HIJRAS AS A THIRD GENDER
AN ANALYSIS ON GENDER MULTIPLICITY OF HIJRAS BASED ON A RHIZOMATIC FRAMEWORK

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Hijras as a third gender: An analysis on gender multiplicity of hijras based on a rhizomatic framework

Anke Truyers¹

This article conducts an analysis of hijras based upon already existing literature. It takes Stachowiak’s (2016) article on gender multiplicity through a rhizomatic framework as a starting point. I believe that this rhizomatic framework could be a useful model to properly step away from the persistent binary construction of gender that has been present in the West and other cultures that have been contained by Western thinking, since it moves beyond intersectionality and takes multiplicity and connectivity into account. This article shows the potential of this model as one that is applicable to any culture at any point in time by applying it to hijras in South Asia. It explores the ways in which hijras can be seen as a third gender, ways that contradict the legal policy and societal ideas around hijras. It thus gives the chance to create a more nuanced and complex image of the multiplicity of gender and the individuals involved, by taking both their lived experiences as well as the social construction of gender into account. This might eventually help address the shortcomings of the current legal third gender recognition of hijras.

Keywords: Hijras, third gender, rhizomatic framework, genderrevolutionary, transgender, genderqueer, gender identity, South Asia, West

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INTRODUCTION

Hijras are a cultural group in South Asia – predominantly found in India – that has often been described as *eunuch*, hermaphrodite, neither man nor woman, or a third gender\(^2\) (Agrawal, 1997; Nanda, 1999; Bakshi, 2004; Kalra, 2012; Hossain, 2017). Nanda (1999) characterizes them as a religious group of “men who dress and act like women and whose culture centers on the worship of Bahuchara Mata”, one of the many versions of the Mother Goddess in Hinduism worshiped throughout India (Nanda, 1999). Although they have often been the victims of violence and social isolation (Nanda, 1999; Kalra, 2012; Khan, 2016; Stachowiak, 2016 etc.) they have existed and survived for over thousands of years (Kalra, 2012), embodying a spiritual function in society through the act of *badhai* (see *infra*), which is a ritual performance at a marriage or the birth of child, mostly a son\(^3\), where they bless the couple or the child with fertility and prosperity (Nanda, 1999). This power to bless newlyweds or newborns is ascribed to hijras because they are seen as a sexually ambiguous group, who had their genitals removed but no female genitalia reconstructed; a process that is called *nirvan*. This emasculation, and the implication of ascetics attached to it, is believed to link hijras to Shiva and the Mother Goddess (Nanda, 1999).

This cultural group will be analyzed by using the research of Stachowiak (2016) on genderqueer individuals in the West (see *infra*). In this way I will try to find out if a different way of thinking about gender, namely through a rhizomatic framework that was already performed on trans* individuals and that allows for an interpretation of unique aspects, might create new ways of looking at gender identity in the world as a whole and might help to avoid the danger of not recognizing third genders as they are (see *infra*). The reason why hijras seem to be a good group of people to accomplish this is because they have always been considered to exist outside the binary and contain the power to be genderrevolutionary (Nanda, 1999).

The starting point of my analysis is thus the qualitative study of Stachowiak (2016), who has already explored the possibilities of a rhizomatic framework with genderqueer

\(^2\) Or even third sex (Bakshi, 2004), although this seems to be too limiting for hijras, who are rarely born intersex (born with characteristics that are both male and female). Hijras are in most cases male-bodied (Nanda, 1999; Kalra, 2012; Hossain, 2017).

\(^3\) Usually only sons are blessed since daughters are seen as a burden in Indian society (Nanda, 1999).
individuals. A genderqueer individual is “a person whose gender identity cannot be categorized as solely male or female” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This thus can be seen as a synonym for trans\(^\text{4}\), which is why I will use these terms interchangeably\(^5\). Genderqueer or trans\(^\ast\) are terms that are more elaborate than “transgender” (see infra); they are “the widest notation of possible trans\(^\ast\) identities aimed at promoting unification among gender variant communities by placing focus on gender transgression over specific identity labels, genders, or bodies” (Khan, 2016). Davidson (2007) indicates that trans\(^\ast\) has “no singular, fixed meaning but is instead currently conceptualized by both scholars and activists as inclusive of the identities and experiences of some (or perhaps all) gender-variant, gender- or sex-changing, gender-blending, and gender-bending people”. In this way trans\(^\ast\) individuals thus can be seen as a third gender or genderrevolutionary as well.

Rhizomatic thinking shows much potential to look at gender multiplicity and other cultures without bias. It takes specific aspects of these cultures and individuals into account because it looks at three different aspects that intertwine and interact, namely the felt sense of gender of individuals, the social construction of gender in a specific culture, and gender as becoming (see infra). I also believe rhizomatic thinking can provide an interesting perspective because it moves beyond intersectionality; it recognizes that different identities do not just intersect or can be turned off or ignored – they are always present and negotiated (Puar, 2007; Stachowiak, 2016). Additionally, I hope to contribute to the discussion of third gender and how we can step away from binary thinking, although I believe the model also leaves room to investigate multiple masculinities and femininities which makes it useful for gender multiplicity in general. Lastly, a rhizomatic framework contains the potential to take into account “the difficulties associated with pinning down a single definition through which to describe such individuals” (Khan, 2016) – individuals such as hijras and trans\(^\ast\) people. This framework thus will help provide leverage for groups such as hijras and trans\(^\ast\) individuals to be able to claim their gender in their own, individual way and not in the ways they are currently defined through hegemonic structures and social norms (see infra).

This paper is organized as followed: firstly, I will give a short introduction on the discussions on (third) gender. Secondly, I will elaborate on what it means to be trans\(^\ast\) or

\(^4\) The fact that trans\(^\ast\) is used here as an umbrella term is indicated by the asterisk (\(^\ast\)).

