

# Performing (Trans)Woman Identity through Nirvana: A Study of Hijra Life Narratives

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## Abstract

This paper extensively studies the significance of nirvana in the lives of hijra transwomen at the personal, social as well as cultural levels. Life writings of hijras from India so far published in English are taken as the primary source of study. Hijras constitute one of the uniquely organised transgender communities worldwide, with a distinct historical legacy and sociocultural characteristics of their own. Nirvana, in the hijra parlance, refers to the shedding of male genital organs and attainment of (trans)woman's body through castration coupled with an elaborate set of rituals. It plays an eminent role in authenticating hijra identity by the virtue of its corporeal visibility and ritualistic connotations. Castration, the core treatment in gender-affirmation or sex reassignment surgery, happens to be the crucially inevitable procedure in nirvana process. Hijra life narratives document their innate desire and anxiety for nirvana, preparations for sex reassignment surgery with community support, painful and brutal experience of surviving castration surgery, postoperative care and rituals within the hijra community, and ultimate pleasure of attaining nirvana. This paper employs Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity, and the interconnectedness between biological sex and social gender to investigate the lived experiences of hijras for unearthing the significance of nirvana. The study concludes that nirvana becomes an agency for resisting oppression and stigma for the hijra transwomen. It further establishes how nirvana authenticates their (trans)womanhood, while also bestowing them with the power to bless others with fertility.

**Keywords:** hijras, life writings, emasculation, nirvana, gender-affirmation

## 1. Introduction

Hijras are transwomen or male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals with a distinct gender expression and unique group culture. They constitute the most prominent cohort within gender nonconforming and sexual minority populations in the Indian subcontinent (Revathi & Murali, 2016; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2010; Hinchy, 2020). The word "hijra" refers to being a eunuch, its root going back to the Arab word "Hijrah" which means "flight" or "departure" (Reddy, 2005; Rao, 2015). Effeminate men and transwomen are variously identified as "hijras", "thirunangais", "aravanis", "jogappas", "khusra", "kojja", "kinnars", "napunsaka", "akwa", "shiva-shakthis", and "kothis" in different parts of India (Jayaprakash, 2022, p. 22). Most of the males who desire to be females, dress like women, undergo castration and claim to have the power to bless people identify themselves as hijras, while other terms also generally refer to effeminate males (Rao, 2015, p. 99).

As Gayatri Reddy (2005, p. 2) defines, hijras are phenotypic men who dress and present as women, undergo sacrificial emasculation, venerate the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata and occupy an intermediary realm between men and women. Scholars like Reddy (2010), Nanda (1999), Lai (1999) and Cohen (1995) posit that hijra status is not confined to one's sexual orientation and gender identity alone, but rather involves a wide kinship network, community structure and distinct group culture. A multiplicity of relational, religious, ritual, regional and class differences also exert a strong influence on hijra individuals and their communities in India. Within both this tightly-knit community framework and society at large, a hijra's authenticity predominantly hinges on their attainment of nirvana. "Nirvan" or "nirvana" is a religious term which, in this context, refers to the castration or mutilation of the male genital organs (penis and testicles) from the hijra body and the rituals associated with this removal process (Tripathi, 2015).

Life narratives of hijras, in the form of autobiographies, oral narratives, personal interviews, case studies and documentary films, illuminate their perception of nirvana as the pivotal, if not the exclusive, determinant of their gender identity. Despite recounting their experience of castration and its aftermath with chilling details, many hijras express a strong sentiment of pride and relief for having attained nirvana amidst all their sufferings. This paper delves into various facets of the nirvana process including its attributed significance, the preparatory phase for gender-affirming or sex reassignment surgery, the unsafe surgical procedures, the post-operative

condition of hijras, and nirvana rituals as recounted in hijra life narratives. Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity and interconnectedness of biological sex and social gender are applied to these recounting of nirvana experiences in hijra life narratives. While hijras have been categorized as the "third sex" (Reddy, 2005), "phenotypic men" (Rao, 2015), "intersex" (Sharma, 2009), and "neither men nor women" (Nanda, 1999), this paper exclusively employs the terms "transwomen" and "hijras." This usage aligns with how these individuals self-identify in their life narratives. Although "gender-affirmation surgery" is the preferred term, this paper employs "sex reassignment surgery" for procedures related to castration and associated treatments, given the continued prevalence of the latter term for practical purposes.

