Lucy Lippard, a feminist writer, activist, and curator, writes in her book *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*,

Irony, humor, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences – inverse, reverse, perverse (199).

Lippard calls this process “Turning around…: the simple (and not so simple) reversal of an accepted image” (200). A perfect paradigm of such artists is the *hijra* community of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh). The term *hijra* or *khusra* is loosely translated in English as “hermaphrodite” or “eunuch” – the third gender. The purpose of this paper is to discuss Lippard’s concept of “turning around” via the illustration of individuals who self-identify as hijras. I intend to take the discussion one step further: rather than simply superimposing an American feminist’s perspective onto the subject of hijra identity, I present the perennial philosophy of Sufism (the esoteric, spiritual dimension of Islam, widely practiced in South Asia and other Muslim majority lands) as an alternative theoretical approach to weaving a gendered analysis of the topic at hand.

Throughout history and across the globe, there have always been individuals who do not neatly fit into the sex/gender binary of male and female, masculine and feminine (Nanda 1-9). What Westerners label as “third gender” in much of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, has in recent years started to gain a more nuanced understanding. From an outsider’s perspective, the word *hijra* seems to be an umbrella term for all those who do not fit into the binaries of heterosexual
male and female. Since any departure from heteronormativity is theoretically looked down upon in these societies, it is easy for those who fall somewhere else on the gender or sexuality spectrum to be classified as hijras, including but not limited to homosexuals, effeminate males, castrated males, masculine females, transgendered persons, transsexual people, and so on.

Hijras are a socially and economically marginalized community in the Subcontinent. The role of performance art as a means of survival and an art of resistance is critical in understanding hijra identity formation. Given their otherized status, they adapt not only to survive but also to form unique individual and group identities through what Lippard calls “turning around.” Through the use of irony, humor, and subversion in their day-to-day lives, they hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, to the hegemonic, heteronormative society. Lippard’s mirror and Rumi’s mirror are the same mirror of reflection and self-criticism. Mowlana Jalal ad-din Muhammad Rumi was a thirteenth-century Persian poet, theologian, and Sufi mystic, and today is one of the most celebrated Sufi poets and philosophers globally (Chittick 1-5). Rumi writes,

Let go of your worries
And be completely clear-hearted,
Like the face of a mirror
That contains no images.
If you want a clear mirror,
Behold yourself
And see the shameless truth,
Which the mirror reflects…
Between the mirror and the heart
Is this single difference:
The heart conceals secrets,

While the mirror does not.

In other words, Rumi is eloquently pointing out that the mirror does not conceal anything, it shows all. It has no secrets. It is shameless truth. Just as hijras are perceived as human beings with no shame by the *vox populi*, they are the metaphorical mirror of self-reflectivity within any given society. For example, as Gayatri Reddy’s ethnographic study points out, the performance of lifting their saris to show their (lack of) genitalia is a threat hijras use to get what they want (i.e., money, respect, etc.) (139-140). Under her section titled, “(Dis)Embodied Exposures, Revealing Practices,” Reddy quotes others’ comments: “[Hijras] are shameless. They have no honor. They are answerable to no one…they have no *sarm* (shame)”, explaining

they are “a people freed from the constraints of decency that regulate the rest of society”…by virtue of their…gender ambiguity…[they] are considered to be outside the social mainstream and thus to have “no *sarm*”…serving as potential repositories of shamelessness…exposing that by which they are construed as shameless…(139).

