

**Queer Identity Construction: The Performative Subversion of Reproductive Expectation in
Selected Bangladeshi Texts**



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Selected Bangladeshi Texts**

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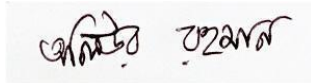
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.


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Dedication

To the queer Palestinians

Acknowledgements

This thesis is a product of my nerdiness and my academic interests; and summarizes my takeaways from four years of academic journey at ULAB. My academic approach has always been stubborn and as such, difficult to manage. Despite that, I had my faculties by my side whom I looked up to; faculties who supported my dogged approach. As such, I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to my faculties and DEH for their support and guidance.

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Abstract

Due to heavy censorship as well as the social and legal stigma surrounding queer lives, public availability of queer literature is bordering non-existent in Bangladesh. The few available queer literature fall into either of two categories: diasporic or coded literature that portrays queerness while avoiding legal ramification; and misinformed or vilifying bodies of literature that discuss queer or to be more specific, hijra characters, only to reinforce the mainstream boogeyman. Among the few available queer literature, *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan* will serve as the primary texts that this paper aims to study. Academic studies of queer lives are also within the limited range and in a small volume; as such, a subversive performative approach to queer reproductive expectation and in extension- queer identity construction is non-existent. To bridge the said research gap, this thesis aims to implement a qualitative reading to the three aforementioned texts: *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan*- using Judith Butler's queer theory; as presented in their seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* and its extension- *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. The research objective is to demonstrate the subversive performativity of the protagonists from the three texts; in relation to the reproductive expectation and queer identity construction. Inspired by theoretical queer academia, this thesis aims to contribute and enrich Bangladeshi academic approach to queerness through lived experience and solidarity.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Reproductive expectation refers to the normative social outline where individuals are dichotomically gendered and are expected to procreate in a heterosexual union. The reproductive expectation can be viewed as the core of the patriarchal cis-heteronormative power structures that dictate and govern how individuals are expected to engage and align with compulsory heteronormativity while enforcing strict gender roles and reproductive norms. Said enforcement in terms dictates cisnormativity, as the expectation not only creates dichotomically opposed gender camps, it also imposes roles, such as women being tacitly maternal and biologically oriented to do so; and are passive recipients in sexual union. The social outline and expectations thus views gender and sexuality as biologically predetermined and establishes the cis-heteronormative ideology. As presented by the American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, in their seminal texts *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* and its extension- *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Butler theorizes the subversive performativity along with a distinction between gender and assigned sex. The subversion of said reproductive expectation is thus any performative approach to gender and sexuality, as the performativity renders predetermined or innatist approaches obsolete. Here, the performativity, when resists to conform to the reproductive expectation, renders the subject and their performativity as queer- hence forming the queer identity construction. This research will analyze the queer subversion of reproductive expectations in the play *Shikhondi Kotha* (2020), and two novels *Duroddhoy* (2024) and *Omba Akkhan* (2015).

Due to legal and societal condemnation of homosexuality and queerness in general, Bangladeshi queer literature and academia is far and few between and certainly difficult to find because of censorship. Among the very few available literary texts, this research will analyse three: *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan*- the first of which is a play, and the rest, novels. These texts try and in some succeed in portraying queerness as an everyday lived experience of Bangladeshi queer individuals. From contemplating dysphoria to feeling ostracized, from the hijra customs to rituals, from desire to disappointment, these texts take to the street to reprimand the patriarchal insistence to uphold cis-heteronormativity as absolute.

The first of these texts, *Shikhondi Kotha* (2020) is a play written by Bangladeshi professor and playwright Anan Zaman. The play is centered around an intersex hijra, Rotna. The play revolves around Rotna's dysphoria and desire, focusing significantly on their adolescence. The play also focuses on hijra performativity, rituals and day to day customs. In the process, the play also highlights the hijra engagement with normative society through bipartisan means.

Written by human right activist and author Tanveer Anoy, the novel *Duroddhoy* (2024) deals with dysphoria, violence- mental, physical and sexual and queer uncertainty. The protagonist Tonim/Tonima's queer subversion creates turmoil in the family, leaving them desperately seeking for a safe space. The novel also highlights sexual exploitation and rape of the queer individuals as well as the violence of conversion therapy. The desperate cry for exploration also underlines the lack of comprehensive sex education as well as the lack of accommodation for the vulnerable.

Largest of the three texts, the novel *Omba Akkhan* (2015), written by Joyshri Sarker explores the intricacies of hijra lives and desire. The narration sifts through hijra customs and myths, presenting the hijra lives as humane, all the while putting a heavy emphasis on sexuality and desire. Using Ulti language as the gateway to hijra third space, the novel portrays the hijra yarnings to live and exist within a family. In the process, beyond the hijra kinship and family structure of dera (hijra resident), the novel puts a heavy emphasis on the parental desire and inherent femininity and motherhood of hijras who identify within the feminine spectrum. Moreover, the novel excels in portraying the duality between the queer hijra world and the normative cis-heteronormative world through human engagement and exclusionary rhetoric.

Due to a normative social and legal approach to gender and sexuality, as well as due to heavy censorship and vehement queerphobia regarding anything that deviates from said normativity, queer literature is nigh impossible to access in Bangladesh. The selected three texts: *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan* will be analyzed using the subversion of normativity to assess how queer identity is constructed. The following analysis will however not include the hijra ritual emasculation.