### *1.1 Hijra Life Narratives: An Introduction*

The world of Hijra life has captivated anthropologists, writers, documentary filmmakers, and researchers both within Western academia and India since the late 1980s. As noted by Reddy (2010), the final decade of the twentieth century alone witnessed the emergence of at least four documentaries or news features, four ethnographic monographs, three fictional works, two dissertations, and several graduate theses centred on India's hijra community. While certain of these external portrayals were genuinely empathetic, others delved into the more sensational facets of the hijra community, encompassing their religious practices and occupations. These portrayals from outsiders became perturbing for the hijras, who were gradually gaining visibility in mainstream society while concurrently striving to secure their legitimate citizenship rights (Brinda & Gayathri, 2021). The initial two decades of the twenty-first century also bore witness to the emergence of life narratives authored by individuals from other marginalized segments in South Asia, including dalits, adivasis, sex workers, and the disabled. This confluence of factors culminated in the undeniable imperative for the advent of transgender life narratives in India.

The first of such life narratives by hijras emerged in Tamil from the transgender writer and activist Vidya, titled "Naan Saravanan: Vidya," in 2008. This work was subsequently translated into English as "I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey" in 2013. Following this, transgender activist, writer, and performer A. Revathi unveiled her autobiography "The Truth about Me" in 2010. Originally written in Tamil, Revathi opted for an English translation for her initial publication, ostensibly to shield her family from the contents of her book (Revathi & Murali, 2016, p. 26). After receiving substantial acclaim for her life narrative's English rendition by V. Geetha, Revathi released the original Tamil edition under the title "Vellaimozhi" a year later. In her anthology "Unarvum Uruvamum," published in Tamil in 2007 and subsequently translated into English as "Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Life Stories" (2012), Revathi meticulously documented the life experiences of twenty transwomen and transmen hailing from diverse regions of South India.

Revathi's trajectory continued with the publication of her second autobiography in 2016, titled "A Life in Trans Activism," an English translation of her oral recollections by Nandhini Murali. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a renowned performer and advocate for transgender rights from Mumbai, shared her life journey in "Me Laxmi, Me Hijra," published in 2015. The work was an English translation by R. Raja Rao and P. G. Joshi from her original Marathi manuscript. Manobi Bandyopadhyay, the first transgender individual to ascend to the role of a college principal, chronicled her life story in "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi" in 2017. The most recent addition to this rich compendium is "We Are Not the Others" by another eminent transgender activist, Kalki Subramaniyan, published in 2021. Beyond these hijra life narratives, an extensive body of work has surfaced in Indian vernacular languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi, Hindi, and Kannada, much of which has yet to be translated into English. Transgender life narratives have thus evolved into an invaluable subgenre within the realm of marginalized Indian life writings. This paper examines these life writings with the aim of establishing nirvana as a potent gender performance for asserting their hijra identity and as a crucial instrument of resistance and agency.

### *1.2 Objectives of the Study*

The central aim of this analysis is to elucidate nirvana as a significant gender performance in the construction of hijra identity, both on an individual level and within the framework of hijra community. A secondary objective is to delve into the intricate preparations and rituals carried out by the hijra community for every member, both preceding and subsequent to gender-affirming surgery. Another objective is to unveil the perilous, life-threatening, and unhygienic procedures associated with castration in hospital settings, as well as the traditional methods employed by hijra community midwives for conducting castration.

## **2. Review of Literature**

Several research endeavours have explored the realm of hijra culture, rituals, and the distinctive legacy that hijras contribute to the cross-cultural tapestry of transgender identity. Anthropologists and writers, including Nanda (1999), Irving (1995), Rushdie (2008), and Reddy (2010), have delineated the unique cultural practices, occupations, and life trajectories that define the third-gender categorization of hijras. Scholars in this domain have undertaken comprehensive ethnographic investigations into hijra communities, documenting both the socio-economic dynamics and the complex interplay of identities among hijras and other gender-divergent groups in India. Adopting a sociological lens, researchers like Srivastava (2014), Semmalar (2014) and Sopna (2017) have meticulously analysed the obstacles confronting hijras in terms of accessing healthcare, securing legal safeguards, and benefitting from social welfare programs. On the historical side, Hinchy (2020) has illuminated upon the oppression and criminalization of hijra community during the colonial era, focusing particularly on the North West Province of British India.

