

Forget about names, Talk about Politics: Identity Politics and Dilemma of Trans/'Hijra' Recognition

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the critiques of identity politics that focus on identifying categories rather than their situational politics, focusing on Trans/*hijra* identities. Post-structuralist critiques have already problematised the fixed categorisation of marginalised groups using concepts like *intersectionality* and *disidentification*. Through *assemblage* I want to emphasise the process of marginalisation rather than the identification of certain group. As an example of this, I discuss the recognition of Trans/*hijra* identities in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh. I argue that, firstly, naming 'third genders' doesn't challenge the normalising categorisation from which oppression works. Second, this naming adds to the hierarchy of normalised identities, as it doesn't challenge the derogatory meaning of 'hijra', which refers a position of 'less-man': without the masculine virility of heteronormative 'men'. Thirdly, the recognition of 'hijra' communities marks them as distinct from Western Trans people, which will prevent assimilating with global LGBTQ movements and share in the success of those movements. This form of identity politics puts them in a distinct pocket with their constant marginalisation and social vulnerability. Therefore, I argue that the scholarly tendencies towards continuous demarcation and creating yet more identity categories makes it increasingly difficult to connect the shared and situated experience of exclusion, marginalisation and pain. By emphasising 'identity' and its critiques, the focus has shifted from 'politics of identifications' to

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'identity politics' and I want to argue for renewed focus on the politics of power relations.

"There's always someone asking you to underline one piece of yourself--whether it's Black, woman, mother, dylee, teacher, etc.--because that's the piece that they need to key in to. They want to dismiss everything else. But once you do that, then you've lost because then you become acquired or bought by that particular essence of yourself, and you've denied yourself all of the energy that it takes to keep all those others in jail."

Audre Lorde: Interview." *Denver Quarterly* 16.1 (1981:10-27).

Introduction

The problems with identity politics highlighted by Audre Lord arise within critical scholarship and political activity that focuses on power relations between presumed social groups like gender, class, race etc. The reason to focus on identity is the presumption that power relations work through categorical identification, and therefore identity has to be considered before taking any resisting political action. But post-structuralist critiques in feminism and queer theories problematise the identification of essential/universal categories, instead focusing on differences and fluidity of identities. Rather than fixing identity before taking political actions, identity can be constructed 'through the deed' (Butler 1990:142). For instance, 'Queerness' emerges through the dismantling of 'gender as a relationship between man and woman', and positions itself within a multiplicity of sexual identities. In this article, I want to question not only to the primacy of identity but also the identification process 'through the deed,' as proposed by Butler. Because not only prior identification, but also constantly naming and identifying process can create more and more borderlines. The scholarly tendencies towards continuous demarcations make it increasingly difficult to connect the shared and situated experience of exclusion, marginalisation and pain. I argue that, by emphasising 'identity' and its critiques, the focus has shifted from 'politics of identifications' to 'identity politics' and I want to argue for an emphasis on the politics of power relations again.

To show the academic sifting to focus on identity from politics, I will start with legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's 'intersectionality' and discuss the critiques of it which actually

identify the problem of identification to show. From there I will discuss the problem of identification by the idea of 'disidentification' proposed by José Esteban Muñoz. I will go further to examine the problem of 'disidentification' too with the Deleuzian concept of 'assemblage' by which Puar elaborates her argument, connecting the term 'queer' with the constructed notion of 'terrorist' which challenged the intersectional analysis of identity. Together, these three concepts set off a solid critique of identity politics. Furthermore, I will analyse the problems of scholarly and political interest celebrating identity; and in this connection I will bring the arguments of Davis. In *Situating Fluidity*, Erin Calhoun Davis problematises both the essentialisms of gender binaries and the post-structuralist subversive political agenda to resist it. She situates the lived experience of Trans within social authentication and negotiation, rather than as post-structural mascots. Similarly, I will connect the identification problem of South Asian, especially Bangladeshi Trans people with my argument: focusing on the process of exclusion and marginalisation rather than losing way in the labyrinth of naming and un-naming.

IDENTITY Politics and the Items in its Closet

Categorising identity was considered a key step for feminists and black activists in the fight against racism and patriarchy. However, the liberal flattening endorsement of these movements created terms like multiculturalism and plurality as 'politically correct' solutions, through correctly *identifying* labels of oppression (Scott 1992). As Joan Scott argues, "Within the pluralist framework that seeks to contain and resolve the debate, identity is taken as the referential sign of a fixed set of customs, practices, and meanings, an enduring heritage, a readily identifiable sociological category" (Scott 1992:13). However, liberal endorsements of plurality and multiculturalism through identity politics also came under question. Race, class or women as categories were challenged as exclusionary and reductive. The more individualist approaches challenged these labels and focused on the lived experience of people, through which, the feminist politicization of private became reverse: "political becomes personal" (Mohanty *in* Scott 1992).