Taking the aforementioned aspects into consideration, the following research questions were formulated to explore the queer identity construction within the narrative of the selected texts:

1. How do Rotna, Duroddhoy and Jonaki subvert the reproductive expectations in *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan*?

2. How does the subversion of reproductive expectation create the queer Identity construction in *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan*?

Chapter 2

Methodology

This research is conducted through a qualitative approach as it focuses on queer identity construction of Rotna, Duroddhoy and Jonaki in *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy and Omba Akkhan* respectively. Drawing from diverse academic sources, Judith Butler's revolutionary queer theory - as presented in their seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* and its extension- *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* are used as a margin to study the characters. Highlighting the artificial continuum between sex and gender Butler proposed the performative queer theory that approaches the constructed reality of both. Butler's theory states that gender is not an objective monolith, rather it is a performative nod at the reproductive expectation. The claim is supported by the fluidity of gender across cultures. And gender is shown to be performative and fluid, sexuality is thus also rendered fluid; as the supposed continuum between sexuality is and the binary gender appears to be performative and constructed. Butler's theory thus claims, the subversion of said expectation- through repetitive performance that defies cis-heteronormativity is what creates the queer identity construction. Due to the lack of exposure and social vilification, available mainstream Bangladeshi literature struggles to faithfully portray queerness and queer lived experiences. Being stuck in the exclusionary-innatist debate, these bodies of literary works also fail to address the aspect of queer identity construction. In this study, the misrepresentation is not challenged, rather is contrasted through performative queer subversion.

CHAPTER 3

Literature Review

As prolific as queer academia is, the scholarship shows porosity when it converges on individual queer construction. When academia is in fact concerned with construction, more often than not it is regarding the social construction of queerness and not individual queer identity. For example, a plethora of academic work on hijra identity is available in South Asian academic space; most of which are either from an outsider perspective or not concerned with individual subversive identity. The few academic literature that do use said subversive discourse, their approach is often in relation to wider social concerns; such as as the subversive performative livelihood of hijra individuals. Regrettably, the same is true for Bangladeshi scholarship as well; as the country struggles with legal and socio-cultural censorship. And even more regrettably and perhaps ironically, despite the country recognizing hijra as the “third gender”, queer subversive performativity is still considered as a taboo. As such, to initiate the subversive performative discourse- in relation to queer identity construction, this literature review will include ten articles, focusing on individual subversion through performativity, language and the third space.

To initiate, in the chapter “Gender, Sex and the Sexual” of the book *Gender Without Identity*, author Jean Laplanche discusses the plurality of gender, sex and sexuality and the assignment of sex. In reference to Robert Stoller’s coinage of “core gender identity”, Laplanche critiques the dichotomizing of gender as a set of convictions belonging to either of two socially pre-defined groups of masculinity and femininity; as

well as the insistence that one is ought to be assigned into either of these two camps (Laplanche 106). However, the author also opposes the performative construction of gender- beyond the assigned duality of sex. Laplanche writes, feminist theorists subvert “the notion of sex to the point of annihilating it, in a purely retroactive fashion, by gender” (Laplanche 109). Similar sentiment is echoed in his reference to Nicole-Claude Matthieu’s three modes of gender conceptualization. Laplanche argues, in order for gender to translate, symbolize or construct the sex, sex needs to be a biological precondition. He further contents Matthieu by emphacizing, instead of gender reconstructing the concept of sex, it reinforces the biologically predetermined definition of sex (Laplanche 110). Yet, despite based on the Freudian concept of sex, regarding the construction of gender in early childhood, Laplanche recognizes “gender is neither a hypothetical cerebral impregnation, which would be a sort of hormonal impregnation...nor an imprint in Stoller’s sense, nor a habit” (Laplanche 118); and coins gender to be ipso-centric or centered solely on the individual- highlighting the related dissociation of sex and gender. On this, Laplanche also recognizes and agrees that the fundamental aspect of gender can be associated with socio-cultural assignment at birth, and it is reflective of the institutional structure.

Correspondingly, in the article, “The Unbecoming Subject of Sex: Performativity, Interpellation, and the Politics of Queer Theory”, using poststructuralist queer and feminist theory, Mary Bunch presents a critical analysis of how individual identity is formed. Bunch uses the theoretical contributions of Louis Althusser and Judith Butler to analyze how the interpellative processes and performative queerness serve as a catalyst of the concept of “unbecoming”. Bunch, referring to performative interpellation, nods to

Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation and notes on the political quality of the linguistic practices of subject formation and the de-constructability. Bunch writes, when the law calls on to the subject's identity into being: a person hailed by law and, recognising themselves in the call- turns toward this agent of the law and accepts the identity given to them. Bunch continues on Althusser and writes that sex as an ideology shapes the individual's identity as they are expected to become the gender assigned to them even before they are aware of the construct (Bunch 42). Referring to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, professor Bunch demonstrates the "unbecoming" as an act of political resistance as Butler's theory suggests that gender identity is not an innate concept, rather it is established through repeated acts. Performativity hence challenges the "becoming" demonstrating how gender is enacted rather than pre-existent. Professor Bunch also nods to Viviane Namaste's argument against Butler and highlights Sara Ahmed's concept of "feminist killjoy"- someone who disrupts social norms through subversion. The author relates to trans existence and writes "Namaste likewise posits an unbecoming subject that challenges the terms of subjection, both by refusing one's genitally assigned sex, and also through activist resistance to gender norms and transphobia" (Bunch 46)- demonstrating the "unbecoming". The article however is intrinsically concerned with the linguistic and politicality of theoretical interpellation and not necessarily engaged with the individual gender construction via subversion.