This is the same shameless truth that Rumi sees in his clear mirror. On one hand, hijras proudly wear this badge of shamelessness. Unlike men and especially women, hijras have no qualms about lifting their clothes and showing that which is considered private or shameful. They are “slyly infiltrating…[the] mainstream with alternative experiences – inverse, reverse, perverse”. On the other hand, because the public perceives this as a shameful act, one not to associate oneself with at all costs, this performance is used as a threat to get one’s way. As Reddy explains, hijras are well aware that their shamelessness makes people afraid to incite public confrontations with them (139). “Hijras *in turn* use this knowledge to their advantage, threatening to lift their saris if their demands are not met” [my italics] (Reddy 139). This “in turn” is the same “turning
around” that Lippard explicates. Like Lippard’s artists of resistance, the shameless gain the power of shaming others. Acting as mirrors, they force society to “behold yourself and see the shameless truth” that Rumi talks about. That shameless truth being, how uncomfortable society is with ambiguity, specifically sexual/gender ambiguity. We are ashamed of that which is different, that which is the Other, that which does not fit neatly into the rigid compartments we have created for ourselves over time (i.e., man, woman, male, female, etc). We are so ashamed, yet, we have no remorse when it comes to shaming the Other, to ridicule the Other, to marginalize the Other, to abuse the Other. For instance, as one hijra expresses his frustration in the short documentary I am that: on one hand, hijras are called to perform at wedding ceremonies and birth celebrations, on the other hand, they are pushed away like a disease if they ask for more money than one would like to give to a beggar or a lowly entertainer. We cannot seem to “let go of our worries” about rigid labeling and stiff sexualities, therefore are unable to be completely “clear-hearted.” Our mirrors are filled with “images” – images of an unrealistic, idealized, sanitized world, one which does not exist in reality.

Throughout the ages, Sufism has questioned our perception of reality, and in turn, Reality (i.e., God, the Divine), using irony and humor via the creative arts. One definition of Sufism is, the “inner dimension of Islam concerned with spiritual training of the soul” (Nasr 292). This training of the soul is achieved through creative, artistic expression, passed down from generation to generation. For example, poetic expression and storytelling play a major role in Sufi philosophy. Sufi poetry and parables use humor and irony to question and ultimately subvert hegemonic, patriarchal, exoteric, narrow, dogmatic interpretations of Islam specifically, and religion and culture generally. Famed author and teacher Idries Shah wrote countless books incorporating the Sufi tradition of humor and irony through his renditions of teaching-stories. As
in the perennial tradition of Sufism, Shah uses humor to represent human behavior and question the intellect, questioning those who bother to think, those who bother to question. In his book titled, *Special Illumination: The Sufi Use of Humour*, Shah quotes Rumi: “If you want special illumination, look upon the human face: See clearly within laughter the Essence of Ultimate Truth” (3). In other words, Rumi is emphasizing the significance of humor in spiritual experience. On one level, he is mocking those intellectuals, those religionists who claim to achieve special illumination through being serious, being rigid, being humorless. On another level, he is making a direct link between the Divine (i.e., Essence of Ultimate Truth) and human laughter, human happiness, human acceptance, human love. On yet another level of analysis, if you “turn it around” and take another look, laughter is not always connected with happiness. Laughter may be a sign of nervousness, of going along with those who make fun of you, of being in pain, of covering up sadness, a symbol of despair and desperation. In the case of the hijras, as in the case of Sufism, it is more than likely, all of the above and countless more layers of complex meanings. As Lippard says, it is simple and yet not so simple.

Case in point: hijras, on one hand, claim to be women, and on another say they are neither man nor woman. Reddy discusses in her chapter titled “(Per)Formative Selves: The Production of Gender,” how hijras strive for feminine beauty through various practices. For example, some hijras (not all) go through the *nirvan* (rebirth) operation resulting in physical emasculation, some take hormones to sculpt their bodies in an attempt to grow their *chati* (breasts), others tweeze their beards, bleach their skins, and let their hair grow out, while almost all wear women’s jewelry, makeup and clothing (Reddy 121-141). Moreover, some admit to fantasizing about nursing children, and others claim having post-operative bodily discharges similar to menstrual periods (134). Despite all of these painstaking efforts and wishes to feminize
the body, hijras do not decidedly think of themselves as women. “We are neither men nor
women; we are hijras” is the common reply when asked about their gender affiliation (134).