1. Intersectionality as a feminist magic-spell:

Liberal discomfort with essentialist 'identity politics' that failed to incorporate personal experience and diversity was assuaged by the emergence of intersectionality. Initially this term identified the overlapping racist and gendered experience of oppression in legal and civil rights. This term emerged with Crenshaw's attempt to identify black women's lived experience of oppression and marginalities a product of intersecting racism, class and sexism. Intersectionality maps the multidimensionality of marginalised subjects lived experiences. "Ultimately, intersectionality seeks to demonstrate theoretical variation(s) within gender and the gendered variation(s) within race through its attention to subjects whose identities contest race-or-gender categorisations." (Crenshaw 1989:139). This concept soon became celebrated in feminist scholarship as a means to understand the blurred areas created by overlapping identity markers. Crenshaw argues: "my focus on the intersection of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1993).

Reacting to the enthusiastic endorsement of the term, Kathy Davis (2008) dismisses it as an academic 'buzz-word', popular because of its ambiguity. For her, the vagueness of this concept makes it a seemingly good feminist theory. Jennifer Nash (2008) offers a more sympathetic critique, emphasis in its lack of methodological clarification. She identifies four limitations of this concept: 1. the lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology, 2. the use of black women as prototypical intersectional subjects, 3. The ambiguity inherent to the definition of intersectionality, and 4. the problem of coherence between intersectionality and lived experiences of multiple identities.

Crenshaw's contribution adds an important academic tool from a feminist political standpoint. But the importance of this concept for me is not as a magic concept to understand inequality or oppression, but in its objective to search for a tool to fight against oppression. While Davis criticises its supposed ambiguity and open-endedness, to me the concept creates closure by making many names and wrapping them in a separate identity cover. Here I want to problematise four pitfalls that the concept creates:

Essentialist: It provides the visibility of multiple identities. Although it embraces post-structuralist emphasis on differences influenced by Foucauldian analysis, the visible imaginary of those identities are presented as essentialist and whole.

Hierarchical: It raises the question of hierarchy within these identities. Which identity should be considered first: gender, race or class? This kind of hierarchical positioning creates problems in feminist theory and politics, distracting from the politics of oppression. Doing so often creates new forms of marginalisation and exclusions within its own discourse.

Alienating: It led feminist scholarly tendencies towards continuous demarcation, creating increasingly intricate borderlines and exclusions within its own discourse. Political standpoints become increasingly alienated.

Obscuring politics: The assumption of solid identities moves our focus from the fluid nature of power relations where the content of those identities is situated. Therefore, the construction of identity obscures the power relations where it is located. The focus should be the relational threads of the subjects of oppression situated in the field of power relations.

Therefore, I will argue for a common ground of oppression away from the rigidity and hierarchy of identification. The feelings of marginality and exclusions can be a standpoint of feminist theories and politics. And of course these feelings are not fixed in relation of one, two or even multiple solid identities.

2. 'Disidentification' to fight against Naming/un-naming

To criticise the fixity of 'identity politics' José Esteban Muñoz uses the term disidentification as a performance by which minority subjects can resist the oppressive and normalising discourse of dominant ideologies of identification (1997:83). For Muñoz, this effort is beyond the binary of "identification and counter-identification". For him, counter-identifications denunciation of identification discourse actually reinstates it. Muñoz illustrates this process with the performance of drag-queen Vaginal Cream Davis' lucid and farcical performance of disidentification. This disidentification is an intersectional strategy proposed by Crenshaw to endorse the coexistence of simultaneous multiple identities like sexuality, race, class, gender, and any other identity differentials (1997:84). According to

Muñoz, Davis' disidentification differs from liberal ideas of plural identities, where pluralities consumed by corporate-sponsored performances desexualise and normalise homosexuality. Muñoz examines the "queerer modality of drag" of other queer drag artists different from liberal/plural drag. He sees the potential, via Guattari, not to "change the ideas of spectators, but in order to trouble them" and uphold a form of terrorism of queerness by disidentification (1997:85). Muñoz shows Davis' disidentifications as "productive interventions by which politics are destabilised, and he compares her role as "organic intellectual" from Gramscian analysis. The disidentification of Davis creates critical uneasiness and desire to unsettle the fixed identity. Therefore to him, it is intrinsically terrorist¹. It is a cultural product with political potentials of radical cultural critique.