\(^5\) I will also only use these umbrella terms, as using separate terms for every individual gender identity would be too diffuse for this analysis.
genderqueer and I will discuss Stachowiak's (2016) research on genderqueer individuals. Here I will look at the possibilities rhizomatic thinking offers in the lived experiences of trans* people. Lastly, I will elaborate on hijras and take a first step in applying the rhizomatic framework to this cultural group in South Asia to see in which ways they (dis)identify with masculinity and femininity and can thus be characterized as a third gender.

(THIRD) GENDER: AN INTRODUCTION

Before getting into trans* individuals and hijras in particular, it is important to understand how "gender" has been defined in previous academic literature. In the beginning there was no distinction made between birth sex and gender (identity and expression). This changed in the second half of the twentieth century with academics such as Oakley (1972) and Shively & De Cecco (1977). Oakley (1972) was one of the first to make this distinction and described sex as the body, based on biological differences, and gender as the cultural equivalent that classifies people into "masculine" and "feminine". Often though these two concepts still get confused and sex/body is used to ascribe someone's gender (see infra). Joan Scott (1986) was one of the pioneers in defining gender in a more constructive way. She described "gender" as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." This definition contains two dimensions, namely a social dimension, which contains the presumed differences between the sexes, and a power dimension. The social dimension shows that gender is a social construct. This implies that gender needs to be looked at in its specific social context and that different cultures have different views. In Scott’s definition specifically gender is still defined in a dichotomous way, opposing femininity against masculinity. Such a definition of "gender" is very common in twentieth century academics. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) illustrates this by indicating that science compartmentalized views of the world, and thus also views on gender, into either/or oppositional categories.

In the 1990s academics started letting go of this dualistic view more and more (Ekins & King, 2006, 2010). They realized that gender, and specifically for this article gender identity, consists of more than masculinity and femininity. These critiques started with the rise of poststructuralist feminist theory and queer theory (Butler, 1990; Hines, 2010). They realized that individuals do not always relate to (only one) femininity or
masculinity, but that there are other experiences as well and that these experiences might even differ from culture to culture. This lead to gender and transgender theorists and activists “[arguing] against a “master narrative” of transgender experience in which all experiences of gender fluidity and multiplicity must be resolved in favor of a singular, unified gender” (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Echoes of these critiques on the dichotomous model of gender have found their way into the academic world in general (Bornstein 1994; Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000; Feinberg 1996), but they often are not well theorized yet at the level of subjective psychological experience (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008).

Even when we realize gender identity is more complex and fluid, it is still necessary to wonder in what way it is possible to break through this binary thinking that has been present for so long. This is a difficult task since there is no unified answer to “what makes a particular classification qualify as a discrete gender” (Agrawal, 1997), let alone multiple genders. This ambiguity explains why authors have different views. One attempt to develop such a model of multiplicity comes from Diamond and Butterworth (2008) who suggest that it is important to take intersectionality into account. They argue that it “provides a generative starting point for theorizing women’s experiences of multiple, partial, and fluid gender identifications” (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008) and claim that intersectionality as a framework takes experiences of multiplicity in gender identification into account. These experiences shape new forms of identity and experience (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008), but does this intersectional framework actually break through the binary or does it stick to the man-woman dichotomy? It seems more like the latter since they talk about “women’s experiences of multiple, partial, and fluid gender identifications” (see supra; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). They also claim to use intersectionality as a way to look into identities that are neither “unambiguously female nor male”. This thus acknowledges multiple masculinities and femininities, but does not go far enough to reach the possibility of third, fourth, fifth… genders, independently of a man-woman dichotomy. Another attempt to break through this dichotomy, and the one that I will explore in this article, can be found in the work of Stachowiak (2016) who uses a different type of thinking, namely rhizomatic thinking, to explore a perspective on gender multiplicity that takes lived experiences of genderqueer individuals into account (see infra).
EXPLORING A RHIZOMATIC FRAMEWORK WITH GENDERQUEER INDIVIDUALS

(Re)defining trans*/genderqueer

Trans* was first coined in the twentieth century as “transsexual”, a term that was then isolated from “homosexual” and “transvestite” by pioneers such as Hirschfeld in 1910 and Ellis in 1938⁶ (Ekins & King, 2010). It signified someone who was born in the wrong body. This “wrong body”-metaphor was the dominant view for a long time⁷; it points at a discrepancy between the sex/body and the gender identity/mind of a person and has the connotation that there are “true” gendered identities, of which transsexuality is not one. (Hines, 2010) There was only one solution for this “condition” (as Harry Benjamin, a leading sexual reformer, called it) caused by dysfunctional socialization and that solution consisted of a surgical reconstruction. The goal of this surgery was to create “gender harmony” and to discard anyone that was neither male nor female; this also lead to pinpointing a “real” transsexual, the ones that could be “fixed” by surgery, namely male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals. Here, a pathologization of transsexuality took place (Hines, 2010).

By the 1990s a paradigm shift took place in the definition of this “transgender phenomenon”. Binary ideas of gender were increasingly let go off and different perspectives on trans* people arose: Marxists for example looked at it as a “grand narrative”, others took a more postmodernist perspective and thought of it in terms of gender performance and fluidity (Butler, 1990; Bornstein, 1994; Wilchins, 1997; Ekins & King, 2010). Another paradigm shift took place, namely “a greater awareness of transgender diversity, combined with a critique of the major medico-psychiatric [categorizations]” (Ekins & King, 2010). This accomplished two reactions: one reaction was that many trans* individuals felt free to identify as “trans” or “gender queer” (Nestle, Howell and Wilchins, 2002; Ekins & King, 2010) without conforming to the medico-psychiatric categorizations; the other reaction was an emergence of new categorizations and identities with the purpose of pinpointing “precisely who and what they were”. (Ekins & King, 2010)

As said before, the view of transsexuality as a transitional stage changed and new perspectives arose. This all started with the rise of the transgender movement and

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⁶ Their work was crucial in separating practices of sexuality from gender diversity.