Apart from a limited number of doctoral studies, research on Indian transgender life narratives is a very recent phenomenon especially in relation to hijra community. Works of particular relevance to literary studies in this paradigm include those by Das (2015), Jayaprakash (2022), Mondal (2014), and Ganesan and Gopalakrishnan (2023) which have taken writings about and by hijras for an in-depth analysis.

Nevertheless, few of these researchers have analysed the process of nirvana and phases of gender-affirming surgery as recounted by hijras in their life writings. Only a few research articles about hijras have focused on sex reassignment surgery, and they have limited their discussion to healthcare and socioeconomic perspectives. For instance, Mathai and Pradeep (2022) have studied the financial, physical and institutional barriers faced by hijras in accessing sex reassignment surgery with the assistance of modern medicine, while Tom and Menon (2021) have elucidated the social significance and cultural implications of nirvana rituals conducted by south Indian hijras.

### 2.1 Research Gap

After a comprehensive review of the existing literature, a potential research gap has been discerned wherein the present study aims to contribute. A dearth of thorough investigation exists concerning personal, cultural, and social significance attributed to nirvana by the hijras of India. Studies have not adequately brought out the methods and procedures followed in sex reassignment surgery by medical practitioners and fellow hijras across various phases, including the preparatory and postoperative care periods. More importantly, the entire nirvana process has hardly been subjected to an in-depth analysis based on the insider perspectives. Life writings of hijras happen to be ample and invaluable sources for gaining access to this crucial viewpoint about their lived experience of nirvana process and sex reassignment surgery. While several studies have been carried out on hijra life writings, they have not considered nirvana as an exclusive factor of analysis. Even those limited number of studies focused on sex reassignment surgery have confined their discussion to sociological, healthcare, economic and policy aspects involved in this process. Studies on hijra rituals have also not adequately contextualised the nirvana process and elaborate procedures integral to it. Objectives of this study have been formulated in response to this existing research gap.

### 2.2 Methodology

This study makes use of Qualitative method as it is predominantly a textual analysis of life narratives by Indian hijra transwomen. A. Revathi's seminal autobiography *The Truth About Me* (2010), collection of hijra life stories *Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Life Stories* again by Revathi (2012), recounting of her journey as an activist *A Life in Trans Activism* (2016), Living Smile Vidya's pioneering life narrative *I am Vidya* (2013), Manobi Bandobhadyaya's autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017), and Kalki Subramanian's vignettes of recollections *We are Not the Others* (2021) are taken for analysis. Only those parts dealing with nirvana and sex reassignment surgery in these texts have been considered as material of analysis for the purpose of this study. Descriptive method has been employed for the discussion part, in which analytical views and arguments are presented.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity' and the relationship between biological sex and social gender as espoused in her three seminal books in gender studies and queer theory: *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Within these texts, Butler has consistently argued that gender is essentially constructed, negotiated and renegotiated through performativity. Butler's theorisation of performativity is not limited to explicit acts of performance alone, but also to linguistic expressions, physical activities, life style and many more implicit aspects of an individual as well as social institutions. An important dimension of Butler's theorisation for the purpose of this study is her repudiation of the view that social gender is different from biological sex. She argues that such an opinion is necessarily counterproductive, because bodies cannot exist outside their social meaning. The interplay of society and culture significantly influences individual perceptions of the body.

In her book *Undoing Gender*, Butler illustrates the regulation of gender roles by sociocultural institutions, thereby advocating for trans people's gender rights and social transformation. Analysed from Butler's theoretical point of view, the very act of nirvana becomes a multifaceted performance by hijra individuals for gender transition and identity affirmation at the physical, social and cultural levels. Nirvana thus turns out to be one of the vital factors in asserting hijra identity and the only way of attaining their desired biological sex. As Smith and Watson (2010) underscore, the coming-out narratives of transgender people and other sexual minorities have turned out to be a rich corpus for deciphering their lived experience more closely than any outsider observation or anthropological account. This is particularly true with the narration of nirvana process and experiential account of sex reassignment surgery as evinced from the hijra life writings. Consequently, Butler's theory of gender performativity serves as the analytical framework for dissecting the hijra life narratives pertaining to nirvana within this study.

