has positive connotations in that it suggests great sanctity and power (cf. Douglas, 1966). In this conversation hijras are seen as positively inflected figures of deviance.

Just as the great stories of human love bring about the loss of one’s own identity and acceptance of the beloved’s identity, so too divine love can lead to the dissolution of the self and the metamorphosis of human attributes into the divine. It leads to a form of *kbichdi*, or ‘hotchpotch’, a term which Anjum uses to conceptualize her/is individual form of hybridity, explained further as both *anjuman* or ‘gathering’ and *mehfil*, or ‘festive gathering,’ “[o]f everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing,” to which “everybody is invited.” This hybridity is inseparably connected with the (pro)creative power of hijras.

In Islamic belief, as Scott Kugle explains, the soul, or self, is conceptualized as a dynamic, multidimensional spectrum: “The soul is an awareness more than a substance. ... As an identity, it recognizes a name, perceives an individuality, and accepts culpability of the actions of the body. It organizes the parts of the body into a single being, a self. In that sense, the soul as an identity can be said to have gender. The soul, reflecting on the body, perceives itself to be female or male, or possibly both-male-and-female or neither-male-nor-female” (Kugle, 2010, p. 237). In an interview with the magazine *Guernica*, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi explains the spectrum of the soul within the mercurial interpretive framework of hijrahood in India:

...a hijra is [someone who has transitioned from] male to female, but we don't consider ourselves female because culturally we belong to a completely different section of society. Many hijras are castrated, but it's not compulsory. They say it's the soul which is hijra. We feel we are neither man nor woman, but we enjoy femininity. I enjoy womanhood, but I am not a woman. It's very confusing (Seervai, 2015; cf. Tripathi, 2015, pp. 39–40).

When asked about Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s statement that it is “the soul which is hijra” – reflected in Roy’s (2017, p. 27) phrase “[t]he word Hijra ... meant a Body in which a Holy Soul lives” – my interlocutors similarly related that it is the “state of the soul” – pertaining to the quality of the soul – that constitutes a hijra/kinnar (cf. Singh, 2001, p. 63; Jaffer, 2017, p. 182). This shows that, next to the restrictive patriarchal power structures of the (contemporary) Duniya, Sufi discourse offers an opportunity to understand the transcendence of gender dualism as a powerful, procreative act of completion and to forge a pluralistic vernacular that encourages the reclamation of multifaceted spiritual identities.

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