⁷ Sometimes this metaphor is still used, although rarely.
community, who pointed at the possibility of multiple gender identities (Nanda, 1999), but also with the rise of queer and gender studies, who coined the term “transgender” instead of “transsexual” in the nineties. This shift in terms changed the focus, away from psychopathology, and provided a chance to broaden its definition. Trans* people started using “transgender” as “a way to fight the medical monopoly on classification of trans practices and identities, as well as to unify a diverse population of people whose non-normative gender practices were unaccepted by many members of both straight and gay communities (Denny 2006; Valentine 2007; Spade and Currah 2008)” (Westbrook, 2010). It is now used as an “umbrella term applied to a diverse group of individuals whose gender identity/expression diverges from culturally defined categories of sex and gender” (Kuper, Nussbaum & Mustanski, 2012). In this way, surgery was also discarded as the solution to “fix” trans* people (Van Caenegem et al., 2015). However, surgery is still commonly performed; the difference here is that it now has become a personal choice and that there are equally valid options available. These other options can be diverse. Trans* or genderqueer individuals can identify as “neither male nor female, both male or female, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the very idea of only two genders” (Richards et al., 2016). Labels used to express these gender identities are endless (agender, bigender, two-spirited, non-binary et cetera) and they might differ from individual to individual, depending on which label they personally prefer and feel comfortable with. Despite the fact that there only seems to be a rise of such identities in the last few decades, they have been present over time and across different cultures. (Herdt, 1996; Richards et al., 2016)

Rhizomatic thinking as a framework (Stachowiak, 2016)

Stachowiak (2016) explores the possibilities of rhizomatic thinking as a framework for gender multiplicity with genderqueer individuals and effects it by looking at gender identity in three ways: through the felt sense of gender (Salamon, 2010), through gender as becoming (Braidotti, 2002; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), and through the way in which identity is negotiated in relation to the social construction of gender. In this way, they⁸ argue, one can see gender identity as something “organic and personal”, something that

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⁸ I use “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun, because Stachowiak (2016) indicates that they are genderqueer and there is no comment on which pronouns they prefer. “They” here feels like the best option then, since this is commonly used when it comes to gender neutrality (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center, n.d.).
“brings forth negotiations of social and felt sense of gender, and internal and external oppression”. It does not regard gender as a fixed element that is experienced by everyone in one way or another, but rather sees it as something uniquely fitted into the lives of individuals. This view not only allows multiple forms of masculinity or femininity but also offers a place for people who experience gender identities that fall outside of the binary, without it being necessarily connected to it.

As was said before, they explore this framework by looking at gender identity in three ways. First there is the felt sense of gender; this encompasses what Stachowiak (2016) calls “disidentification”. It means that those individuals “neither opt to assimilate within [the binary] structure nor strictly oppose it” but instead disidentify as “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz, 1999; Stachowiak, 2016). This idea of disidentification thus challenges dichotomous thinking. It also gives individuals agency in their gender experience. Despite the importance of disidentification, another aspect, namely the social construction of gender, should not be completely dismissed:

_Salamon (2010) argues that ‘what we feel about our bodies is just as “constructed” as what we think about them, and the power of social construction as a model of understanding embodiment stems from its insistence that these categories are not separate but always intertwined’ (p. 76). (Stachowiak, 2016)_

Stachowiak (2016) claims that disidentification and the in-between position of these individuals⁹ makes intersectional thinking impossible. Intersectionality according to them implies that “the different aspects of our identity can be turned off, ignored, or simply managed” and this would help “maintain hegemonic structures of hierarchy and power by forcing classification of social constructs”. That is why rhizomatic thinking as a framework for gender multiplicity seems more appealing. Moreover, gender as a rhizome emphasizes the connectivity of this multiplicity and provides the opportunity to move away from the binary and socially constructed labels. Again, the importance of gender as a social construction must not be forgotten.

Lastly, Stachowiak (2016) argues that when we read gender as a rhizome, gender as becoming is a given. This means that one “becomes” by encountering other subjects, entities, events et cetera. These encounters happen to everyone and are “based on our lived experiences that are mediated through the bringing together of the different social

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⁹ I.e. not identifying as a man, but not as a woman either.
constructions of who we are and our life stories and/or moments”. In this way, gender as becoming also becomes an important factor in moving towards a new perspective on gender multiplicity.

What makes rhizomatic thinking as a framework interesting on the one hand is that it breaks away from the previous reliance on the dichotomous model. It has the perk of allowing us to make connections that are not binary “through the intentional or unintentional ruptures, breaks, or severing of connections” (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Stachowiak, 2016). It is also important to note that this approach does not completely swear of intersectionality. Rather it provides extra layers to it by showing the relationship between intersectionality, multiplicity, and assemblages and thus creating a more complete and complex image of the possibilities of gender identity; it “identifies the multiple in-between spaces (...) which we occupy throughout our lived experiences” (Stachowiak, 2016). On the other hand, this model is difficult to use, since it requires looking at single moments, individuals and specific contexts. Still, I think it is important that this paper takes a tentative first step into developing this framework in different settings, based on the already existing literature so that its potential is emphasized.

**Genderqueer individuals in a rhizomatic framework (Stachowiak, 2016)**

To apply the rhizomatic framework, Stachowiak (2016) explores the three aspects described above: firstly, the felt sense of gender of genderqueer individuals; secondly, the social construction of gender; and lastly, gender as becoming. On the one hand, there is their felt sense of gender in which they all express some kind of awkwardness. They felt like they did not fit in; they were not “one of the boys/girls”. Once they recognized that genderqueer was an option, many finally felt like they finally belonged and started exploring the possibilities of identifying as genderqueer in their own experience. On the other hand, there is the social construction of gender, which is still dichotomous in the West. For example, people still think in terms of men and women; the law (in most countries) still only recognizes only two “genders”; and intersex people often still receive genital-normalizing surgeries and therapy that is more harmful than

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10 “Genders” is in between quotation marks since in law it is confused with sex/body.