In her section titled “The Mimesis of Femininity and Parodic Gender Subversion,” Reddy
discusses Judith Butler’s famous critique on gender construction: she says, Butler argues
…for the understanding of (all) gender as “performance” and…parody as the most
effective strategy for subverting the fixed “binary frame” of gender... “Our identities,
gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic inner “core” self but are the
dramatic effect (rather than the cause) of our performances”…all identities are
performative, and conscious parody of such performance is what subverts both the
category and lived reality of gender…(135).

Hijras are quintessential parodic performance artists whose livelihoods serve to subvert the fixed
binary frame of gender, through irony and humor. The dramatic effects that their identities
express range from threatening performances like the lifting of the saris, to literal parody
performances at weddings, birth celebrations and other gatherings. Hijras are invited (and
sometimes come uninvited), to sing and dance, clap loudly, behave flirtatiously, make sexual
innuendos, and attract all kinds of (a)sexual attention as they entertain the masses. In a society
where women are discouraged from singing and dancing in public, looked down upon for openly
flirting with the opposite sex, and even discouraged from laughing too loudly, the hijras are there
to “turn it around” (“it” being gender norms and expectations) through their performances and
their larger-than-life personalities. This kind of conscious parody of what a proper woman is
supposed to behave like serves to subvert, serves to hold up that mirror to society that Lippard
and Rumi canvass, serve as sly infiltrations via the “inverse, reverse, perverse.” Through their
loud exclamations (i.e., singing, clapping) and laughter, their exaggerated gestures (i.e.,
provocative hip and chest movements in dancing), they make others laugh along with them. Human faces, filled with laughter: that Essence of Ultimate Truth that Rumi talks about, that laughter which possesses many layers of meanings, that laughter which if seen cursorily may communicate happiness, but it takes a “turning around” to understand a deeper pain, a more problematical context.

Reddy discusses these hijra performances problematizing any easy characterization of gender ideals. She says that their

…practices serve as performative correctives to an easy understanding of their identity as merely embodying a resignification of existing gender patterns. Instead, these dramatic hijra performances necessitate a critical reflection on hijras’ role in this debate and indicate that they are neither only subversive agents of resistance nor simply particularly flamboyant feminine surrogates. Hijras appear to embody both these images/ideals, and their gender performances instantiate their “inherently ambiguous” and axial position in the Indian imaginary (136).

Just as Sufi poetry and parables via music and storytelling serve as performative correctives to an easy understanding of human behavior, human identity, human feelings, and necessitate a critical reflection on our roles (i.e., as humans, as Muslims, as spiritual beings, as men, as women, as the Other) in this debate with the Divine, in this debate with other humans, indicating that we are neither only subversive agents of resistance nor simple-minded subservient slaves. Whilst we embody divine ideals and images (e.g., in both the Bible and the Quran, God Speaks of creating the human in God’s own Image (Gen. 1:26) and Breathing God’s Spirit into the human (Quran 15:29)), our performances on the stage of life instantiate the inherent ambiguity of reality. This
neither-only-subversive-agents-nor-subservient-slaves concept is expressed eloquently by Bulleh Shah (one of the most celebrated South Asian Sufi poets and philosophers) in Punjabi:

\[ \textit{Bulleya, ki janan mein kon} \]

O Bullah, what do I know who I am

\[ \textit{Na mein momin wich masitan} \]

Neither am I a believer in the mosque

\[ \textit{Na mein vich kufar di reet aan} \]

Nor am I grasped in the tradition of disbelief

\[ \textit{Na mein paak aan, Na paleet aan} \]

Neither am I pure, Nor am I impure

\[ \textit{Na mein Musa, Na Phiroan} \]

Neither am I Moses, Nor Pharaoh

\[ \textit{Na mein aabi, Na mein khaki} \]

Neither am I of water, Nor am I of land

\[ \textit{Na mein aatish, Na mein pon} \]

Neither am I the fire, Nor am I the wind

\[ \textit{Bulleya ki janan mein kon} \]

O Bullah, what do I know who I am (Junoon, Shergill, [My trans.])