Although the idea of disidentification upholds the problems of the binary of identifications and counter identification, disidentification still is the puzzle of identification process. Whereas, to omit this puzzle, I want to give an increased focus on the process rather than the naming boundary. The concept of assemblage can be thus a useful tool that I am going to discuss now.

3. Assemblage: process, rather than name

Jasbir K. Puar, in her path-breaking book "Terrorist Assemblage," elaborates the concept of "Queer Terrorist" by connecting these two concepts or 'Queer and Terrorist' with Deleuzian assemblage theory in the post-9/11 US context. She resists the "queerness-as-sexual-identity" and analyses it as "queer assemblage" by examining the image of the terrorist body (Puar 2005:121). First, she critiques the 'queer' identity that became one of the markers of US superior nationalism. Puar refers to it as Homonationalism, "for understanding the complexities of how "acceptance" and "tolerance" for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated." (Puar 2005:124). She then examines the terrorist trope in its post-9/11 context. She relates Muñoz's idea of terrorist drag where the disidentification in performance disrupts normalisation and carries terrorist elements. But Puar wants to go beyond the 'terrorism of queerness' to examine the 'queerness of terrorism'. She doesn't want to see queer as identity, preferring to position it in "enunciation and dissolution, causality and

effect,” turning from intersectionality to Deleuzian concepts of assemblage (Puar 2005:125). An “assemblage is not an entity with substance”, rather “dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (Puar 2005:128). Drawing the example from post 9/11 U.S. of Sikh turbaned body under the Islam phobic gaze where a terrorist look-a-like body becomes the subject to hate crimes and a “sign of guilt” she argues that this turbaned body suggests “the constant sliding between that which can be disciplined and that which must be outlawed” (Puar 2005:133). For her, this queerness of terrorist turbaned bodies represents “assemblages, a cacophony of informational flows, energetic intensities, bodies, and practices that undermine coherent identity and even queer anti-identity narratives” (Puar 2005:133). Puar’s emphasis on embodiment of context with subject rather than fixed identity enables thinking beyond identity categorisations and helps concentrate on the dynamics of power relations. I want to argue that her appropriation of ‘assemblage’ can help us to look critically to the naming of Trans people and their sexuality in the mainstream language in south Asian context, that will be analysed later in this paper.

Forget about NAME:

While the label ‘queer’ emerged from the critique of identity politics to challenge the gender binary, it became the key reference word to identify the boundary dismantling process. But with Puar’s argument, we find that ‘queer’ itself became an identity again. Muñoz also saw the difference between neo-liberal queer and the “queerer” modality (Muñoz 1997:85) of Davis. Here emerges the intersectional problem of hierarchy between queer identities; which is more queer? These naming and categorising identities not only fail to identify the situated experience of people who actually deal, struggle and negotiate with society in their everyday life, but actually creates a new kind of exclusion within its own discursive boundary.

Starting from the Trans experience of identification anxiety, to its post-structuralist critique, Erin Calhoun Davis situates the constant negotiation of Trans experiences within society by the concept of social authentication. To critique the fixity of male/female gender binaries, Davis shows that recent scholars of gender and sexuality often rely on the experiences of Transindividuals as evidence of the multiplicity and fluidity of gender as a potential political ground. The lives of transgender

people became a scholarly example to establish theoretical 'fluidity' of gender, as ideal representations of gender transgression. Drawing on Butler, she argues that "the persistence of nonconforming identities exposes the limits and regulatory aims of the "matrix of intelligibility" (Davis 2009: 97).

Davis tries to question not only the fixed identification of gender but also the post-structuralist exited expectation on the fluidity by the "bodily experiences and living conditions of transgendered people" (Davis 2009:98). Transgendered bodies become a space of hope for promising political subversion of theoretical fluidity in against fixed gender identity because they have been historically and bodily positioned beyond that binary of man and woman. But, "this theoretical emphasis on multiplicity and fluidity often overlooks the embodied experience and implications of compulsory gender performance" (Davis 2009:98). As she points out: "neither the emphasis on stability nor the postmodern framing of fluidity can completely account for the on-going, every day practices and experiences of (Trans)gender identity construction" (Davis 2009:99). Expectations of politically subversive queer fluidity become a burden, excluding and undermining daily negotiations and vulnerabilities in relation with social authenticity.