11 Intersexuality is “the condition (such as that occurring in congenital adrenal hyperplasia or androgen insensitivity syndrome) of either having both male and female gonadal tissue in one individual or of having the gonads of one sex and external genitalia that is of the other sex or is ambiguous.” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)
helpful (Reilly, 2006). That is why identifying as genderqueer is often difficult and in conflict with the social construction of gender. As was said above, all subjects at first experienced awkwardness towards navigating their behavior, since they were expected to adhere to the norms that are imposed on them by society’s view on gender, often confused with sex assigned at birth. A successful performance of this social construction was then to fit into their sex assigned at birth, but it also meant that they failed at their felt sense of genderqueerness and gave into hegemony and oppression (external oppression). This caused them to eventually “(dis)identify with male and female in ways that are tied to an emotional and felt sense to belonging to both expressions of masculinity and femininity”. When they finally learned that genderqueer was “an alternative to male or female of gender”, their experiences became genderqueer and they finally found the language for who they had been all along. Often though they also participate in their own gender oppression (internal oppression). This internal oppression is also caused by the social, cultural and political context around them, which makes them feel the need to adhere to cisnormativity\(^\text{12}\) to some extent. Lastly, all subjects felt that identifying as genderqueer meant being and doing at the same time. The subjects expressed this by saying that they saw genderqueer more as a verb, genderqueering. They all experienced it as “identifying”, as “queering gender norms”. Genderqueer(ing) then is “an act of becoming”.

Stachowiak’s (2016) research is only the first step in working out a new model; they already indicate that more research is needed to fully understand lived experiences of genderqueer individuals and how they negotiate their identity. In my opinion more research can also help lawmakers in understanding the multiplicity in gender so that they can take the needs of trans* people into account when they strive for their recognition. In what follows I will show how a rhizomatic way of thinking can help understand other groups that do not exactly fit into the binary better, by applying the framework to hijras and their general experiences. This will also point out the dangers of binary thinking on a social and legal level; dangers that are present despite the official recognition of a third gender. The current situation of hijras can then be a way to reevaluate our own perspective on gender and gender multiplicity.

\(^{12}\) Cisnormativity is “the assumption that all, or almost all, individuals are cisgender”, i.e. “someone whose gender identity matches their body and the gender assigned to them at birth”. (Russo, n.d.)
METHOD

The analysis of this article is based on an extensive study of already existing literature on (third) gender, trans* people (see supra), and hijras (see infra). I chose to carry out an analysis based on a literature study because of the impossibility to interview hijras for the lack of proximity and the fact that they do not easily trust strangers. This distrust stems for example from the history of violence against hijras, but also through the British colonizers who enforced their western view on the Indian society, which caused hijras to be seen as deviant (see infra; Khan, 2016).

The literature I used were mostly anthropological and historical articles (and sometimes books) I found through using LIMO, a tool from KU Leuven that is accessible for students and grants access to many important scientific databases such as JStore or Web of Science. Some articles and books could not be found through LIMO and were accessed through Google Scholar. The search terms I used were “third gender”, “hijra India”, “third gender hijra”, “non-binary gender”, “transgender”, “trans*” and variants of these search terms. I also looked for specific titles or authors that I ran into while reading through the articles and books I collected by using the aforementioned search terms.

As far as this literature allows it, I will apply the rhizomatic framework mentioned above to hijras, since I think this framework offers a possibility to finally break through the reiterations of binary thinking and can be applied to different cultures. It makes room for lived experiences of individuals, but also takes into account the various cultural aspects, views, and terminology. It is important though to keep in mind that without hearing real life experiences from hijras themselves I cannot consistently and properly do this. That is why I will focus mostly on the multiple extensive disquisitions that exist on hijras and that sometimes include hijras’ experiences. Despite this lacuna, I still think a rhizomatic perspective applied to already existing literature will be a good first step to show its potential so that further qualitative research might build upon it.

As a side note, I do think it is crucial to take my own background and identity into account and consider how this might affect my analysis, so that it can be consciously acknowledged in looking at another culture. In this way I hope to successfully avoid any bias. I am a white, cisgender lesbian from Belgium who identifies and was born as female. I grew up in a small city with middle class parents and was able to study at a reputable university. I was baptized as a baby, but raised without religion and I consider myself to be agnostic. I have never experienced any violence because of my sexuality or
identity. In many ways I thus have (lived) a privileged life, despite belonging to a minority group – the LGBTQ+ community – and despite being female. My position as a cisgender female allows me to not let my personal experiences get in the way, but it also might influence my thinking process in a way that induces bias. By being aware of my position I hope to be able to eliminate this as much as possible.

HIJRAS AS A THIRD GENDER

Hijras have existed since “the times of the Ramayana and Mahabharatha\(^{13}\), which means they have been present in Indian society for over thousands of years (Kalra, 2012). They are viewed as a group of sexually ambiguous people who are neither men nor women. They are not men, since they use female names once they join the community and they dress and behave like females. However, they are also not female, since this feminine behavior is often exaggerated, which makes it look like a caricature. It is often sexually suggestive in ways “that would be considered inappropriate, even outrageous, for ordinary women” and they use coarse and abusive speech and gestures while performing badhai, but also on the streets where they are often feared by the rest of the population (Nanda, 1999). Moreover they often still have a male facial structure, body muscularity, and facial hair when they did not receive their operation yet (see infra) and they do not menstruate or have female (reproductive) organs\(^{14}\). Furthermore, it is possible for them to practice both male and female jobs, but as a “true” hijra they usually only perform badhai, begging, or sex work. They live in houses with their gurus (leader), where they help with the household and earn money for their guru who takes care of them as if she is their mother (Nanda, 1999). Hijra relationships are thus formed as if they are a family consisting of females, with for example the naanni (grandmother hijra), the guru (leader/mother), and the chela (student/daughter) (Kalra, 2012). Some hijras do not live with their guru, but with their heterosexual families where they “simultaneously perform the role of “macho” householding men and that of hijra” (Hossain, 2012), but

\(^{13}\) Ramayana and Mahabharatha are two important Sanskrit epics of ancient India (Wikipedia, 2018).

\(^{14}\) The fact that having no female (reproductive) organs seems so important in the definition of hijras shows how important the body still is. It also shows that gender is often still confused with sex, since sex is assigned at birth by looking at genitals and/or reproductive organs.
there are also hijras who are in a relationship with a man, who they live with and where they perform the role of a housewife in an exaggerated, stereotypical, soap-like way to “present themselves as normal and as belonging to the mainstream rather than the margins of their society” (Nanda, 1999).