This neither-here-nor-there, neither-this-nor-that theme in Sufi poetry is the philosophical underpinning that is a \textit{sine qua non} in our approach to understanding those whom we label as the Other (i.e., hijras, third world, woman, etc). It is a blatant criticism, a deliberate disruption of the oppositional-binary mode of thinking (i.e., male-female, man-woman, homosexual-heterosexual). It challenges notions of extremes and absolutist modes of thought (i.e., nobody is
as purely angelic as a Prophet, nor is purely as evil as the Biblical/Quranic character of Pharaoh; nobody is absolutely masculine or absolutely feminine). Through critical thinking, it creatively creates liminal space for the Other, for discourse with/through the Other, and an understanding imbibed with empathy for the Other. It allows for grey areas, for fluidity, rather than rigid compartmentalization. Both Bulleh Shah and Reddy are addressing the same dilemma: the constant negotiation between our ids and our superegos, that “inseparable, ‘fluid relationship between ideal and experiences…,’ with each related to the other…each ‘constantly being transformed one into the other’” (Reddy 227).

If hijra constructions of gender…teach us anything at all, it is that notions of culture, self, and meaning can only be comprehended through the unresolved tensions between such desire and experience, between individuals’ ideals and practices…we “have to come to terms with the fact that “meaning” cannot be pinned down, is always sought but never apprehended, is never this and never that, never here nor there but always in between, always inherently elusive and always inherently ambiguous”…a viewpoint that hijras would readily endorse (227).

A viewpoint the Sufis philosophized and a viewpoint hijras endorse. A viewpoint and a hard-learned lesson by Western feminists: meaning does not come out of rigid labeling and compartmentalizing, meaning is the child bore from unresolved tensions between desires and experiences, between ideals and practices, meaning is to be found in the elusive, ambiguous crevices between the supposed oppositional binaries we think we have so concretely set up.

Meanings and mirrors.

Bulleh Shah’s poem, passed down from generation to generation, still sung today by South Asian Sufi musicians, continues on to recite,
Bulleya ki janaan mein kon
O Bullah, what do I know who I am
Awal aakhir aap nu janaan
I only know Self to be first and last
Na koi duja hor pichanaan
I do not recognize any Other else
Mein to na koi hor sayana
There is none wiser than Self
Bullah Shah khara hei kon
Who is this Bullah Shah standing here? (Shergill, [My trans.])

A superficial hearing of such verses would leave the listener thinking the poet is a narcissistic fool. It takes an astute mind to recognize the “turning around” that the spiritualist is presenting. On a secular level, he is implying that humans are arrogant; they think they are the first and the last, the center of the universe, the wisest of beings. On a religious level, he is alluding to God, whose two of the ninety-nine divine attributes in Islam (also known as ninety-nine names of God) include Al-Awal and Al-Aakhir, the First and the Last; he is attesting to the Unity of the Divine. On a spiritual level, or in the Sufi/artistic/“turning around” process, the poet is using irony to oblige the individual to think critically: if there is no Other than the Self, then the Self and Other are One. Hence, his rhetorical question in third person: if the Self and Other are One, then who is left standing here? Who is “I”? Who is this Bullah Shah you speak of? This is not to be mistaken to be interpreted as though there is no such thing as “difference” and that all is the same, all is one, we are all little gods running around. Rather, as Trinh T. Minh-ha (feminist writer, composer, artist, filmmaker) explains it in her book Woman, Native, Other: Writing
Postcoloniality and Feminism, “Imagine a world of yang and yang instead of yin…and yang…
No conflict exists…except when the pair are thought of as opposite to each other (instead of
different from each other)” (67). In other words, difference is critical; it is not “difference” that is
the root crisis here, rather the setting up of opposites, oppositions, oppositional positions. Minh-
ha gives the specific example of the male and female principles here, but also implies that this
concerns that which we label as East versus West, masculine versus feminine, homosexual versus
heterosexual, or in Bulleh Shah’s verses, Moses versus Pharaoh, believer versus disbeliever, pure
versus impure, and so on and so forth. In the case of the hijras, for example, one cannot simply
gloss over all gender/sexuality differences and state that we are all the same, and that there is no
difference among hijras and between those who identify as man or woman. Moreover, one
cannot even state that all hijras are the same. As Reddy underscores in her ethnographic study,
there are various differences in the language and behavior of self-identification even within and
among those who are labeled as hijras (211-228). Again, difference is critical, but it does not
have to be set up in adversarial terms. Hence, a shallow reading of Bulleh Shah’s verses above,
and other Sufi texts in general, would render a simplistic notion of universalism. Only one who is
acutely astute enough to understand the irony would arrive at the underlying theme: there is no
universalism without particulars – a key to understanding the Other and the relationship of the
Other with the Self.