## 3. Discussion

Transgender individuals face a great deal of discrimination, segregated by society and attributed with a cultural stigma due to their gender identification (Sopna, 2017; Pannikot, 2022). Negative attitudes ranging from a general apathy up to extreme aversion against trans persons is the result of the deeply entrenched perception to view any deviance from the heteronormative sexuality and binary gender construct as constituting biocultural abnormality and social unruliness (Srivastava, 2014; Brinda & Gayathri, 2021). Nevertheless, most hijra individuals strive hard and even risk their lives to get rid of the sexual organs with which they were born, since these organs are in opposition to their gender and sexuality. Most often than not, male genital organs turn out to be a source of disgrace to the hijra transwomen's individual perception of their own gender identity. Within the transgender community, particularly among hijras, the possession of male genitalia diminishes one's perceived 'femaleness' or 'femininity in many contexts,' profoundly influencing status and recognition.

Besides sociocultural perceptions within and outside the community, hijras also feel an enormous desire to reorient their biological features and sexuality to match the gender of their inner self. Though hijra identity is inclusive of cultural embodiment and social performance, the questions of sexuality and body are central to one's status and position within and outside the hijra community (Reddy, 2005). Those who

have undergone sex reassignment surgery are considered more authentic and authoritative hijras, while those who await their chance are incapable of elevating themselves beyond the level of “chela” (daughter) (Revathi, 2010). The transwomen who were born as intersex traits with incomplete genital organs are considered to be gifted with divine prowess and their blessings are thought to carry a profound benevolence (Hall, 2005). Conversely, hijras who shed off their male organs through castration are considered to attain nirvana after a forty-day period of isolation, post-operative care and an elaborate set of rituals. These emasculated hijras are consecrated with the power to bless new-borns, married couples and others with fertility, wealth and prosperity (Reddy, 2010; Jayaprakash, 2022).

In this intricate context, nirvana performed through an elaborate set of rituals, cultural practices and castration surgery becomes a key-factor in defining hijra identity. At the heart of this transformation lies Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, underscoring that nirvana is a profound, though not solitary, performance enmeshed within hijra culture and the corporeal self. Both violence involved in the castration process and social respect gained within the hijra community after nirvana are central to the gender performativity of hijra individuals in their journey of this sacrificial emasculation. Hijra life writings eminently reveal their fervent aspiration to get rid of the male genital organs and to convert their bodies into female ones for affirming their identity as transwomen. This transfigured hijra physicality concurrently serves as both an instrument of defiance and an agency of resistance against societal stigma, violence, and the deprivation of fundamental rights.

### 3.1 Sex Reassignment Surgery in the Global Context

There are greater difficulties associated with the bodily transformation of transgender people in developing countries when compared to developed ones or liberal societies (Hines & Sanger, 2012; Chatterjee, 2018; Mathai & Pradeep, 2022). A comprehensive medical process has been established in the developed countries, including womb implantation and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for transgender persons. Historically, various terminologies have evolved for referring to the surgical removal of genitals and medical interventions for augmenting the body of individuals synergic to their desired gender identity, including ‘gender transition surgery’, gender affirmation surgery, transsexual surgery, and sex reassignment surgery (Stryker, 2017; Chiang & Arondekar, 2021). Sex reassignment surgery undergone by transwomen commonly involves the reconstruction of male genitalia into a form resembling female genital organs in both appearance and function. Preceding the surgery, they typically undergo hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and, depending on the initiation age of HRT, other interventions such as facial hair removal (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

Lili Elbe was the first known recipient of male-to-female sex reassignment surgery which took place in Germany in 1930, although there had been several precedence to this treatment earlier (Chiang & Arondekar, 2021). Christine Jørgensen garnered a celebrity status in the United States and elsewhere for undergoing the ‘gender transition surgery’ in late 1952 at Copenhagen. Another remarkable activist to undergo sex reassignment surgery was Renée Richards in the mid-1970s, and she successfully fought to have transgender people recognized in their new sex (Stryker, 2017). In India, genital surgery or vaginoplasty remains to be the only form of medical intervention available for transgender persons in most instances. It involves many complications, even a severe risk to life (Vidya, 2013).

In the recent years vaginoplasties are conducted in hospitals with the application of anaesthesia. Historically, such surgeries were conducted only by self-trained non-professionals, doctor-impostors or midwives from the hijra community itself (Vidya, 2013; Revathi & Murali, 2016). At present, surgical removal of male genital organs for hijras is conducted in certain hospitals as well as by the hijra midwives. It only makes sense to mention this surgical procedure as castration, since no other standard medical guideline is followed in most cases. It can hence be ascertained that sex reassignment surgery, as undergone by hijras, is not in line with the standard procedures and protocols followed in the advanced countries. Nonetheless, these surgical procedures, along with their preparatory and postoperative phases, constitute a formidable performative act toward nirvana, a profound manifestation of hijra identity and a compelling assertion of their transwomen existence.