Hijras have been tolerated through the ritual function they fulfill in Indian society. This ritual function has been ascribed to them through two important elements in hijra culture, namely myths and nirvan. Firstly, there are ancient Indian myths that bestow hijras with special powers of being able to bless people with luck and fertility because they are associated with ascetics and are seen as sannyasis, people who renounce society to live as holy wanderers and beggars (Nanda, 1999; Kalra, 2012). Secondly, there is nirvan or the emasculation operation, which is one of hijra’s most defining characteristics and the reason why hijras are connected to ascetics and thus the Mother Goddess15 and Shiva. This emasculation operation is performed by a dai ma, which is a hijra without any medical training who is believed to receive her ability to perform this operation through the power of Bahuchara Mata, so that the result is not in the dai ma’s hands (Nanda, 1999). The choice to not let “sex change” doctors perform this surgery is justified by the belief that these doctors will not do it the right way according to their tradition. For example, a “sex change” doctor will try to stop the blood that comes from the removed testicles and penis from flowing, but the hijras believe that the flowing of the blood is less medically harmful, and, more importantly, is a necessary part of the ritual (Nanda, 1999). To “receive” the power of Shiva and Bahuchara Mata it is thus important that the dai ma performs the operation.

When it comes to religion, most academics claim that hijras have a bias towards Islam, even though they are rooted in Hindu mythology and practices (e.g. Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). In Reddy’s (2005) research for example most hijras were born as a Muslim and practice Muslim religion in their daily lives. They do however derive their spiritual function16 among other things from Hindu mythology. Academics such as Taparia (2011) argue that the adoption of Hindu practices stems from “the loss of their courtly prestige under the Mughal sultanate”, a sultanate where they were “a cruelly enslaved commodity”, after which they “transform[ed] the Islamic practice of emasculation into a culturally acceptable trope of [idealized] renunciation in Hindu-dominated India” (Hossain, 15 Bahuchara Mata.

16 I.e. their power received from Shiva and Bahuchara Mata.
In this way emasculation became something more than an Islamic practice; it was also acceptable from a Hindu perspective. Here thus lies one of hijras’ survival tactics (see infra). Later on, the link between emasculation and Islam was forgotten and it was seen as a sin against Allah to have your genitals removed (see infra; Hossain, 2017).

Ambiguities

Trying to define hijras brings along some ambiguities. Firstly, Nanda (1999) describes an issue that emerges from the disjunction between the cultural definition of the hijra role and “the individually experienced social roles, gender identities, sexual orientations, and life histories of the people who become hijras” (Nanda, 1999). This disjunction has important consequences. On the one hand hijras are seen as impotent and emasculated men or intersex people, who are ascetic and/or asexual and define themselves as neither man nor woman. They perform traditional occupations that are seen as inherent to hijras: they are performers of the badhai, and also perform at temple festivals. On the other hand, many hijras do not perform. They often beg or go into prostitution. Kalra and Shah (2013) even claim that badhai is slowly disappearing and that more and more hijras are forced into sex work. The fact that they practice as a sex worker does not fit into the societal idea of hijras as renunciating their male sexuality and becoming ascetic. Lastly, not all hijras see themselves as neither man nor woman, but define themselves to be “like women” (Nanda, 1999) or self-identify through the distinction between their body and their soul: a feminine soul trapped in the body of a man (Nisar, 2017). This distinction between the body and soul seems an important leitmotif in the hijras’ lives and “replaces” the gender/sex division used in the West (Nisar, 2017) since it provides a different experience of their identity, but other authors often neglect or do not mention this distinction.

Another issue that impedes a definition of hijras is an issue of the body. This is related to nirvan. Nanda (1999) indicates that this operation is the attribute that distinguishes a real hijra from a fake one17. This view seems to be outdated and is connected to the cultural definition of the hijra as neither man nor woman (see supra; Nanda, 1999). Currently, hijras define themselves in different ways, which blurs the

17 Although Nanda (1999) admits that one group of hijras clouds this distinction, namely hijras who work as sex workers. Most of them are “real” in the sense that they did have the emasculation operation, but are “fake” since they perform an activity that is not in line with the traditional definition of hijras as ritual performers who are to be ascetic.
former definition of hijras as sexually ambiguous. In Bangladesh for example hijras construe themselves in terms of “the ability to conduct hijragiri”, which is a ritual conduct of badhai, cholla or birit\textsuperscript{18}, and the mastering of the ulti\textsuperscript{19} (Hossain, 2017). This does not mean that anyone who has that ability to conduct hijragiri can become a hijra. Only “male-bodied persons with a desire for masculine identified men” qualify to receive training from a guru to become a hijra (Hossain, 2017). Such a definition broadens the meaning of hijra immensely. It implies that the body has become less important in the hijra community itself. There are even symbolic and religious justifications for having nirvan or not. Emasculation for example is justified through Hinduism, where the removed genitals are connected to receiving the (ritual) power that links them to Shiva and the Mother Goddess, Bahuchara Mata (Nanda, 1999). Not having nirvan is a choice derived from the Islamic belief, which prescribes that getting rid of genitals is a sin (see supra; Hossain, 2017). Society however still clearly attaches “body” (here, the emasculated body) to hijras and thus uses body as a distinguishing factor in dividing people into male, female, or possibly, a third gender (see infra). This is, again, attached to the cultural understanding of hijras, since their sexual ambiguousness allows them to fulfill their traditional occupation of badhai in Indian society (Nanda, 1999).