In order to convey this message to the masses, Sufis throughout history have not only
used irony, but humor as well. The use of humor to criticize those in power (i.e., law-makers,
religious clerics, governmental entities, royalty, upper-class/elite of society, etc.) is a common
theme within Sufi poetry, parables, and philosophy. An example of an Idries Shah teaching-story
called “Whose Beard?” in his book *The World of Nasruddin* goes as the following:
Nasruddin dreamt that he had Satan's beard in his hand. Tugging the hair he cried: “The pain you feel is nothing compared to that which you inflict on the mortals you lead astray.” And he gave the beard such a tug that he woke up yelling in agony. Only then did he realize that the beard he held in his hand was his own (438).

What Shah is poignantly pointing out through the character of Nasruddin is the shortcomings of the human intellect. That which we label as Satan, or Evil, or the Devil, that which we like to label as the Other so that we may have someone to point a finger at, in reality, turns out to be the Self. That which we choose to otherize says more about the Self than it does about the Other. Shah is using humor to hold up that mirror Lippard and Rumi talk about. On one level, the author is using the character of Nasruddin to hold up the mirror to the character; his dream acts as a mirror, making him realize who he thought was Satan turns out to be the Self. On another level, the story itself is acting as a mirror for religious clerics/fundamentalists/elites, forcing them to question their assumptions about reality and Reality. Lippard and Shah are both highlighting the same insight: we are all wearing guises and disguises, whether we choose to recognize that and jump into the fire is another matter.

*Kuch khel nahin hai ishq ki laag*

It is not some game, this obsession with Love

*Paani na samajh ye aag hai aag…*

Do not mistake this for water, verily it is fire

*Yeh ishq nahin aasaan*

This Love is not easy

*Bas itna samajh lee jiyay*

Understand this much at least
Ik aag ka darya hai
It is a gushing river of fire
Aur doob ke jaana hai
And drowning is the only way to cross it [My trans.]

sings Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (world famous Pakistani Sufi musician) in the song *Tumhein Dillagi Bhool Jani Paray Gi*, “You must forget about mere infatuation.” One dimension that the (unknown) poet is expressing is Love (capital L) versus love (little l). Divine Love versus worldly love. He is crying out concerning the anguish and agony that accompanies true Love, one that requires human beings to give up worldly infatuations, materialistic gains, and so on. On another dimension, he is lamenting that even within worldly love, the painstaking process one must go through to attain true Love, verses mere lust or materialistic, temporary, superficial attachment. Again, it takes “turning around” to realize the irony: once one attains true Love for human(ity), one draws closer to *Al-Wadood*, “the source of all Love” (*Al-Wadood* being another one of the ninety-nine names of God in Islam). Sufis are those artists leaping out of the melting pot and into the fire that Lippard talks about, literally and figuratively.