In addition, in the article titled, "Prevailing Non-Normativities: Exploring Gender Norms, Transgressive Desires and Identities in Literature by Muslim Women Writers of the Subcontinent", the author Sumaiya Tasneem Haque critically explores South Asian Muslim women's identity under the gender norm, their defiance and subversion. And

women's desires and queer sexual exploration within the heteronormative marriage oriented constraints. Haque nods to the religious history of the Subcontinent and sheds a light on the native normative acceptance of queerness before the Islamic inquisition and introduction of queerphobia. This sense of subjugation and queerphobia was furthered by the colonial "puritan values"; the sentiment was later internalized by Indian nationalists and persisted till modern day through the Section 377 of 1860 Penal Code, writes Haque in reference to Ruth Vanita (Haque 14) . In reference to Monica Wittig, Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler, Haque shows marriage normativity and compulsory heterosexuality as the core of heteronormativity- used by patriarchy to suppress women's gender and sexual expression (Haque 7). Through the close reading of Mamlukul Fatema Khanam's short story "Chameli", Haque shows how women are forced to conform to normative gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality in order to meet the reproductive expectation. She writes, Chameli presenting and socializing as men- leads Chameli to internalize a male identity. As such, when Malek asks Chameli to marry him, with discontent she questions her gender and asserts, "am I not a man?" (Haque 22). Chameli breaking the porda(veil) and performing masculinity subverts the assigned feminine identity by breaking the sex-gender binary. Thus "when Chameli performs as a woman, there is an element of parody in it because she has not really become a woman, rather she imitates being a woman." (Haque 22) However, the forced conformity to compulsory heteronormativity strips Chameli of her repeated performative identity. Despite showing the subversion of gender and sexuality, Haque's thesis is largely concerned with the desires and identities of women and not with the queer identity construction.

Likewise, In the chapter “Voices of Survival: LGBTQ+ Representations in Literary/Cinematic/Creative Texts in Bangla” of the book *The Queer and the Vernacular Languages in India: Studies in Contemporary Texts and Cultures*, author Himadri Roy analyzes the paradigmatic shift and queer representation in queer literary, cinematic and creative texts- written in Bangla; in the post queer legalization in India. Roy portrays the queer representations in West Bengal as a desperate expression of survival- juggling between inclusion and exclusion. The author finds the expression to be universal; regardless of the intellectual elitism vs general populace debate. He also reflects on the said representation in contrast with the cis-heteronormative gaze and the renewed balance between objectification and subjectification and argues, the said representation is either overlooked or overemphasized in their depiction(Roy 245). In reference to the language and the socio-cultural constructions, Roy also emphasizes both the deliberate use of LGBTQ+ over Queer- to prevent the amalgamation and homogeneity of queerness; as well as the attempted bridging with the mainstream cis-heteronormativity in society- through coded language to survive the abusive attention (Roy 246). In reference to the textual analysis of Swapnamoy Chakraborty’s 2015 novel *Holde Golap*, Roy criticizes the objectified representation and hyper-sexualization of transgender performativity by critiquing the representation of transgender subversion of normativity and calls the transition presented in the novel as radically operational and comments on the identity construction as if it’s done through the cis-heteronormative gaze (Roy 249). Despite depicting queer subversion, Roy is mostly concerned with the linguistic, urban elitist and literary intellectualist aspect of queer representation in Indian Bangla queer works. The sentiment is further supported by Roy’s reference to author and queer linguist Anna

Livia. Roy voices Livia's concerns and argues that the biographical stances superimpose the deployment of egoistic elitism; and adds- such narrative structure's tendency to reiterate the intellectual and scholastic superiority. The author extends this sentiment further by arguing that such tendencies make the queer representation appear victimized and vulnerable (Roy 247). Roy concludes by stating that the trans and queer intersectionality is socioculturally compartmentalized through such representation (Roy 250)

In a parallel, in the article "Third Gender Politics: Hijra Identity Construction in India and Beyond", Suzy Woltmann discusses the hijra identity construction- focusing on the external as well as internal cultural diaspora- a systematic phenomenon founded on alienation, stigmatization and marginalization- that renders the hijra subject subaltern. In reference to Jyoti Puri, Woltmann writes, India's anti sodomy law under the Section 377 of Indian Penal Code is one of many variables that seeks to regulate gender and sexuality. In doing so, the law aligns hijras with criminality and categorizes them outside the normative gender identities. Woltmann holds orientalism responsible for this outsider recognition (Woltmann 2). On this, Woltmann echoes Marjorie Garber and argues that looking "at rather than through" the hijra subject is the key to alleviating the orientalist categorization and subaltern erasure. She further insists on the beyond binary approach in social construction to render the othering of hijra subjects as obsolete (Woltmann 2). In an attempt to visualise hijra identity through literature, the author discusses Salman Rushdie's diasporic novel *The Golden House* and portrays the protagonist D's diaspora and subversion of the cis-heteronormativity. D's attempt to remove her stepmother to assume the role of "the woman of the house" and operationally transitioning to present

female photographs the subversion. Woltman relates D's moving out to the history of hijra exclusion from their ancestral homes and writes, "as ideological diasporic subjects, hijras are exiled from their original homes and must seek out new forms of community. D's move away from home parallels this re-creation." (Woltmann 9) Recognizing the hijra voices of individual and political self-construction through queer diaspora theories, the author argues that such claim and presence is actively disrupting the imposed imperialist perceptions and traditional gender binary (Woltmann 10). The author confirms this claim through a reference to a study by Joya Sikder et al. and writes "members of the hijra community are expertly capable of analyzing their own problems and are the equal "another" rather than the fetishized or the "colonized" other (Woltmann 10).