Social and legal acceptance

Throughout history, hijras have been more and more excluded and socially isolated. This “downfall of the hijra” started with the arrival of the British colonizers in the nineteenth century (Hinchy, 2014; Khan, 2016). In pre-colonial India hijras were still part of everyday life, with only little discrimination and no laws against them, but when India came under British rulings everything changed (Khan, 2016). People who did not fall into the binary division were seen as deviant. Even worse, the British ideology was based upon masculinity, a trait that was also central to their construction of the category “eunuch” in India. This category came to existence to label, control, and sanction every group that embodied an in-between position, of which hijras were seen as the lowest, as the embodiment of failed masculinity because of the fact that they were “effeminate”, “sexually “deviant”” and “impotent” (Hinchy, 2014). That is why the British colonial rulers wanted to erase hijras as a visible social category and gender identity in the public space. For example, they prohibited badhai and transvestism; they referred to hijras as “men” as

\textsuperscript{18} Cholla or birit is the collection of tolls from within the ritual jurisdiction (Hossain, 2017).

\textsuperscript{19} Ulti is a secret language that real hijras are expected to know (Hossain, 2017).
to erase them linguistically; and they instated the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871, which provided for the registration of and control over eunuchs (Hinchy, 2014; Khan, 2016). Hijras, however, found ways to survive by doing the few everyday practices that were not criminalized, such as begging, performing rituals and the re-telling of oral traditions. This survival strategy made sure that hijras were associated with a spiritual power (cf. sannyasis, zie supra; Nanda, 1999), plus it undermined the government’s attempts to control the hijra “obscenity” and erase them. For instance, when people refused to give hijras money, hijras would started doing obscene gestures and cried out insults, which caused obscenity in public, something colonial rulers wanted to avoid at all costs. The re-telling of their communal mythology on the other hand was the ideal way for hijras to legitimize their gender identity, despite British attempts to enforce binary thinking. (Hinchy, 2014) Nevertheless, this colonial legislation has had an enormous impact. Although it did not succeed in erasing trans* communities, it caused hijras to face intense discrimination and marginalization, which they still face until today. (Khan, 2016) This is exemplified in the fact that many hijras are HIV-positive or carry other sexually transmitted diseases that are often not treated properly due to discrimination by reliable health care professionals and a lack of knowledge about hijras. When it comes to mental health issues, it might be even worse since little is known about it, even though hijras carry many burdens such as the coming to terms with their identity, coming out to their family, being socially isolated et cetera. They also still enjoy fewer rights than other people in Indian law; they have no right to vote, no right to own property, and no right to marry. (Kalra, 2012) Only recently, in their recognition as a third gender, have they received the right to claim a formal identity (see infra; Hossain, 2017).

Despite their legal recognition, societal and legal struggles with the hijra identity have not been completely resolved. Even more, the fact that hijras are culturally defined one way but define themselves another way has recently caused a fuss in Indian society. Hossain (2017) describes how the government wanted to “mainstream and ‘rehabilitate’ the hijra” by for example offering them jobs, but before hiring them, the hijras had to be interviewed and medically examined (“gender testing” as it was called). This medical examination revealed that most still had their genitals, and the one person who did not have their genitals anymore admitted they were removed by surgery, which caused the doctors to label all of them as genetically male. Because of this incident, they were seen as males who impersonated hijras. This shows the importance of and emphasize on the body in mainstream society.
Agrawal (1997) indicates that in practice a multiplicity of genders can be found in Indian society and that this multiplicity is more or less accepted, but that in theory it is only permitted “at the cost of acquisition of an appropriate bodily configuration”, as previous example has shown. It is thus clear that hijras are still linked to missing or ambiguous genitals, which can also be seen in the legal and law reform. Moreover, the government of Bangladesh has proposed missing or ambiguous genitals as a way of legally assigning a third gender marker to someone (Hossain, 2017). This has an important implication: the emphasis on genitals only offers limited gendered or cultural possibilities, and even worse, links the third gender category to a discourse of disability, since they are defined as “sexually and genitally handicapped” (Hossain, 2017). This label of “diseased” or disabled bodies is part of a process of medicalization (Khan, 2016). Ironically, the label that used to be their “source of social stigma and marginalization” has now thus become the way in which they might obtain resources. However, such a label divides hijras into real and fake once more, although this time in ways hijras do not, which causes for only some hijras to receive rights. (Hossain, 2017)

Often hijras do not even choose to register as a third gender for multiple reasons. Firstly, they feel like they are giving up on privileges they receive when they are registered as a man. Nisar (2017) calls this engaging in a “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti, 1988). Another factor in not wanting to choose this legal third gender is their family. Often family members use “various strategies - like admonition, threat of violence, and withholding family verification (mandatory for getting a legal ID)” (Nisar, 2017) to discourage choosing the legal third gender, but it can also be out of respect for their family because they do not want to betray and abandon them20 by giving up on their father’s name and taking the name that has been given to them by their guru21 (Nisar, 2017). Moreover, sometimes hijras have heterosexual families, which they would have to give up to be able to register as a “third gender” (Hossain, 2012). This is something they probably do not want, although no one has explicitly addressed this yet, so more research is needed to confirm this. Religion also plays an important role. Nisar (2017) describes how hijras in Pakistan often “conform to the dominant patriarchal discourses”

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20 Even though they sometimes have been abandoned by their families themselves (e.g. Nanda, 1999; Nisar, 2017).

21 A guru is the leader of a hijra household (Nanda, 1999).
when it comes to religion and how they believe that they are men in their god’s eyes, despite them having a feminine soul. Lastly, there is an enormous administrative burden before acquiring their legal third gender. Members who were previously registered as male have to “submit a medical certificate verifying that they (biologically) belong to the third gender category” (Nisar, 2017). Such a requirement is often impossible, since most are born with male bodies. Moreover, because of their social isolation, travelling and fulfilling all the requirements costs a lot of effort and money. Even here, stigma and a narrow view on different genders surface and create many barriers. It shows that the legal recognition of a third gender category alone will not be enough; it is also important to listen to actual hijra experiences and to involve them (and other groups embodying an “in between-position”) in the process of legally recognizing a third gender, something which has not happened at this point (Hossain, 2017; Nisar, 2017). Here, a rhizomatic framework might offer new opportunities for academics to address these aspects and hopefully in this way inform the government.