Throughout history, Sufis have been persecuted and marginalized for their beliefs, for their criticisms of hegemonic religions, cultures, and politics. The exemplary story, often told through songs and poetry, is of Mansur Al-Hallaj, a thirteenth century Persian revolutionary writer and teacher of Sufism (Garraty 288). Al-Hallaj was known for attaining spiritual trances in which he would exclaim “An al-haqq”, “I am the Truth”. *Al-Haq* is also one of the 99 attributes of the Divine. While Al-Hallaj was simply holding up the mirror, forcing people to question the relationship of the Self and the Other, of the Self with the Divine, his utterances were misconstrued as though Al-Hallaj was calling himself God. After spending 11 years in jail, he
was publicly executed for heresy (Glasse 164). Some accounts say his body was cut up into pieces and he happily allowed his body parts to be thrown into fire. Many parallels can be easily drawn between the story of Al-Hallaj and Jesus Christ. The stories of those who are executed for their beliefs, and moreover, those whose crucifixions leave a redemptive significance for all of eternity, those whose ironic stories serve as mirrors for all those who come after them, those who leap out of the melting pot and into the fire.

A more contemporary example of Sufis being thrown into the fire would be the terrorist attacks across the various Sufi saint shrines in South Asia. In recent years, particularly since 9/11, the rise of militant groups in South Asia has led to an onslaught of bomb blasts across Sufi saint shrines in the Subcontinent (Roggio “Suicide Bombers Kill”) (Tavernise “Suicide Bombers Strike”). Whether we label them “militant groups,” “terrorists,” “extremists,” or “fundamentalists,” the underlying problem is the same: they are offended by the Other, that which is within their own supposed belief system of “Islam” yet does not conform to their standards of faith and virtue. Sufi beliefs, practices, and traditions offend those who believe such beliefs, practices, and traditions lie outside the realm of Islam and therefore are heretic. Those who are slaves to compartmentalization, slaves to oppositional-binary modes of thinking (e.g., male, female, believer, disbeliever, etc.), those who cannot reconcile the difference between our ideals and our experiences, those who cannot recognize the negotiation process that takes place between the Self and the Other with every breath we take, find it easier to throw the Other into fire rather than reach across and attempt to understand the Other – all the while failing to see how deeply intertwined the Self and Other are, all the while failing to see that when we throw the Other into fire, we are also extinguishing the Self.
The relationship between hijras and Sufism is reified in the story of Tarabai, passed down from generation-to-generation of Indian hijras:

There was once a hijra named Tarabai who desperately wanted children of her own. So she went to Ajmer Baba and asked for this wish to be granted. Only, she said, “I wanted a child to be produced in my womb,” and did not explicitly ask for it to be born. So her pregnancy continued for several months and finally, unable to bear the pain and burden any longer, Tarabai slit her stomach and removed the baby, killing herself and the baby. But to this day, hijras who go to Ajmer Baba’s dargah [tomb] inevitably pay homage to Tarabai as well (Reddy 134-135).