Additionally, in the chapter "The Hijras in Cross-Cultural Perspective" of the book *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, the author Serena Nanda discusses the perceived western gender binary and the third space occupied by the gender diverse and performative non-binary population in cross-cultural context. The author critiques biological determinism that supposedly established the male-female binary construction phenomenon in the west- over the wide variety of masculine and feminine roles and attributes that construct gender in the rest of the world and the variable nature of said construction (Nanda 128). However, Nanda recognizes the still imposed dichotomic and oppositional differences in biological sexes and the patriarchal determinism in the social constructive process; as well as the associated mutual exclusivity (Nanda 129). The author's cross-cultural reference uses the Omani Xanith, the Native American Two-Spirits, the Polynesian Mahu and the western transgender population to study the beyond binary third space- based on subversion and performativity. The Xanith are

assigned male at birth homosexual prostitutes; who occupy the third space as neither men nor women- while embodying the characteristics of both. The Xanith are closely associated with women because of their passive role during intercourse. As Omani patriarchal society dictates that masculine roles must perform the penetrating role during intercourse- rendering the Xanith as “not men” and occupy the aforementioned third space (Nanda 130). However, despite associating with femininity, they are banned from wearing women’s clothing due to the perceived purity of Omani women; and can achieve the male status if they can “demonstrate publicly in the approved ways that he is indeed potent in the male sexual role.” (Nanda 131) In reference to the native American Mojave Alyha, the author presents the performative gender aspect and ritualistic male to female transition. Unlike the operational hijra transition, the Alyha go through an initiation ceremony confirming a permanently changed gender status. The Alyha, assumed a female name and insisted that “their penis be called a clitoris; his testes, labia majora; and anus, a vagina” (Nanda 133). Assuming the female role, the Alyha would imitate menstruation by scarring their penis; and imitate pregnancy by stuffing rags in their skirts. They also imitated stillbirth nearing the end of their pregnancy by inducing constipation and defecating over a hole in the childbirth position (Nanda 134). The author also relates the discussed performativity and subversion in relation to western transgender identity and critiques the formerly appropriated term transsexualism- which enforced the rigid dichotomic gender binary. The author also critiques the primitive concept which posits that “a person is transsexual when they are in an in-between transitional sex status” and can only achieve the male/ female status by undergoing a genital reconstruction. Nanda criticizes this notion and writes “Indeed, we view an intermediate sex or gender

category as nothing other than transitional; it cannot be, in our culture, a permanent possibility.”(Nanda 138) Nanda, through her cross-cultural gender diversity analysis affirms that the very presence of the agency proves the western sex and dichotomy as culturally constructed. The same also proves that neither the dichotomy nor the diversity is the same or universal across cultures.(Nanda 149)

Following the same tone, In the article “LIVING SEXUALITIES: Negotiating Heteronormativity in Middle Class Bangladesh”, author Shuchi Karim highlights the prevailing heteronormativity, sexual space and sexual autonomy in middle class Bangladesh. The author argues sexuality to be an amalgamation of social, reproductive and cultural construction that functions on the basis of normative hierarchy and regulation of said normativity. In relation to feminism and the strive towards understanding sexuality, Karim refers to Mary E. John and Janaki Nair and argues that the feminist discourse approaches sexuality as a challenge to the biological ‘genitality’ and the constructed legitimacy and illegitimacy; as well as the social institutions and norms that dictate the subject of sex (Karim 2) Karim also refers to the “counter hegemony” that challenges and destabilizes “the heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage” and argues, any performative subversion that defies the compulsory participation in the aforementioned monogamous patriarchal marriage and reproductive expectation- destabilizes the heteropatriarchal hegemony (Karim 6). The author critiques Bangladeshi government’s control, stigmatization and criminalization of queerness through the enforcement of the aforementioned normative marital regulation- which not only vilifies homosexuality but also refuses to recognise the beyond binary gender status and space (Karim 65). The author refers to Therese Blanchet

and critiques the anti homosexual social views and hypocrisy as the adult male fetishization of young boys was and still is prevalent and continues to occupy pockets of space. She extends the sentiment of subversion further, by referring to Adnan Hossain's works that argue for the prevailing queer sexual relationships among working class men. She adds "sexual relationships between men are not seen as anything out of the ordinary, nor as exclusively stemming from female absence. Rather, Hossain's research reveals how the female body and its sexuality are feared as a 'ticking time bomb' that can result in unwanted pregnancies." (Karim 67) The author further extends this argument by asserting that despite the anti sodomy law being in place, homosexuality occupies a complicated space between class and gender normative structure. Karim also asserts that non-normative sexual exploration is allowed to exist within this space as long as it is practiced behind the veil of social morality.