A rhizomatic perspective on hijras

Now I will follow the method of Stachowiak (2016; see supra), by exploring the three aspects they prescribed: the felt sense of gender of hijras, the social construction of gender in South Asia, and gender as becoming, including the tensions and conflicts that derive from the interplay of these elements. In this analysis I would like to start with the social construction of gender in South Asia instead of the felt sense of gender, so the tensions with (how hijras navigate) their felt sense of gender will immediately become apparent. I am going to derive hijras’ felt sense of gender from their habits, rituals and ways of acting described in already existing literature.

The social construction of gender shows some similarities to the West, even though South Asia started out from a different position. That is to say, pre-colonial India was very open and accepting when it came to sexually ambiguous groups, mostly because their way of thinking then was not “contained” yet with the binary way of thinking of the West, but also because of their emphasis and use of mythology which often contained sexually ambiguous figures with much power (e.g. Shiva; Nanda, 1999). Sometimes there was discrimination towards these groups, which shows some discomfort, but in general they were accepted and even served in the sultanates (see supra; Hossain, 2012). This changed with the arrival of the British colonizers, who

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22 God here is meant as a general, religion-neutral term.
imposed their masculinity politics and introduced a new way of thinking: a dichotomous view that opposed “the normal” against “the deviant”. Here, sexually ambiguous groups were perceived as abnormal, even as the lowest of all groups, since they failed at masculinity the hardest (see supra; Hinchy, 2014). This view on gender in general and hijras in particular has been present ever since, not only in the minds of general society but also for example recorded in laws. There is a recent evolution of improvement through the recognition of a third gender, but this has had little effect in practice since officials stick to a very rigid image of what this “third gender” looks like, which in reality are people born with ambiguous or missing genitals and thus born as a third sex. Such a definition does not capture who or what hijras (or other groups classified as eunuch in South Asia) necessarily are. Hence the social construction of gender is in essence still binary and a disability ideology based on a medically based policy is still apparent in this culture, which categorizes people with different gender identities than the dominant ones as deviant and disabled. This disability discourse is the only way in which hijras can truly be accepted in current-day South Asia.

Secondly, the felt sense of gender of hijras is diverse and it often comes down to a distinction between the body and the soul instead of the sex/gender distinction we are “used to” in the West. More specifically, they often feel “like women” or as if they have a feminine soul in a male body. They are also often described as neither man, nor woman, which indicates they have feelings that cannot just be defined inside the binary framework. Nevertheless, they still feel the need to negotiate their identity within this binary construction because of a lack of another accepted option. This causes hijras to look at themselves through masculinity and femininity, both embodying it and disidentifying with it. This embodiment can be seen in the fact that hijras embody femininity when practicing their job(s), but also in their way of dressing and living in households as families existing of only females. Furthermore, they embody masculinity since some hijras continue working male jobs and do not remove their genitals; some even keep their facial hair. Despite this embodiment, they also disidentify with femininity and masculinity. On the one hand, masculinity is disidentified with through embodying their femininity (see supra) and more straightforwardly, through the act of nirvan – although this can also be seen as disidentifying with femininity (see infra). On the other hand, femininity is disidentified with since it takes on obscene and exaggerated shapes, a trademark of hijras that has been a survival strategy that inflicts fear and anxiety on other people, both in colonial times as in postcolonial times, but that has also been a way of
expressing their spiritual function. In their spiritual function lies another disidentification with both masculinity and femininity, since they perform badhai (also at temple festivals) in female dressing and manners, but when it comes to religion, most hijras profess it as males. This has to do with two reasons, namely the fact that they fear that they will not be allowed to perform their religious pilgrimage (Umrah or Hajj) to Saudi Arabia, and also because they consider the religious rituals to be imperfect otherwise. They also believe that to their god they are men and they will be judged as such when they die. (Nisar, 2017) Their felt sense of gender thus has to step aside for the body they were born into, although it is clear that it is again more complex than that, since part of the reason is connected to what society believes. There are also other ways in which they break with both femininity and masculinity, for example through nirvan. Here, a new ambiguity moves to the foreground: more and more hijras do not receive nirvan anymore. It becomes clear that in this aspect throughout the years there is less focus on the body and more focus on the actual experience of being hijra, of feeling hijra (and thus, on the soul). This has some important consequences, such as breaking with society’s expectations. It also indicates that bodily configurations were partly connected to these expectations, which is suggested by authors such as Hossain (2012).

As is already apparent, there is some conflict and tension when it comes to the felt sense of gender of hijras and the social construction of gender in South Asia. Hijras are in the margins of society, where they are seen as one of the lowest populations in South Asia, despite their spiritual importance. This explains why, in their legal third gender recognition, they are misunderstood and seen as disabled or diseased and not as a valid third gender (see supra). They also often play with masculinity and femininity so that they still have the privilege to do certain things, for example professing religion (see supra), but also play with it in their hijra identity itself; some of them are in a relationship with a man, who they live with and where they perform the role of a good (house)wife. This performance is often stereotypical and based on what they see in soaps and movies, and is meant to “present themselves as normal and as belonging to the mainstream rather than the margins of society” (Nanda, 1999; see supra). Here, the tension between the felt sense of gender and the social construction of gender literally comes to the foreground, since hijras in these situations conform to what they think a “normal” (house)wife would do. In this case, a successful performance of the social construction of gender can thus be either fitting in with their sex assigned at birth (e.g. performing jobs or religion as a man) or fitting in with the other sex in the dichotomy (e.g. being a good (house)wife for a
man or doing a female job or household chores), although a successful performance by fitting in with the other sex (i.e. female) here does not necessarily mean they fail at their felt sense of gender, even though it might be seen as giving in to external oppression (hegemony and oppression). Nevertheless, hijras always manage to find a way to perform their felt sense of gender in ways they want: they embody certain aspects of the social construction of gender in their felt sense of gender and then perform it in an exaggerated, obscene or stereotypical way – ways that have long been their own, distinct features.

All of this shows how gender is becoming, how it is not something rigid and fixed in advance. Hijras have multiple ways in negotiating their identity and have personal choices that cause them to not fit into one image of “the hijra”; choices and negotiations that are also directed by the interactions and events in their direct environment. As has become clear in this analysis, many options are available and every hijra embodies these aspects in ways of their own, not as loose threads that intersect but as different aspects that all work at the same moment.