These tombs and shrines of Sufi saints serve as spaces that welcome the Other throughout South Asia (Shakir “The Hijras and Dargah Divinity”). For the most part (at least compared to most other worship houses), these are physical and spiritual spaces that are welcoming to marginalized communities, and tend not to discriminate based on gender/sexuality, religious creed, cultural or political affiliations, etc. For example, even if the Saint was a Muslim, non-Muslim worshipers are welcome and come willingly to visit and pay homage. In the same vein, even though hijras are shooed away like inferior creatures in everyday settings outside homes and on the streets, they are welcomed and incorporated into these Shrine communities and cultures such as the iconic shrine of Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti, also known as Ajmer Baba (for being buried in the city of Ajmer in Rajasthan, India). Moreover, even though women are not usually welcomed in many mosques across South Asia, the irony of hijras, the supposedly inferior, ambiguous gender, being welcomed into holy spaces like the Sufi saints shrines is of particular interest and worthy of notice.
In the way that Sufis have been thrown into the fire, so have hijras. The persecution and marginalization faced by all those who do not neatly fit into the compartments created by society for gender and sexuality serve to add fuel to the fire of being othered. Hijras are those artists, (and on another plane, those sufis), who leap out of the melting pot and into the fire. Just as the Sufis philosophize and practice, hijras also execute a critique of hegemony through creative expression. There are countless contemporary personal accounts on social media outlets including film documentaries, in which those who self-identify as hijras or third gender reveal their agonizing stories of being othered, of leaping into the fire. For example, a young individual named Sachin, and later the female name of Sakshi, shares his narrative of how he grew up cross-dressing, and from a very young age, wanting to dance and act like female Bollywood actresses (“Third Soul Documentary”). At first, his family encouraged this behavior. He even performed a feminine dance at school and received much praise and adulation. But as he grew older, his family started to grow weary of his feminizing gender performances. After some initial hesitation, Sachin started to spend time with hijra communities. One day, his older brother discovered that Sachin was cross-dressing and confronted him about it in front of his mother. When Sachin attempted to explain himself, the older brother became violent and hit Sachin. This type of behavior continued, and the verbal and physical abuse escalated. One day, Sachin’s older brother got into a fight with him about making Sachin cut his hair. When Sachin refused and fought back, the brother pulled Sachin by the hair and told him to leave the house. Sachin decided to pack his bags and leave. He decided to leap out of the melting pot and into the fire. Sachin goes on to explain that he had no choice but to find shelter within the hijra community he used to spend time with. After some time, he started feeling guilty for not carrying his own weight and decided to join his hijra friends in earning money through begging on the streets and
providing cheap entertainment by dancing at parties in the evenings. He exclaims how bad he felt for doing all of this and still fears what will happen if his family ever finds out, but he believed had no choice (“Third Soul Documentary”).

This was simply one of the multitudes of illustrations of artists/sufis leaping out of the melting pot and into the fire. There are countless such stories taking place regularly in regards to the violence perpetrated against hijras on a daily basis across South Asia. The violence against women and sexual minorities is systemic and deeply ingrained in the social and economic structures. Given the increasingly institutionalized marginalization of sexual minorities in the Indian subcontinent, since colonialism, hijras have had no choice but to resort to beggary, prostitution, and the art of cheap entertainment as their only sources of survival. Left with a lack of basic human rights, hijras are frequent targets of police brutality in addition to being vulnerable to rape and sexual harassments on the streets (“Ongoing Police Violence”).

Whether we are talking about the literal fire of Al-Hallaj, the literal fire of violence and abuse, or the figurative fire of pain/agony/otherization of hijras and Sufis, these are those artists that leap out of the melting pot and into the fire. From one perspective, the Self is leaping into the fire willingly. For example, Sachin chose to leave his house, Sufis choose to follow in the path of strict spiritual training, they choose to criticize those in power. From another perspective, the Other is being thrown into the fire. For example, through extreme violence, through institutionalized discrimination, hijras and Sufis are rejected by the mainstream and thrown into the margins. Yet again, it takes the perceptive to see the “turning around” taking place, to see the complexity of the process at hand, to see that ironic mirroring. Given the limited choices of survival, hijras, Sufis, artists, while being forcefully thrown into the fire, are also jumping whole heartedly into the fire. To be true to the Self, they are owning their Otherness.
At the beginning of her book, Minh-ha discusses her own crisis of choosing one otherness over another. She uses the example of what she terms as the “triple bind” – or as us Westerners might label it “the triple threat” – which places a woman of color (such as herself) in the dilemma of choosing from “three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color?” (6). She explains how this dilemma causes one to constantly question “her relation to the material that defines her and her creative work” (6). Minh-ha is eloquently pointing out the predicament of being buried under layers of otherization (i.e., a writer, a woman, a person of color), and then being forced to choose one dimension of self-identification over another. This predicament of choosing one identity over another applies directly to the understanding of hijras. If a relatively advantaged person like Minh-ha is fastened in a triple-bind, what kind of a multi-bind are hijras entangled in? At the very least, there is triple bind of being a person of color (third world citizen), identifying as a woman (if one can get away with it), being a hijra (ambiguous, gender/sexual minority). Other layers of otherization would include: being a street beggar, being a prostitute, being a cheap entertainer, being a nuisance to society, and so on. Street begging connotes lower class status and poverty. Prostituting oneself is perceived as sexual promiscuity, a social abhorrence that must be exorcized from the community. Actors of cheap entertainment at celebratory gatherings are not seen as creative artistic expressionists, but rather a form of lewd parody performers. All these forms of expression and survival, whether it is street begging, prostitution, or dancing, act as both a cause and a result of marginalization – there is a perpetual cycle of pain and personality, the cycle of “turning around.”