### 3.2 Nirvana as a Collective Endeavour of the Hijra Community

The preparatory stage for attaining nirvana involves active participation and support from the hijra community. The desiring hijra should wait for her turn in order to be permitted by the guru or nani (guru's guru), the elder member and mother figure of the hijra family (Parivar). Selection of a hijra for sending to the castration surgery is to be announced by this family elder, contingent upon several factors including one's luck and favourable position. Castration surgery was, until very recently, carried out only in a very few self-designated hospitals in a discrete manner. Almost all the hijra life writings elaborate the preparations required in order to travel to these hospitals and the enormous difficulty in getting back to their community. Revathi (2010) recounts how blessed she felt when her nani chose her to be sent for the sex reassignment surgery:

She (nani) called me to her again and asked, ‘Do you want to have an operation performed by a doctor, or by a thayamma? . . . I did not quite understand the importance of nani's question, but felt thrilled nevertheless. I wanted to jump up and down in excitement. . . . In my heart of hearts I was afraid to opt for a thayamma operation. On the other hand, I knew that those who had nirvaanam done by that method enjoyed a special status and were respected. But more than anything, I was eager to become a woman and that was all that mattered to me. You might not be able to bear a thayamma operation, so it is best you get it done by a doctor,’ said nani. (Revathi, 2010, p. 26).

Revathi's account further illuminates the substantial collective effort invested by the hijra community to facilitate castration surgery, the core procedure in nirvana. In Revathi's case, her hijra family arranges for a train ticket and seven thousand rupees for her travel to Dindigul in Tamil Nadu for the castration to be conducted in a stealthy manner at an unsafe and unclean hospital. Likewise, Vidya (2013)

narrates how she was sent to Kadapa in Andhra Pradesh for her surgery to be carried out discreetly in similar conditions. She acknowledges her favourable circumstances compared to other hijras, as her nani was compassionate enough to arrange a 'Sleeper' class train ticket for her. She recounts her excitement on the day before the nirvana procedure thus:

Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honour—I had even begged on the streets to achieve that end. How could I sleep now, with my dream about to be fulfilled tomorrow? . . . It was the most important day of my life. (Vidya, 2013, p. 6).

Similarly, castrations known as thayamma operation performed by midwives from within the hijra community involve a lot of preparations and rituals. This ritualistic surgery is anticipated with a lot of anxiety as well as excitement by the hijras. As documented by Revathi (2010), there exists a prevalent belief that those hijras who attain nirvana through the thayamma operation achieve a more perfect feminine physique and subsequently enjoy a distinguished status within their community. The process entails an intricate series of preparatory rituals, typically set in a secluded village where the castration is performed. These preparations undertaken by hijras for nirvana signify an effective embodiment of their desire for gender affirmation. Viewed within Judith Butler's (1993) theoretical framework, hijra physical body is converted into their agency for performing social gender through elaborate preparations for corporeal transformation.

### 3.3 Parental Support in Sex Reassignment Surgeries

As expounded by Revathi (2010), Vidya (2013), and Revathi and Murali (2016), the majority of hijras encounter blatant rejection by their actual families and mainstream society as and when they embrace new gender identity and sexual orientation. They invariably depend on their newly found hijra family for attaining nirvana. In the case of transwomen who are fortunate enough to have the support of their real families, the preparation for sex reassignment surgery is more scientific and medically driven, as they understand the complexities of the process and the complications that could arise due to this surgery. Manobi (2017) poignantly recalls her family's efforts to arrange consultations with clinical psychiatric experts who bombarded her with alternate medications in the name of 'curing' her gender dysphoria. She further narrates the support rendered by her parents in finding a physician who could understand her legitimate desire to undergo the surgical procedure in order to become a biological woman. Undergoing sex reassignment surgery was thus an individual choice and an inner desire for Manobi, without much bearing upon her social identity, economic position or status as hijra. She describes her aversion to her own body, a typical feeling expressed by other transwomen, as the reason to opt for the sex reassignment surgery with a fuller understanding of the complications involved:

I would spend hours standing naked in front of the mirror trying to inspect the image that stared back at me. I hated him. I could not relate one bit to this body. Each time I arrived at the same conclusion—this is not me. My soul and sexuality did not match the image I saw in the mirror. I would look at that otherwise perfect reflection and weep for hours. I felt like tearing away and escaping from the man's body in which I was born. I knew that if I dressed and behaved more masculine in public I would be spared the insults and jeers that had now become a part of every waking minute of my life (Bandopadhyay & Pandey, 2017, p. 109).