Furthermore, in the doctoral thesis *Beyond Binaries: An Ethnographic Study of Hijra in Dhaka Bangladesh* author Rezwana Karim Snigdha explores the performative hijra gender and sexual identity as well as the socio-cultural and political perception of hijra lives in Bangladesh. In the process, Snigdha highlights the performative subversion of the aforementioned criterias in the hijra third space. Regarding the nuanced and fluid hijra identity, Snigdha critiques the social constructionist view that describes hijra as emasculated, castrated and impotent figures. Referring to Adnan Hossain and Kira Anne Hall she argues the hijra to be born with a male or ambiguous genitalia, who present and identify as feminine non men and are purportedly attracted to masculinity (Snigdha 36). The author uses an intersectional lens to draw upon the orientation and argues that the hijra identity represents a non-homogenous multidimensional fluidity in relation to their

gender and sexuality. Snigdha argues, A hijra person subverts the cis-heteronormative social structure as they present a diversified, performative gender fluidity beyond their assigned sex, as well as perform a fluid sexual orientation (Snigdha 146). The multidimensionality is further evident in hijra religious and cultural practices. Those who undergo castration are initiated following a set of hindu rituals, however, as the author points out, these rituals are not performed as religious obligation, rather as a cultural tradition (Snigdha 151). Regarding the crisis with hijra desire, the author highlights a multiplicity that stems from normativity and subversion. The author highlights the nonlinear and fluid sexual practices of hijras and maintains that hijras do not prefer any specific sexual label or practice. Some hijras desire masculine partners, whereas others, namely kotis and jananas (effeminate hijras and hijras with penis) often have feminine sexual partners. The author also highlights bi/pansexuality spectrum as some hijras choose both male, female and other hijras (Snigdha 155). However, due to homosexuality being criminalized under Penal Code 377, as well as due to the negative social perspective towards hijra sexual desire, hijras often practice the state governed heteronormative sexuality as their survival mechanism. Snigdha acknowledges that desire is often an aspect in one becoming a hijra, however, she also argues against that desire to be canonized as a core factor(Snigdha 157). A further critical point emerges as Snigdha highlights patriarchal influence in hijra gender roles as despite presenting a form of performative gender fluidity, hijras are often patriarchally influenced to assume and perform masculine roles (Snigdha 158). Despite hijra gender fluidity, the element of hegemonic masculinity is prevalent in hijra gender-sex relations, which the author associates with the concept of “male cultural genitalia” (Snigdha180). The

aforementioned is especially prevalent in sexuality discourse, as despite not being limited by heteronormativity, their sexual practices are often governed by the hetero-patriarchal ideology.

Moreover, in the chapter “Hijra Erotic Subjectivities: Pleasure, Practice and Power” of the book *Beyond Emasculation: Pleasure and Power in the Making of Hijra in Bangladesh*, the author Adnan Hossain accentuates the hijra subversion by portraying hijra as a counter cultural formation against the normative patriarchal cis-heteronormativity. In the process Hossain highlights their non-normative sexual exploration, orientation, practice and outlook on sex and sexuality. Adnan refers to existing literature on hijra identity and argues against the social tendency to prioritize the discussion of gender performativity over erotic hijra desires which in turns, renders the subject as asexual, or more appropriately, void of sexual desires (Hossain 83). The aforementioned void or erotic dissociation is often embraced by the hijra community, though only to maintain the normative social image that views hijra as defective or incapable of having sexual pleasure, as it is the basis of hijra interaction with the normative society (Hossain 85). The author also highlights a tendency to maintain secrecy regarding sexuality in public. Acknowledging the negotiation between the hijra desire and the proclaimed normative social outlook on hijra sexuality, the author argues the desire to be the core catalyst of hijra identity, both erotic and gender (Hossain 86). Referring to Cameron and Kulick’s research on language and sexuality, Hossain presents how language helps to shape and forge identity and desire. The author argues that the hijra colloquial *Ulti* allows the hijra to navigate their desires while maintaining a relation with the cis-heteronormative society which primarily uses Bangla and sees the hijra as

putative asexuals (Hossain 88). Said navigation can be explained as Ulta creating a linguistic space that allows the expression of desire that is prohibited in the mainstream Bangla speaking space. As per sexual practice, the author points out a hijra desire for men as active penetrators, not receivers as most hijras refuse to assume the penetrator's role. The desire is often linked with hijra gender identity, however, Hossain urges the desire is not the sole criteria, as it is not universal. On this, the author refers to Serena Nanda who categorized hijra as male homosexual prostitutes who present a niche cultural gender performance. Hossain contends Nanda's categorization of homosexuality and argues that hijras who prefer male partners, do not consider themselves or their partners as gay; rather, their approach to desire for men is made through the lens of Bangladeshi heteronormative gendered terms (Hossain 90). The author locates this approach to sexuality in a broader Bangladeshi heteronormative framework as penile centric and argues against homo-hetero binary. Rather, the author finds hijra desire to be framed in heteronormative gendered terms, where the role of penile insertion and reception be associated with "maleness" and "hijraness". According to the author, in relation to sexual union with a male partner, this penetrator-penetrated model often governs hijra sexual union (Hossain 104). Hossain also highlights hijra-hijra unions, which is considered sapphic in nature. Hossain also adds that though such unions are recognized, they are often not considered as a form of eroticism (Hossain 108).