As Lippard exclaims, this cycle of turning around is a simple and not-so-simple reversal of an accepted image. The accepted image of who a hijra is supposed to be is being challenged
today through processes that are also excruciatingly simple-and-not-so-simple. The most recent example of this is how hijras are finding or being offered new modes of making a living. As one documentary narrates:

Being at the bottom of the heap in India is perhaps one of the most difficult sentences life could pass. You learn to grab what you can, and for some an opportunity has appeared in an odd form…Mr. Shetty…a Bombay debt collector…has worked out a brand new way to repossess using the dispossessed…[his company] uses eunuchs to embarrass debtors into paying…Mr. Shetty is undoubtedly in it for the money, but [none of the hijras] are complaining. For them to work in so-called “normal society” is a step towards freedom (“A Eunuch’s Life”).

On one hand, the hijras are finally gaining employment opportunities outside of prostitution and street beggary. On the other hand, they are being exploited by local businessmen who want to use their othered status to embarrass debtors into paying up. In this film, a hijra named Shabina responds to the circumstances by stating, “After coming into eunuchs’ [community], I was very much depressed by the way of living. That means by begging. But somehow, by God’s Grace, today I am working. From one year I am working. I’m very much happy.” She hopes that her next job will be as a social worker helping others like herself. Shabina’s comments echo those of Sachin/Sakshi. The feelings of depression due to being separated from family, the feelings of guilt having to do with prostituting oneself or begging on the streets, the feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity in general, all add up to provide the complicated and frustrated circumstances hijras face after leaping into the fire. These new job opportunities, even if as debt collectors for shrewd businessmen, are a welcome change for those individuals who no longer want to prostitute themselves, beg on the streets, or be the dancing jokers at festive events. Hijras are not
only working as debt collectors for private businessmen, but also as tax collectors for the
government. What started as an Indian practice, according to one CNN report, is now being
adopted by the Pakistani government. “Transgender tax collectors” (as the title of one report
stated) are an increasingly popular trend in the city of Karachi as tax evasion has burgeoned into
an intractable issue (Bilchik “Pakistan’s Dual Gender”). Once again, irony is staring back at us
and smirking. The hijras are securing respectability by using the only asset they have: their lack
of it.

Just as Lippard’s artists gain power by using the only asset they have: their lack of it; just
as the Sufis gain spiritual and worldly stature by using the only asset they have: their lack of it.
Sufis, artists, hijras: all marginalized minorities in their own right. All use irony, humor and
subversion as their common guises and disguises. All are leaping out of the melting pot and into
the fire. All hold up mirrors to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating the mainstream with
alternative experiences. All while engaging the Self and the Other in the simple-and-not-so-
simple process of turning around. Where most people gaze on to simply see an image, or to
simply see the reversal of an image, it takes a perceptive glance to behold the “mixed blessings.”
All it takes is a perceptive glance at the mirror to invite the irony.
Works Cited


10 May 2011.