### 3.4 The Harrowing Process of Sex Reassignment Surgery

Hijra life narratives vividly depict the harrowing conditions under which sex reassignment surgeries are conducted, both within typical Indian hospitals and within the hijra community itself. Revathi (2010) narrates her traumatic experience during the castration surgery and highlights the substandard post-operative care she received at the hospital. She explains how the flow of blood is controlled by a bunch of cotton cloths and how she was left to scream in pain after the penis was removed. Revathi (2012), and Revathi and Murali (2016) share similar accounts of other transwomen who have undergone sex reassignment surgery in unsafe and extremely brutal conditions. As these accounts illuminate, castration surgeries are often carried out without administering anaesthesia, using only a blade or a chopping knife. What Vidya (2013) states about her own experience and that of her fellow transwoman serves to highlight the precise details of the castration surgery as conducted at self-designated hospitals in a discrete manner:

I wasn't prepared for the speed of the operation. . . . In barely twenty minutes, a man and a woman wheeled Satya out — it was all over. Neither attendant looked like a nurse or a hospital worker. . . . They lifted Satya from the wheelchair and, spreading a couple of newspapers on a steel cot, dropped her unceremoniously on it. Their unsafe, unhygienic approach made me nervous, but there was no time to worry. They whisked me away as soon as they had dumped Satya on the cot. . . . But it was no operation theatre, I realized as soon as I entered the tiny room—it was a slaughterhouse. In the room was a solitary cot. A masked doctor stood by its side...(Vidya, 2013, p. 11).

Radha, another hijra whose life story has been documented by Revathi (2012), provides a detailed account of the procedures involved in the thayamma operation as conducted by hijra midwives:

I was shivering from head to toe. I stood naked in front of a photograph of Goddess Mata. . . . Since there was hair in my mouth, I uttered Mata's name within myself. As I was doing it, Thayamma pulled my penis and cut it in one blow with a knife. It was not painful when she cut it. After cutting she made me sit. It was burning like hell. It was like sitting on burning fire. I could not do anything. I fainted. (Revathi, 2012, p. 65).

Radha chose to undergo a 'thayamma operation' since it is said to transform one more thoroughly into a woman. While hijras are deeply

aware of the grave risks involved in this perilous surgical procedure, they aspire to become more authentic women at the personal as well as community level through bodily transformation. Be it at the hospital or within the community, the lives of hijras undergoing castration are put to serious risk upon their own desire. It hence demands an enormous courage and intense desire to opt for castration of genital organs in such an unsafe manner. It is also inferred from the lived experience of hijras that sex reassignment surgery, most often than not, exclusively consists of castration and no other standard procedure. Judith Butler's concepts pertaining to cultural variance and social conditioning in gender performance is poignantly exemplified in the experiences of hijras undergoing sex reassignment surgery. The collective hijra experience underscores the development of internal support mechanisms within hijra culture to facilitate this deeply significant gender performance in response to the lack of adequate medical facilities.

### 3.5 Post-operative Rituals and the Mythical Significance of Nirvana

The experiences of transwomen within the hijra community share a common thread of enduring the brutalities of castration surgery in their quest to realize their authentic selves. Their plight often gets exacerbated by their impoverished circumstances, which often prevent them from accessing safe transportation, adequate accommodation, and sufficient sustenance following the surgery (Revathi & Murali, 2016, p. 21). As noted by Rushdie (2008), hijras face additional hurdles in accessing medical, legal, and rehabilitation services, further marginalizing them and intensifying their isolation from the mainstream society.