On a final note, in the chapter "Practices and Processes of Gendering" of the book *Beyond Emasculation: Pleasure and Power in the Making of Hijra in Bangladesh*, the author Adnan Hossain portrays the performative oscillation of gender presentation among hijras. Hossain highlights the seamless transition between a hijra subject and their

heterosexual masculine alter self. Presenting the oscillation and the simultaneous performativity, Hossain argues that the “third sex” is anything but a monolithic construct. Rather, the hijra engagement and interaction with the normativity proves the third space to be an extension of the lived world(Hossain 135). The author argues, despite the lack of a direct word for gender in both Bangla and Ulti, the hijra conceptualization of the word is closely related to the western concept of gender as a separate extension of sex; compared to Bangla, where sex and gender notes the same male-female binary. However, it must be also noted that the hijra lexicon sees gender as phallocentric and based on the sexual role and reproductive capabilities. An added layer of social conceptualization and tailoring is also critical in how they construct the normative and non-normative. (Hossain 136). The tailoring becomes critical as most hijras see sari or “Sadra” as a point of difference and distinction from men. The differentiation is elevated as some hijras take contraceptive pills as a form of HRT medication to enlarge their breasts (Hossain 139). In relation to femininity, hijras recognize their limitation in transitioning, as such, to most hijras, presenting and passing as cis women is tantamount to being a woman- blurring the border between the trans and the third (Hossain 142). The oscillation however comes to play as the hijra subjects not only transition between different gender status, but also blur them. During cholla, the hijra ritual occupation, those very feminine presenting hijras embody an aggressive and masculine performance and at times even resort to erotic displays- contradicting the very docile femininity that they cherish. Such performativity denotes a dual gender subversion, where hijras are subverting both the assigned normative identity, as well as their desired performative femininity. The author argues, such subversion is conscious as he writes, “the very act of demanding from the wider

society requires masculine vigour unbecoming of normative women.” (Hossain 144)

However, this oscillation is perhaps most prominent in relation to the hijras who are heterosexually married (as men), especially with kids. Their exploring their hijraness with normative heterosexuality or parenthood serves as the utmost catalyst of performative fluidity in action- making them essentially polymorphic.

Chapter - 4.1

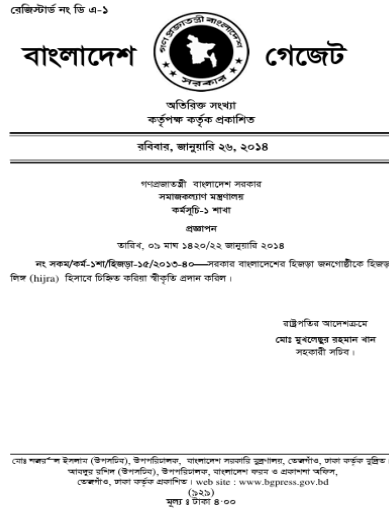
Analysis

Bangladeshi queer literature

Due to the cis-heteronormative approach to gender and sexuality as well as rigid governing over individual expression and the systematic legal censorship, queerness is considered a social taboo in Bangladesh. The socio-political sentiment towards queerness is reflected in Bangladeshi legal framework as well. The antiquated section 377 of the Penal Code from 1860 still dictates and criminalizes queerness in Bangladesh. As such, production, circulation and publication of queer literature is severely limited. The trace amount of activism and publication that existed, was curbed following the murder of Xulhaz Mannan, the editor of *Roopbaan*, the first and only queer magazine in the country. Following this event, queer activism and publications were moved to underground and online spaces. To safeguard from suppression, the circulation is often coded, pseudonymous or published as diaspora literature.

As indicated, the existing queer literature is coded, fragmented and is mostly underground. Yet there are a number of queer literature floating in the mainstream; perhaps the most important of them is Dhee, a lesbian comic strip published by the Boys of Bangladesh, one of the country's oldest queer organizations. Dhee was published at the British Council in 2015 as a project to raise mass awareness regarding gender discrimination and sexuality. Bangladeshi diasporic queer literature covers a large portion of available queer fictions. Bangladeshi-American authors Tanwi Nandini Islam and Sabina Khan's *Bright Lines* and *The Love & Lies of Rukhsana Ali* or Muslim identifying

queer Bangladeshi-Irish author Adiba Jaigirdar's *Henna Wars* and *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* are but a few of such queer diaspora fictions that occupy the Bangladeshi queer diaspora literature; as they sift through culture and desire.



However, there is an additional dimension to Bangladeshi queer literature, or perhaps, literature about queer people, written by the mainstream population- through the cis-heteronormative gaze. Many of these literatures surfaced post hijra recognition in 2014 and onwards. Approaching queerness through cis-heteronormativity, often these works of literature present queerness or in this case hijra identity as the “other” and reinforce the cultural boogeyman. Sometimes, these supposititious attempts reiterate vile cultural myths that vilify hijra lives in the mainstream. One such piece of work *Hijra* by Abuddarda Abdullah that portrays hijra as intentional “fake” performers who make a living out of kidnapping kids!

Regardless, the selected three texts: *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan* are among the very few queer fiction that exists in the mainstream. They exist the same way as the more mainstream literature that discuss queerness or hijra lives; yet, unlike vilifying or shoe-horning queerness into the mainstream, these texts portray a vivid picture of the queer lives in Bangladesh- almost as a lived experience.

Chapter 4.2

What constitutes subversive performativity?

