

# 'With Respect to sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India': Gayatri Reddy Bool Review

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In 1996, anthropologist Gayatri Reddy conducted an intensive study of a group of hijras in the South Indian twin cities Hyderabad and Secunderabad through participant observation. Several years later, in 2005, Reddy published her experiences and analysis of the life of the hijras as an outstanding and insightful ethnographic account titled *With Respect to Sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India*. Gayatri is a well-established anthropologist who specialises in women and gender studies and within this book she explores in a structured and engaging manner the life and beliefs of hijras in India. Emotional and elaborate, this masterly ethnography gives an insight into the everyday struggles of living as a hijra as well as unravelling many of the misconceptions surrounding hijra identity and sexuality. Using a creative and engaging style, Reddy captures the reader through a balanced mix of story narratives, journal accounts, theory and analysis. She also explores and challenges the work of other anthropologists, such as Serena Nanda, to demonstrate the ways in which studies of hijras in the past have solely been focused on sexual performativity and gender rather than the complex array of elements which make up hijra identity

such as kinship, religion, hierarchies and class. As well as providing an informative study on hijras, Reddy also explores the methods and struggles of a female anthropologist in the field, commenting on access difficulties as well as the limited outside support her position as a middle/upper class woman caused her. As such, this book is particularly inspiring for the budding anthropologist as it provides a genuine account of what it entails to conduct fieldwork and highlights issues and challenges faced by anthropologists that are commonly brushed over in many ethnographic books.

## Setting the Scene

Reddy begins her ethnographic account with a detailed and informative chapter titled, "The Ethnographic Setting". This first chapter serves as an introduction as she sets the scene for the rest of the book, introducing the narrative tone and providing a background on the hijras of Hyderabad by diving into the history of city. She explains what is generally understood by the term 'hijra': men who live as women and go through a process of altering their body to appear more feminine. This concept is elaborated on later in the book where its complexity is unravelled. For example hijra's are commonly referred to as an embodiment of the 'third sex' by scholars and some anthropologists but, Reddy challenges this theory.

Within this chapter she discusses some key obstacles that she faced, foreshadowing difficulties that she elaborates on throughout the book, in different stages

of her fieldwork. Reddy begins at the start of her fieldwork, discussing the initial difficulty in gaining access to the hijras due to her status as a middle/upper class Indian woman. Her status made it difficult to find the hijra's location as people around her found it 'improper' to socialise with hijras (4). Locating hijras was also difficult due to the general public's ignorance of them and apprehension about discussing hijras from those who were aware of their existence in Hyderabad. Despite this, Reddy managed to gain access to a group of hijras living under a water tank in Secunderabad, whom she formed close bonds by positioning herself as a curious, unthreatening student.

By starting the book at the beginning of her fieldwork and highlighting initial issues, Reddy gives an insight into the life and work of an anthropologist, showing the hard work and determination that was put into acquiring the information for her book. As well as introducing the hijras of Hyderabad and beginning the narrative of her fieldwork, Reddy uses this first chapter to introduce her main argument surrounding the identity of hijras. Hijra identity cannot be solely reduced to their gender or sexuality but is a combination of various factors which she explores in future chapters. This leads the reader to question their own perception of what makes up identity and question the works of anthropologists which focus primarily on sexual performativity as a marker of identity.

## **Theoretical frames and literature in Chapter 2**

While chapter 1 focuses on introducing

Reddy's argument and highlighting the practicality of conducting fieldwork among the hijras of South India, the second chapter unpacks the existing theory that analysis of hijra identity stems from examining secondary literature. She condenses this theory into four categories of literature which construct the idea of a 'third sex': ancient Indian texts, medieval references, British colonial literature and contemporary anthropological literature (18). Within each branch of literature, she finds evidence of 'third sex' and speculations on concepts of sexuality within India. Reddy shows that these go back as far as ancient Indian times, with different religions such as Jains, Buddhists and Brahmans having their own way of differentiating gender such as procreative ability (21). By analysing and comparing medieval literature she introduces the historical presence and importance of eunuchs in India and the high positions that they often had due to their social difference as castrated men and lack of sexual ability deeming them unthreatening. The use of eunuch to describe hijras implies that the basis of their identity is their lack of genitals, a view that Reddy challenges within this chapter and throughout the book. She uses literature from these four eras to demonstrate the ways in which hijras have been situated in the realm of sexuality and gender difference by scholars and anthropologists and questions hijras' role in being a symbol of the third sex. Drawing comparisons across texts, she shows that the reality of hijras constructing their identity through many social differences other than sexuality is commonly overlooked.