Despite the immense hardships they endure, almost all hijras share an unwavering desire to align their physical appearance with their internal perception of femininity. The decision to undergo such an unsafe and brutal surgical procedure is not driven by mere curiosity but rather stems from their profound aversion to their male genitalia and a fervent longing to be rid of it. Hijra subjectivity problematizes the discursive construction of heteronormative sexuality and binary gender category. The performance of this trans identity by hijras through the physical transformation negates the discursive notion of sexuality as an immutable entity. While sexuality is typically understood as a biological trait and gender as a social construct, the hijra experience of attaining nirvana blurs these distinctions. As Judith Butler (1993) elucidates in her exemplary work *Bodies that Matter*, both biological and social characteristics complement one another in the process of gender performativity and its affirmation as a cultural identity.

All hijras invariably express their great relief, intense satisfaction and absolute joy upon the completion of forty-day rituals following the castration surgery. For instance, Revathi enjoys special treatment and is asked to rest for the next forty days within her hijra community following the ordeal of the surgical procedure. A grand celebration is organized by the hijra family, during which many elder hijras offer their blessings to her and perform pujas to the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata. She poignantly recalls her emotions as she looked at her own reflection in the mirror as part of the rituals after the forty-day postoperative period:

A mirror was then thrust into my hands—I had to look at myself, and I had not looked into a mirror for forty days. The mirror was of such a size that I could view my face and Mata's face. Beguiled by her rich beauty, I could not recognize myself. My face had changed! I felt like a flower that had just blossomed. It seemed to me that my earlier male form had disappeared and in its place was a woman. I felt exultant. (Revathi, 2010, p. 33).

Vidya, Manobi, Radha, and Kalki also share the same jubilation and satisfaction upon attaining nirvana, which bestows upon them a distinctive status, a rare honor, and a mark of respect within and beyond the hijra community. Paradoxically, hijras become infertile following this sacrificial act of attaining nirvana, yet they are attributed with the power to bless those around them with fertility. Sutradhar (2022) highlights its mythical underpinning thus: "The belief that an infertile hijra has the power to ensure that a woman will give birth, thereby inducing her compulsory fertility, becomes associated with the universal fertility of Shiva lingam" (p. 70). According to the Hindu texts *Shiva Purana* and *Linga Purana*, Shiva castrates himself, and his castrated fertile phallus spreads fertility to the universe. In a similar vein, hijras are believed to possess divine power to confer fertility upon people because they have sacrificed their own fertility.

### 3.6 Narrating Nirvana as an Act of Gender Performativity

Hijra life narratives often consist of the castration procedure and attainment of nirvana, thereby cherishing the fond memory of coming out as a biological (trans)woman at the end of this life-threatening ordeal. These accounts divulge specific stages, procedures and post-operative conditions involved in sex reassignment surgeries as they are conducted in typical Indian hospitals as well as by the hijra midwives called "thayamma". Attainment of nirvana is thought to endow hijras with the ability to bestow fertility and prosperity upon others. By subjecting their body to this arduous journey and immense risk, hijras repudiate the heteronormative gender binary and fixed sexual categories. The act of performing nirvana, both at the individual and community levels, testifies to Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity and the role of body in this performative gender affirmation.

Simultaneously, by choosing to recount their experience of nirvana, hijras indulge in the next layer of performance in solidifying their hijra identity and transwoman embodiment. These documented memories in hijra life writings unearth the specificities of their lived experience and the pivotal role of nirvana in their gender transition journey. These narratives also reveal that the real living conditions and sociocultural position of hijras are in sharp contrast with the "eternally liberated self" as signified by the term "nirvana" (Sutradhar, 2022).

As gleaned from the life writings of hijras, transgender individuals in India constitute one of the most marginalised sections in economic and social terms. Despite the divine attributes ascribed to them, hijras are deprived of basic civil rights and human dignity in everyday life. They are often humiliated in public spheres based on their sexual organs and femininity (Mal, 2018). In this context, the castrated hijra body emerges as a locus of resistance for these transwomen against oppression, stigma and humiliation. Judith Butler's notion about the

intricate relationship between body and culture finds resonance in the hijra performance of nirvana within the backdrop of their socioeconomic predicament and limited access to healthcare facilities. Trans activist Kalki Subramanian (2021) succinctly articulates the agency of resistance gained through nirvana for the hijras in her poem “Nirvaanam”:

“There goes the pottai”  
heckled those  
who have their manhoods  
hanging about them,  
. . . . My wrath rises  
to pounce like a tigress  
on those morons,  
tear their stomach  
and draw out their bowels.  
. . . . the saree head slipped,  
I stood half naked.

