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‘The yellow sparrow fell in love  
with his own molten loveliness,  
The yellow feathers that were shunned by the world  
Golden and glorious  
A breath of joy escaped from his beak,  
and he broke into a happy song...  
I am the Yellow Sparrow’  
(Khurai, front page)

‘Ulti...becomes the vehicle through which a hijra or koti, disowned or disregarded by their biological kin, enters the community and gives them a sense of belonging and a home in their midst. Ulti becomes the language that enables the community to forge and strengthen these bonds of kinship, solidarity and belonging on a day-to-day basis. It keeps hijras and kotis from drowning in an abyss of silences, slurs and unexpressed sorrow by becoming their language of shared experience, emotional connect and empathy. In many ways—sometimes quite literally—Ulti has emerged as a life affirming force for the community’ (Nandi, p. 5).



‘What form of caring is enacted by the sharing of sukh dukh and by associating the laughter and the fucking? It is not the economy of creation and destruction but rather, I would argue, the action of preservation, of sustaining and sustenance. Looking at the care afforded by the erotic relationships of hijras through the eyes of preservation—or more accurately of sustenance—would allow hijras to enter the economy of life diagonally’ (Saria, p. 55).

A memoir that is evocatively autoethnographic, a linguistic exploration of a secret language, and a critical immersive ethnography—the three books under review traverse (in reverse order) rural Odisha, Bengal and the embattled state of Manipur. Together and individually they transform the heteronormative gaze through rendering legible the everyday experiences, kinship (re)formations in a complex web of the (hostile) familial space knotted and in contradiction with the transgender community of belonging, faith, religion and theology, and subversive vernaculars crafted by transgender communities embedded in distinct spatio-cultural, political and linguistic contexts in India—in these works, Nupi Manbis (‘transgender women’ also referred to as ‘homos’) in Manipur, Hijras in rural Odisha, and Hijras-Kotis in Kalyani in Bengal. I present some valuable insights offered by these works in this review, also setting up a conversation between three very distinct approaches and themes that speak with—and stand with—transgender communities in contemporary India.

‘Ulti’—as Enakshi Nandi discovers is the reversal of linguistic rules in inventing and transmitting an embedded language that is rooted in and departs from Bangla that must only be legible to its closed community of speakers, hijras and kotis. A learned language (never the first language/mother tongue), and contingent on Bangla as the matrix language, Ulti challenges and subverts ‘traditional cisnormative and heteropatriarchal narratives of gender and sexuality by reclaiming and reconstituting the linguistic and discursive power—the power to construct their own identities, and legitimize their personal and political narratives—that has been kept from its speakers by the dominant social and ideological forces for centuries’ (Nandi, p. 1). She suggests that ‘the formation of a secret register in the case of Ulti follows a process of encryption... that is governed by the need to preserve its secrecy, which is the source of the language’s value for the speech community’ (Nandi, p. 6).

Hijras, in a host of expressions of sociality, eroticism, desire, and asceticism in the moral economy they occupy, according to Vaibhav Saria, ‘enter and participate in the social diagonally, following the tangential trajectory of a ray, touching but not crossing points...Hijra is located similarly and triangulates the duality of man and woman...it is only through the third point that one can triangulate the distinction between the two points establishing a line, thus enabling man and woman to be determined as distinct locations as opposed to existing on a continuum’ (Saria, p. 102). As an illustration, their complex articulation of the moral economy, for Saria, calls for a reconceptualization of the livelihood practices of hijras especially in relation to ‘traditional notions of moral-religious exchange such as daan, dakshina, bhiksha, dalaali, and haq’ (Saria, p. 22). The collection of challa on trains, Vaibhav Saria argues, cannot be translated as begging, as hijras believed it was their haq—their right—which passengers did not dispute, they only evaded paying up. What was disputed was the amount and not the act of collection, pointing to a logic of extraction that both parties mutually understood, which for Saria points to the similarity between challa and tax, and its partial similarity to other moral economic exchanges (Saria, pp. 112-127). In an interesting aside, Saria draws our attention to the fact that government officials in Patna sent ‘eunuchs’ to collect taxes from defaulters offering a four percent commission on collections, a move that yielded rich returns (Saria, pp. 115-116). Did this

point to the fact that their skill/authority in collection denoted a transaction that was not unidirectional—i.e., dependent on the benevolence of the giver and the passivity of the recipient?