### Kotis in Chapter 3

After examining the methodology and theory behind studying hijras, Reddy moves onto discussing the beliefs of the community, introducing an array of concepts and linguistic terms which establish their entire social order. Reddy discusses the terms *koti*, *pantis*, *AC/DC* and *nanans*, all of which are identifying labels which show that hijra is not a blanket term for men who live as women. Reddy defines *koti* as “receptive, effeminate men”, meaning that they do not penetrate during sexual intercourse, whereas *pantis* are “penetrative, masculine men” who do penetrate (44). This focuses on their roles within sex, showing that while Reddy argues that sexual performativity is not the only factor in hijra identity, it is still a factor for some. By discussing these terms, Reddy displays the blurred lines of gender and the complex construction of identity, challenging the idea that there are only three genders. Furthermore, religion also plays a role in hijra identity, as while hijras are one type of *koti*, their Islamic faith is one of the key factors in making them hijra-*kotis* rather than an alternative type such as *jogins* who are Hindu. *Jogins* believe that they were born as *kotis*, unlike hijras, as they were possessed by the goddess Yellamma at birth (71). Another type of *koti* are the *kada-catla* *kotis* who by a hijra’s definition are “kings by day, and queens by night” (67), meaning that they are men who live as men during the day and as women at night. By providing clear descriptions of various types of *koti* within the ‘*koti-family*’, Reddy shows that hijras have more identifying features than their sexual role. While the term ‘hijra’ is the

most well-known and stigmatised across India, they are not the personification of third sex but simply one of many communities who identify as neither male nor female.

Furthermore, in chapter 3 Reddy once again demonstrates difficulties that she faced with gaining access to different *koti* communities. While her focus was on hijras, in order to explore their relationship with other *kotis* it would have been beneficial to interact with other *kotis* and *pantis* too. However, she found this difficult as some *koti* groups such as *Jogins* only coame together for pilgrimages and special occasions. Another large issue in talking to *pantis* was her loyalty towards the hijras. This made it morally difficult to approach them considering the common “emotional polarisation of the *koti-panti* relationship” (49). This makes the book vastly one sided, from only the hijra point of view. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the opinion of the hijras and does not make the book any less engaging.

### The role of asexuality in hijra authenticity in Chapter 4

In chapter 4, Reddy engages with the idea of the ‘real hijra’, contemplating hijra authenticity by exploring asexuality and views surrounding sex work. Asexuality is seen by hijra’s as the most important feature in hijra ‘authenticity’ with “sexual impotence” being a necessary criterion to be a hijra (92). This is ensured by the performance of the “nirvana”, an operation to remove male genitalia, which serves as proof of their asexuality Those who have had the nirvana are seen to be authentic

hijras and as such have and gain more izzat (respect) from other hijras. Reddy highlights a key paradox within the system of hijra authenticity and izzat as it is believed that those who have had the nirvan gain more respect, while simultaneously the operation results in the loss of izzat in the eyes of the general public due to the stigma associated with the label and practices of hijras (96). By pointing out this issue, Reddy emphasises the struggles that hijras face as they are discriminated against for becoming the most respectful version of themselves.

Reddy also discusses the presence of sex work within the lives of hijras which is frowned upon by other kotis. The lack of izzat associated with the work often resulted in hijras lying to her or going to extreme lengths to fabricate stories to cover up their participation in prostitution. This made it difficult at times for Reddy to gain an accurate account on hijra occupations. However, I would argue that this act itself shows the belief systems of hijras and the importance of maintaining the illusion of having izzat to others as well as their shame of unauthenticity.

### **Blurring of religious and gender boundaries in Chapter 5**

As mentioned above, the role of religion is important in the identity of hijras. Reddy elaborates on this further in chapter 5 where she discusses hijras' claims to Muslim identity despite the construction of their history through Hindu mythology. Hijras' personal views of religion are similar to their views on gender in that they

blur religious boundaries. While hijras are Muslim, and Reddy was often told about Islam being a necessary element of hijra identity, they also incorporate elements of Hinduism into their identity. For example, hijras worship the Hindu goddess Bedhraj Mata and believe that they need her permission to become hijras and to have the nirvan operation or they will die (109). This blurring of religious boundaries is mirrored by the blurring of gender in that hijras' practice a combination of male and female Islamic customs and rituals. For example, many hijras take part in the male pilgrimage Hajj and enter mosques wearing male clothing. However, they also partake in female practices such as wearing a burqa (104). By exploring the religion of hijras, Reddy shows the complexity of their identity.

In chapter 5 Reddy also comments directly on other anthropologists' methodologies and theories, challenging their frameworks by highlighting their emphasis on hijras as social outcasts rather than studying how their Islamic faith relates to their identity. Reddy suggests the possibility that in previous studies hijras articulated their identity in terms of their location outside of the general religious boundaries of society due to pointed questioning by the fieldworker rather than elaborating on their own constructed combination of religion. As a result, ethnographic studies overlooked the role of Islam and Hinduism in hijras' lives (117-118) and instead focused on their social differences from the general public. Reddy's engagement with anthropologists Lynton, Rajan and Jaffrey adds an extra layer to her analysis and addresses a potential issue in the misrepresentation of hijras in literature.