DISCUSSION
With this article I wanted to investigate the potential of a rhizomatic framework as a new model for gender multiplicity and in this way contribute to the discussion on gender multiplicity and third gender. I believe my analysis of hijras, based on an earlier investigation of Stachowiak (2016) on genderqueer individuals, proves how useful this way of thinking could be in the further exploration of other non-binary individuals throughout the world.

POTENTIAL OF A RHIZOMATIC FRAMEWORK
A rhizomatic framework has the potential to show a more nuanced and complex image of groups of people that do not fit into a binary framework, but also of multiple masculinities and femininities. It allows for individual experiences and negotiations (felt sense of gender) to matter against a backdrop of the social construction of gender in a certain

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23 Some have nirvan; others do not. Most are attracted to men, although some hijras have wives, but there are also hijras who have no partner (unless maybe sexual). Some perform “male” jobs, others “female” jobs, or “hijra” jobs or maybe even no jobs. Some identify as having a woman’s soul in a man’s body, others feel like they are “like” women, but will always be something else, something in-between. Et cetera.
society. This means that individuals have agency and that they can (dis)identify in ways that fit their personal narrative. It thus understands how gender is not fixed, but has to be rather seen as a verb (cf. Butler, 1990); it is becoming, not just being. It is a model that moves beyond intersectionality, not by completely dismissing it, but by pushing it further to a framework that believes that identities, events, interactions et cetera intertwine and work together at all times, but in unique and personal ways for individual people. It does not just believe in identities that intersect and can be turned off and on whenever is suited. This is an important shift since in this way people’s lived experiences play an immense part in negotiating their identity, while at the same time, the specific social construction of a country/region is still taken into account. (Stachowiak, 2016)

**HIJRAS AS A THIRD GENDER**

Reddy (2005) argues that the hijra identity “is too complex to be read as merely a third sex/gender” and that thirdness is contextual. (Hossain, 2012) I would agree that thirdness is contextual and that hijra identities are complex but I believe a rhizomatic framework can offer a way in which this contextuality and complexity can both be present, as I have shown in my analysis. I also believe that it is important to recognize these groups as a different gender in which they can feel comfortable so that eventually they will be less socially isolated and more accepted, since they clearly do not just fit into the binary structure and the disability discourse that is currently imposed on hijras in South Asia.

When applying a rhizomatic framework (Stachowiak, 2016) to see the tensions and the negotiations that arise in hijra lives, it becomes clear that the label of “male” or “female” is in essence too simplistic for them. In their felt sense of gender they both negotiate and disidentify with masculinity and femininity, since they never really fit into either of these categories. They embody it in their own unique ways, ways that differ from individual to individual. The connection and tension with the social construction of gender also shows why hijras sometimes negotiate this femininity and masculinity. It proves it is impossible to just reduce them to this man-woman dichotomy; rather, they have the potential to be genderrevolutionary, as was already argued by Nanda (1999) and has now been proven anew. Moreover, hijras have been renegotiating themselves and their identity throughout the years; trying to survive the social and political struggles they faced while attempting to keep their unique identity as a hijra and not collapse under the weight to conform to the binary (Hinchy, 2014; Khan, 2016). This model also emphasizes that it is important to acknowledge that it would be unrealistic to pinpoint hijras as a group to
one image of “the hijra” (also see the images sketched by Nanda, 1999; Hossain, 2012; Khan, 2016; Hossain, 2017; Nisar, 2017; et cetera).

SHORTCOMINGS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This research was based on a literature study because of timing and practical issues. Such an investigation contains few opportunities to take the actual lived experiences of hijras into account, which is a significant part of a rhizomatic framework. However, I tried to take a first tentative step in showing the possibilities of rhizomatic thinking with individuals that do not fit into the binary by extracting as much relevant information as I could from the existing literature. Now, it is important that further research is undertaken in which hijras are interviewed so that this research can be amplified and complemented with that information. In this way their experiences can also be used to plead for a better regulation on third gender recognition, since at this point they have not been listened to while making the legislation on the recognition of a third gender (Hossain, 2017).

As I said before, I believe a rhizomatic framework can offer a much more complex image, one that will be helpful to understand gender multiplicity better, but in order to establish this it is necessary to perform more research, both on trans* people24 and on hijras, but also on other non-binary individuals in different cultures. The rhizomatic framework has the potential to be used objectively, in a cultural-neutral way and thus offers chances to understand other cultures without imposing bias.

Lastly, it is crucial to acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive overview of who hijras are, what they do, how they act et cetera. The purpose is to merely show the possibilities of a new framework that can step away from binary thinking but still take the dominant way of thinking into account. This thus might be a step in the right direction to move forward to a more blanket model that is not only useful for individuals that fall outside the binary, but also to explore masculinity and femininity in their multiplicity, i.e. as masculinities and femininities.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to contribute to the research on gender multiplicity by looking at a group of people that have been considered genderrevolutionary ever since they came into existence, namely hijras. By using a rhizomatic framework that was first applied to genderqueer individuals and their lived experiences (Stachowiak, 2016), I  

24 Stachowiak (2016) already indicated the necessity of more research on genderqueer individuals in a rhizomatic framework.
hoped to show how hijras fit better into this idea of gender multiplicity. Lastly, I hoped to discover a new way of fully stepping away from rigid binary thinking and help to show the potential of this framework as a new universally applicable model, a model that moves beyond intersectionality.

I believe my analysis of hijras in this rhizomatic framework, even though it is concise and incomplete, is a good complement to the research that had already been conducted by Stachowiak (2016). It proves the opportunities of rhizomatic thinking as the framework to investigate gender multiplicity in any context, in any culture, at any time. It showed the complexities, possibilities, and nuances of a hijra identity and how they negotiate their own experiences against the backdrop of a binary social construction of gender that they do not fit into. In this way, it has become clear that gender identities in general are more complex than being either one thing or another and should be understood as such.
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