Unwilling to induct herself into ‘the hall of masculinity subscribed to by Baba and society’, Santa Khurai begins to see the ‘inner world of homos, mainly their feminine nature, simplicity, resilience, and the close and loving relationship they shared with each other’, their ‘great kindness’ towards her, their willingness to share their painful stories with her, their request to Khurai to translate love letters for them since they did not know English, like this one from a male lover: ‘You are my sweetheart, love never ends, love is the language of the unspeakable heart’, their deep desire (largely unfulfilled) to be in a conjugal relationship with men... ‘Gradually, the world of homos started revealing itself to me’ (Khurai, pp. 20-21)

Nandi and Saria speak of contexts of proximity and blurring between Hindus and Muslims in the Hijra universe that are similar and yet clearly distinct. In Odisha for instance, Saria observes that ‘their beliefs and practices would often adhere to one while being claimed as characteristic of the other’, necessitating the ethnographer’s ‘fidelity to the way the crossovers between Hindu and Muslim theologies were lived—that is, both as an instantiation and a limit of the notion of religious syncretism’ (Saria, p. 14). Nandi suggests that the kinship hijras in her study in Bengal feel with Muslims is based on the Islamic practice of circumcision—with several hijras converting to Islam after their ritual initiation and constructing the hijra identity within a spiritual framework marked by celibacy and asceticism. Manipur offers a very different spiritual and ritual framing. Santa Khurai offers a thick description of Meitei territory, society and culture and the Lai Haraoba festival in spring, the ritual performance of the Maibis, her discovery that men could also be Maibi in female attire and notes the paradoxical coexistence of the sharing of space by male and female Maibis, and the secrecy of ‘homo’ spectatorship of Maibi laba (male maibi) performance. This points to the complex intertwining of deeply ingrained traditions of trans-queer performance and the simultaneous stigmatization of uncloseted transness and blatant transphobia in the everyday in Meitei society (Khurai, pp. 26-30). Layered on this and deepening our understanding of hostile environments further is Nandi’s observation that Hijra-Koti solidarities are broken by caste both in non-profit spaces working around HIV/AIDS and within the community itself despite its persistent striving for ‘true equality and unconditional acceptance’—leading her to reiterate Dalit trans activist Grace Banu’s observation that ‘Casteism, Brahminism, permeates the trans community and infects it with its transphobia’ (Nandi, p. 63).

On accounts of aesthetics and performativity, Khurai modelled herself on Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Woman* and describes Nupi Manbis wearing their pheijoms like a lungi reaching down to the ankle and covered their heads with white enaphis, like women do (Khurai, p. 8). Nandi observes that ‘[t]he idea of aspirational feminine beauty is deeply ingrained in the psyche of hijras and kotis ... The idea of feminine shringaar (adornment) is held sacred by the community’ (Nandi, p. 79). Saria argues that ‘[h]ijras, through their theatricality, inherit a form of aesthetics that... can be read as rasa...this aestheticization of the everyday through Sringara helps form a buffer against the world’ (Saria, p. 55). And the complex articulation of the economy of semen (Saria, p. 9, Nandi, p. 28) and sexual desire – in Khurai’s words: ‘Some men did like me, but the problem was that my idea of romance and relationships was influenced by Hollywood movies, and these men could not communicate with me in the way I wanted...’ (Khurai, p. 72).

Running through all three accounts is the thread of violence and hostile environments that hijras, kotis and Nupi Manbis must negotiate daily—with families, within communities, and with the state. In Bengal, caste orders set up barriers even in contexts of fluidity across religious boundaries (Nandi, p. 63). In Manipur, there are painful stories of the rounding up of Bs (code name for Nupi Manbis) by army personnel, the physical brutality, the passing of the baton to the Manipuri commandos who then arrest them en masse and put them in jail, abusing and torturing them in custody (Khurai, pp. 120-21), families sending sons out of Manipur for education and employment to prevent them from becoming naharols (militants) (Khurai, p. 125), and the violent moral policing of Bs by the naharols. And in Odisha, the outbreak of violence involving hijras and passengers is always around the corner (Saria, p. 119).

All three works present gripping descriptions of context, speech (laughter, anger, gestural), language ('sociolect'/'hijralect'—Nandi, p. 84), relationships, and habitations—the dense forests in Manipur—the thick bamboo groves flanking both sides of the dreaded Chandam neighbourhood that one had to pass through to attend the Lai Haraoba festival in Puthiba—where 'it was said that during the daytime the bamboo trees on either side of the lane wilted and spread their branches across the ground' suddenly standing upright the minute someone stepped on them, causing instant death (Khurai, p. 24). Or Saria's last meeting with the dying Mangu: 'She was once again at the majhar, doing very poorly... We remained silent at the peaceful majhar, listening to the sounds of crickets, frogs, monkeys, dogs, cattle, distant motorbikes, and other sounds I could not make out' (Saria, pp. 92-93). As they travel between worlds in living the everyday, a language like Ulti is used in specific domains that mark these worlds apart: Ulti vocabulary has a repertoire of words 'pertaining to hijra social structures, kinship terms, rituals, customs, occupations, finance, bodies, beauty and aesthetics, sexual acts, gender identities and medical terminology', but '[w]ords pertaining to any other domain...that have not been silenced or made taboo by mainstream culture, do not figure in the set of bare Ulti lexical terms', making languages like Ulti an expression of resistance to silencing in dominant languages of Hijra life worlds (Nandi, p. 90).

Cutting through the thick description and analysis of ways in which transgender realities are embedded in the local challenging claims to a universal/global framing of transness and queerness, in the long shadow of HIV/AIDS governance, these works re-present questions of embodiment, performativity, risk, speech and voice in a deeply subversive and poignant manner contributing in important ways to the richly growing literature on transgender studies in the subcontinent.

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