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## **Performativity in Chapter 6**

As previously mentioned, hijras believe in hijra authenticity, an element of which is linked to appearance. Those who appear more feminine, while not being a requirement, gain more respect (124). Hijras are required to rid themselves of masculine qualities. Reddy discusses in detail the various processes hijras go through to make their appearance more feminine such as facial hair removal and

taking excessive amounts of birth control pills for their female hormones (130). However, despite attempts to eradicate male attributes, hijras do not identify as women but instead, as previously mentioned, blur the line of male and female. Reddy makes this clear when she states, “Whenever I asked a question regarding their gender affiliation, hijras would laugh and say, “We are neither men nor women; we are hijras” (134).

Chapter 6 also discusses the importance of performativity in shaping gender and hijra identity. Hijras can be clearly identified in public in India by the classic hijra handclap, which is used solely by hijras to gain attention, express annoyance, shame others or simply to express themselves. Reddy explains the hand-clapping element of hijra identity through a writing style in which she differentiates between “scene 1...scene 2...” to clearly show different times in which she experienced handclapping (130). This is an interesting and engaging format as it allows the reader to clearly see that handclapping is a common aspect of hijra life by showing the various times throughout her fieldwork that Reddy encountered it. It is formatting styles like this which makes Reddy’s book expert-level as she combines various writing styles, swapping between informative discussion to narrated stories, to clearly explain concepts and keep the reader engaged.

In terms of performativity, while handclapping is a key feature of hijra practice, it is not the only identifying element. Reddy highlights the practice

of revealing their genitalia to the public in order to shame them (139). Being a conservative country, the showing of genitals in India is largely frowned upon. However, hijra showing their lack of or mutilated genitals is seen to be a large mark of shame and as such is a weapon of sorts that hijras can use against the public. Reddy emphasises this clearly by including excerpts from instances that hijras have lifted their saris towards people bothering them, showing the power that the nirvan operation can give a hijra, despite simultaneously reducing their social status. I find Reddy's analysis here particularly noteworthy as she emphasises the many paradoxes that exist in hijra life and highlights the stigma surrounding hijras as they are unaccepted by wider society.

### **Personal hijra accounts in Chapter 8**

Further on in the book, Reddy includes a fascinating chapter compiling stories from kotis that she met during her fieldwork. This chapter is particularly interesting, and my favourite chapter, because it allows the reader to dive into the life stories of hijras in their own words. Reddy includes these deeply personal accounts to show the similarities and reality of the struggles that many hijras face in their lifetime. However, the reliability of the stories is somewhat questionable since many hijras tended to fabricate aspects of their background to relate to other hijras. Furthermore, there is an issue with documentation as the stories are written with great detail. Reddy would have had to remember these accounts so that she could write them up, thereby questioning how she accurately

documented the information. However, he may have recorded these interviews, making it possible to write up the full accounts. These accounts detail the abuse and abandonment that many hijras faced as well as the impact that being a social outcast and vastly stigmatised can have on their mental health with accounts of suicide attempts being uncommon. This chapter is vastly emotional and works extremely well placed near the end of the book as the reader has already gained an insight into the practices of hijras and now has the opportunity to read about the emotional toll that it can have.

### **With Respect to Sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India. Conclusion**

Other important factors that Reddy discusses within *With Respect to Sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India* that make up hijra identity are kinship, marriage, family and gay identifications. In her conclusion, Reddy emphasises the importance of studying and understanding hijras by discussing the political advancements for hijras in the 21st century as they gain more rights and recast themselves as respectable individuals, separated from the shameful image that society created. This is the perfect ending as it highlights the book's modernity and the increasing importance of educating the public on hijra identity. Reddy effectively brings the topics from all of her chapters together to form her final argument; that hijra identity is not solely defined by sexuality or gender but is understood through a vast range of differences, including religion, class,

customs, sexuality, gender and beliefs. She discusses how each element links to this overarching argument and makes her point extremely clear. Furthermore, she also engages directly with another anthropologist, Serena Nanda, quoting her directly and contradicting Nanda's statement that hijras are "neither men nor women" by stating that hijras actually adopt a *combination* of male and female traits.

In conclusion, Gayatri Reddy's ethnograph *With Respect to Sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India* is an informative, emotional and masterly book which educates the reader clearly on hijra identity and unpacks the complexity of this identity. Each chapter details an aspect of identification that other anthropologists' claims that hijra identity is solely sexual.

By allocating each chapter a specific factor of hijra identity the book is easy to read and digest. This is emphasised further by clear subtitles and Reddy reinforcing her argument throughout the book. Interestingly, Reddy engages directly with the work of other anthropologists, critiquing their analysis and providing her own spin on their theories, making the book a perfect example of the continuous progression of social anthropology. A slight flaw in the book is that Reddy at times overquotes other anthropologists, including large quotations rather than summarising their views. However, this is a minor flaw as she balances outside sources with her own analysis and theories. Therefore, I would argue that this book is an excellent example of a modern ethnography which engages with the progression of the world around it.

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## REFERENCES

- Reddy, Gayatri. 2005. *With Respect to sex: negotiating hijra identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press