Then one of them hollered,  
“What a shame  
you call yourself a woman?  
you stand in front of us  
slipping your saree?”  
. . . . I stand my ground  
to prove my womanhood,  
With tears rolling down  
I remove my saree. (pp. 109-112)

In her proclamation of (trans)womanhood within this poem, Kalki confronts her transphobic detractors, and the hijra body, having undergone nirvana, emerges as a potent and effective instrument of resistance against social oppression and stigma. This manifestation of resistance and assertion of transgender identity gain increased visibility through hijra life writings. The intricate layers of meaning embedded in the performance of nirvana are recounted with contextual significance and meticulous detail within hijra life narratives. These accounts celebrate nirvana as a powerful form of gender performance that asserts the identity of hijra transwomen.

#### 4. Findings

This study has discerned that, with the exception of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (2015), all the life narratives published in English by hijras recount their lived experience of nirvana. These life writings provide insights into the preparations, community support, postoperative care, and various rituals involved in attaining nirvana. Notably, hijras vividly recall the traumatic ordeal of undergoing castration, the core part of their struggle in gender-affirmation, sexual transformation and attainment of nirvana. It is inferred that surgeries performed by unqualified and non-specialised practitioners in discreetly designated hospitals blatantly violate all safety protocols and established procedures, while hijras encounter significant challenges in accessing proper healthcare facilities. Castrations performed by hijra midwives, referred to as the “thayamma operation,” are also perceived as risky and life-threatening in the absence of medical oversight. Those hijras who undergo castration by either method are cared for by the hijra community for a period of forty days. At the conclusion of this forty-day period, a grand celebration ensues as the hijra achieves nirvana, marked by a series of elaborate rituals and a poignant moment of reflection upon the portraits of Bahuchara Mata and their own image in the mirror.

Despite the numerous obstacles and the life-threatening nature of the surgical procedure, hijra life writings consistently convey a profound sense of joy and absolute satisfaction upon the attainment of nirvana amidst all odds. Viewed through the lens of gender theories developed by Judith Butler, nirvana emerges as a prominent form of gender performativity that underscores the interconnectedness of biological sex and social gender as a fundamental means of authenticating hijra identity. As Butler conceptualizes it, “corporeal destruction is necessary to produce the speaking subject and its significations. This is a body, described through the language of surface and force, weakened through a “single drama” of domination, inscription, and creation” (1990, p. 150). For hijras, sacrificial destruction of the body produces effective ways of performative gender construction through which hijra identity is asserted. attainment of nirvana by hijras thus becomes an act of (trans)gender performativity. Furthermore, recounting of nirvana process and its vital significance in their personal as well as community life becomes an agency for resisting stigma and proclaiming their transformed womanhood.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has sought to trace the process of nirvana performed by hijras in typical Indian conditions as they strive to attain emasculation and the body of their desire. This ritualistic emasculation involves much preparation by the hijra family, an unsafe castration surgery in abominable circumstances, and poor post-operative care. The process culminates in a celebratory moment when the hijras join their community with a new status and identity. This nirvana process, as evinced from the life narratives of transwomen, hinges upon medical, anthropological and cultural paradigms of transwomen's lives in India.

The study has brought out how castrated hijra body becomes simultaneously the source of divine blessing and a space of resistance, even though it is subjected to violence and pain for performing nirvana and asserting the sexuality of transwoman self. Notwithstanding the degree of suffering and intensity of pain associated with the sex reassignment surgery, nirvana in its personal, social and cultural dimensions remains to be an effective way of (trans)gender performativity in authenticating hijra identity. Hijra life writings play a vital role in demonstrating the significance of this gender performance in its corporeal, mental, social and cultural dimensions.

Findings of this study underscore the urgent need for governments to provide comprehensive support, including adequate medical facilities, specialized healthcare professionals, financial assistance, proper postoperative care, travel concessions, and social security for hijras choosing to undergo gender-affirmation surgeries. The present study can be expanded by incorporating different theoretical frameworks such as medical anthropology, psychoanalysis and culture studies. Additionally, there is an ample scope for sociological and historical research on nirvana, pertaining more specifically to its origins, legacy, contemporary healthcare challenges, and the effectiveness of State policy interventions, such as the implementation of the Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act in India since 2020. So also, incorporating comparative research on the nirvana process among Indian hijras and the emasculation procedures within other transgender communities would significantly expand the scope of this study.

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