What constitutes subversive performativity? Pointing gender as stylized repetitive acts that function within rigid regulatory frameworks, Butler theorized performativity to be the driving narrative of gender identity. As such, subversion in relation to performative acts denote- acts that expose the porosity in the innatist approach to gender and sexuality construct. According to Butler, repetitive performative acts that challenge the normative rhetoric on gender and sexuality- create the subversive construct. Butler writes in *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* that performativity is a "reiterative and citational" practice. And in turn, these practices render the subject's performative reality (Butler 2). Here, if "citational practice" refers to the recognizable norms, then subversive performativity would be that which bypasses said recognizability. Butler presents the notion in relation to gender and writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. (Butler 25)" The dismissal of the "identity" thus also dismisses the pre-supposed social markers of the dichotomic gender construction. As such, the subversive bypassing of the recognizability, denaturalizes the innatist arguments of the dichotomic gender and in extension, sexuality. The argument is soundly supported by Butler, as they write, "subversive repetition threatens the stability of the original constructions of identity" (Butler 189); further establishing subversive performativity as a corrosive discourse that disrupts the normativity.

Chapter 4.3

Rotna, Duroddhoy and Jonaki- subversion of the reproductive expectations

Rotna

In the play *Shikhondi Kotha*, Rotna's subversion begins in their childhood. Assigned intersex, yet assumed male Rotna, who was named Roton to align with assumed male identity was more enamoured with dressing up and playing with clay dolls instead of more rowdy playful behaviour typically associated with maleness. Rotna's feminine body language, teenage romantic desire to be with Nitai, and draping their mother's stolen sari and bangles codes Rotna's adolescent gender expression. Getting caught, Rotna is faced with anger and disgust. Acknowledging their identity, Rotna decides to run away and join a hijra dera and goes through the ritual initiation. Rotna dresses in sari, bangles and lipstick, expressing every bit of their femininity. As a hijra Rotna partakes in cholla and badhai, bargaining with vendors in bazaars and arguing over their payment for dancing and blessing newborns. However, Rotna's dysphoria for not fitting into the binary persists and is aspirated as they meet Nitai later in the play. The news of Nitai's wife's pregnancy rejuvenates their desire to be female, to bore his child (Zaman 51). Rotna imitates a pregnancy, acting out the morning sickness; tells their fellow hijra that the child might be Nitati's. Towards the very end of the play, Rotna drapes in sari and kajol, and under the moonlit night they let out their dysphoric outcry; to be a man with desire for a woman, to be a woman to bear a child.

Duroddhoy

In the novel *Duroddhoy*, the protagonist Duroddhoy was initially shown as a dysphoric male teenager Tonim. Tonim's crossdressing, feminine expression as Tonima and disregard towards the binary gender structure creates the foundation for their gender identity construct. Their bags full of hair extensions, makeup and dresses code their third space of expression. Tonim's obsession with the word Duroddhoy, meaning difficult to decipher, also plays into their subversion as the word- that later becomes the very subversive identity that they embody. Here the contemplation leading to questioning of the assigned gender roles play out the subversion. Their contemplation of femininity, bodily dissociation of gender and sex creates another layer to the subversion. Their crush confession in their diary forms another layer. Dressing up in their sister's wedding Jamdani sari and dancing to the song Mardala brings out Tonima, who was ever suppressed since Duroddhoy's attempt at life. Getting caught, Duroddhoy ran out of home to save themselves, further emphasizing the normative suppression of subversive performativity. Leaving home, Duroddhoy is hit with the contemplation of identity. Returning, Duroddhoy is sent to a conversion institution to "cure" them. Escaping, Duroddhoy recognizes that despite liking to present feminine, femininity is not their sole identity as it does not make them feel whole, and neither does masculinity. Soon after, they come across the term non-binary (Tonoy 78); the orientation encapsulated Duroddhoy's dysphoria and existential outcry and later in life it became a label they chose to align with, creating their subversive identity.

Jonaki

The protagonist Jonaki as a hijra and a mother subverts the cis-heteronormative reproductive expectations two fold. Born as Torik, Jonaki was accepted into dera through force, turmoil and loss. Yet, her joining the dera was following the same reasons as always, being socially seen as different. Her dysphoria sips through as she stands naked in front of a mirror, acknowledging her subversion as she wails for the third. The desire becomes more vivid as the narration progresses to depict her relationship with a married heterosexual man, Kalam Mia. Another layer of subversion forms as Jonaki visits her sister; facing vehement disapproval from her husband, Jonaki's sister tells her to leave. She breaks down and in the process she realizes despite having claim over the property, she cannot prove that it is rightfully her! If she had remained Torik, and had not presented as Jonaki, she could've asserted that claim. Despite the realization, Jonaki being herself is the very performative subversion that constructs her queerness. The next layer of subversion is done through Jonaki's motherhood. As Jonaki adopts Omba, she guides her through the hijra world, raising her as her own blood. From rearing her to educating her, Jonaki uses her hijrahood as the profession that secures Omba's future. As Omba was found, her biological parents' identity is unknown; as such, Jonaki assumes the role of her sole guardian. The next layer of subversion is found through the use of Ulti language as Jonaki not only performs her cholla and rituals through the linguistic space, but also establishes her kin- as Ulti is also used to navigate through the dera (Sarker 86). Jonaki also performs her maternal duty through this navigated space as she raises Omba fluent in the language.

Chapter 4.4

Subversive performativity and queer identity construction

Rotna, Duroddhoy and Jonaki create their performative subversions that direct their queer identity constructs. Either assigned or assumed masculine, all three characters find subversion through presenting the supposed dichotomic opposite- in femininity; here the subversion is multi-layered. The first is as stated, presenting the supposed dichotomic opposite. However, neither of aligning with feminine identity creates the second layer of subversion as it creates the transgendered third space. Here the term transgender does not represent the western concept of transitioning between the dichotomically opposite genders. Rather, here the term transgender is used in a more contemporary sense as argued by Sarena Nanda. Nanda views the transgender movement as a conscious subversion that dethrones both the sex-gender binary and the view of gender through gendered markers like genitality, body types and assumed bodily sexual association (Nanda 139). Taking Nanda into consideration, it is fair to say that all three characters create a transgendered third space and in the process, invoke a “feminist killjoy” as argued by Mary Bunch (46) through their dual subversion of expected gender norms.

All three characters portray various forms of gender dysphoria and gender fluidity. For Rotna’s case, it’s their wailing outcry for not fitting into either of the binary. For Duroddhoy, it’s the acknowledgement that they don’t fit into the prescribed masculinity. Duroddhoy liking to present feminine yet- not identifying as such creates another layer of dysphoric outreach. For Jonaki, seeing her reflection into the mirror and acknowledging the difference in desire. These dysphoric episodes further highlight the subversive performativity; as the characters, despite feeling dysphoric, are resolute in

their gender expression and performativity. All of which results in creating the individual third spaces- hijra for Rotna and Jonaki and non-binary for Duroddhoy. If such performative thirdspace is compared to drag, Butler's argument on such performative third space in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* can be brought up. In which, Butler argues, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself- as well as its contingency" (175). It can be argued that as Butler reveals the imitative structure, not only does it reveal the constructed reality but also legitimizes the third space through subversion of the normative expectations. On this Butler further argues, "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: "man" and "woman.""(187) The argument creates a leeway for said subversion to destabilize previously assumed binary and heterosexuality and in the process render a queer subject.

The next line of subversion is shared as the characters display non-normative romantic/ sexual desire. For Rotna, it is the unrequited affection for Nitai; for Duroddhoy, the crush on an unnamed boy and lastly for Jonaki, a relationship with a married man. Here, as the subjects are rendered queer, so are their sexualities. As compulsory heterosexuality is the core of cis-heteronormativity (imposed gender binary being the catalyst to heteronormativity) (Haque 7), any deviation from heteronormative expectation, and in extension, reproductive expectations renders the subject's sexuality as queer. On this, Shuchi Karim argues sexuality to be culturally constructed- as within the aforementioned framework, a normative hierarchy ensues on the basis of gendered subjects. Posing a challenge to the "biological genitality", Karim argues that the counter

hegemonic sexual practices actively subvert the heteropatriarchal hierarchy (Karim 6). On this, Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."*, "It is important to emphasize that although heterosexuality operates in part through the stabilization of gender norms, gender designates a dense site of significations that contain and exceed the heterosexual matrix" (51). Butler's argument can be tied to the assertive normative hierarchy that controls and governs the subjects' sexuality; and on the same framework, subversion destabilizes the structure. In relation to the sexed subjects, Butler further argues that the normative structure creates a "domain of abjection" that dictates the subject's subjectivity by dictating the "undesirable". Here, the same "undesirable" creates the basis of subversion that creates the instability (15). Butler capitulates on this by arguing against the essentialist or "fixed" approach to sexuality, especially heteronormativity and argues, such normativity constrains choice and freedom, ergo the performative subversion to deny and denaturalize the claim(93).

Onto the linguistic queer space, Jonaki and Rotna using Ulti to navigate the third space essentially creates a subversive contrast with the mainstream; where only the normative identities get to proliferate- while subjugating the others. Though in this regard Adnan Hossain uses the linguistic third space as a space to practice non-normative sexuality or dhurphit (88), the space can be used to argue for Jonaki's subversion of parenthood as well- since Omba is brought up being fluent in Ulti. Jonaki's parenthood can also be seen as the ultimate form of subversion as she is an assigned male at birth, feminine presenting hijra who performs the role of a mother to Omba. As the basis of cis-heteronormativity is based on the compulsory heterosexual- reproductive expectation, Jonaki subverts each and every criteria through her performative parenthood. Butler

argues in *Undoing Gender* for the criteria of parenthood to be questioned all together, urging for the norms to be questioned and allocated to accommodate queer kinship (8). Though the hijra dera structure already subverts said norm to create such accommodation through the guru-chela kinship, the parental aspect contrasts the mainstream biological expectation itself.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This research focused on Bangladeshi queer lives, their multiplicity, fluidity, subversion and identity construction. Highlighting the social and legal stigma, taboo and ostracization, the paper also highlighted the ineptitude of available mainstream literature on queer lives and their implied vilification. Challenging the prominent queer archetype as deviant- which is fueled by the lack of relatability, especially in the academic sector, this paper aimed to render queer lives as lived and human.

From a handful of publicly available queer texts, this thesis focused on three, *Shikhondi Kotha*, *Duroddhoy* and *Omba Akkhan*; and discussed the queer identity construction of the protagonists from each text. Using Judith Butler's revolutionary queer theory, this research isolated, analyzed and demonstrated the three main characters: Rotna, Durddhoy and Jonaki's queer subversive performativity. The thesis highlighted how queer individuals' dysphoria, performative fluidity and sexual desires create said subversion.

Parrying the prevalent social misconceptions, this paper demonstrated how recognizable, citational performativity creates the queer agency; and how said agency is not an alien nonexistence in Bangladesh. In fact, interpreting the queer stigma, the very subjects and their subversive defiance demands legitimacy. Countering the Bangladeshi normative approach to gender and sexuality as well the queer subjects, this thesis challenges the socio-political structure that governs public lives. And as such, this thesis

hopes for further future participation in academic queer discourse of Bangladeshi subjects, as that is the only way to legitimize self and others.

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