In South Asia, the history and label 'hijra' for Trans people refers not only their gender but also a specific type of profession, community living, and historical (in)visibility. They were not bodily invisible, but they were invisible from the state and excluded as 'other' in opposition to heteronormativity. But, following India, very recently in Bangladesh their existence has been officially recognised as a 'third gender' by the State's declaration to give them priority in some social rights. Some activists present this as an achievement of identity politics that establishes them as visible, respectable citizens². But it is clear that this 'naming' is an effort to mainstream and include them in normalised discourse. However, this effort also raises some crucial questions. Delwar Hussain (2013) deconstructs these efforts to 'eroticise and essentialise a social group,' putting them in a box like any other social category (Hussain 2013:81). Hussain criticises previous scholarly attempts to compartmentalise 'hijras' and 'non-hijras' as these distinctions lose the 'fluid, overlapping and contradictory' nature of individual identities

and behaviour that constantly move in and out of the boundaries to which they are confined (Hussain 2013:85). He argues that hijras are not only 'neither male nor female' rather, they are both. They are not distanced from male/female genders but move within those two with a fluidity that the term 'hijra' cannot uphold.

Hussain's argument upholds the post-structural interest of seeing them as an example of fluidity. Whereas, Erin Calhoun Davis' arguments help to understand this situatedness in power relations and different social contexts of Trans peoples who live beyond the binary of fixed category. While Davis' ethnographic experiences of Trans lives are very different from South Asian trans experience, with her argument it can be shown that the Trans peoples' lives and experiences are situated in power relations where they struggle within social identification paradigms. I want to focus on social identification as this is the space where normalisation discourse works with power relations.

Moreover, Gayatri Reddy (2010) shows that the history and situation of 'hijras' is very different in South Asia from Transgender labels and processes in the West. Their recent recognition as a 'third gender' influenced by the global LGBT movement has a very significant effect in India. She discusses the correlation between assumed previous 'invisibility' of 'hijras' and the recent 'visibility' granted by state recognition. She presents this 'mainstreaming' as a result of LGBT civil rights movement, but one that creates a new kind of 'visibility,' putting them under the scrutiny of state and local powerful goons and resulting in new kinds of vulnerability and unsettling to both hijra and non-hijra lives (Reddy 2010: 3).

Let's talk about POLITICS

Reddy's analysis paves the way to look at power relations and hierarchy beyond recognition, where Trans people are situated. Here I want to go back to Puar's argument for 'assemblage,' referring to processes, interwoven forces and networks as opposed to intersecting but concrete normative identities (Puar 2005; 128). The turbaned body of Sikh after 9/11 in US context and the body of 'hijra' in Bangladeshi context has similarities. Both create terror in normative gaze. The body of 'hijra' is

significantly different from body of Trans people in west, as transsexual and transgender difference creates the questions of more political correct position of being Trans, that Davis problematised (Davis 2009). Analysis of 'hijra's of Bangladesh, creates much relevance to understand the assemblage body that can create terror image, as part of their survival strategy, which demands much rigorous analysis with the concept of assemblage. The situation of the 'hijra' community in the context of Bangladesh illustrates how the process works with interwoven forces with many layers of their agency and subjectivity.

However, in this article I am proposing possibilities for further research, and want to problematise the 'hijra' naming dilemma. I want to argue that, firstly, naming a third gender doesn't challenge the normalising category from which oppression works, instead it accommodates normativity, while remaining abnormal and excluded. Second, this naming adds to the hierarchy of normalised identities. It doesn't challenge the derogatory meaning of 'hijra' as it always refer a position of 'less-man,' without the masculine virility of heteronormative 'men'. For example, recently, in Dhaka when few hijras captured the killers of a blogger and helped to hand them over to the police, 'hijras' were celebrated: they did the job as 'real' men should.³ Online discussion and public discourse centred on: 'hijras' the 'less-men' showed the bravery and courage expected of 'real' men. This discourse clearly emphasises the scale of masculinity, the place of hierarchy where 'hijra' were always considered 'less' men, as they have a body of man, but dressed in like women. Thirdly, the recognition of 'hijra' community marks them as distinct from western Trans people, boxing and categorised them in a normalising and hierarchical situation. However, it is important to note that it also creates the way to exclude them from the 'civil' rights for which LGBTQ movements were driven. For example, by not being identified as 'Trans', they won't be able to claim any rights that have already been acknowledged for 'Trans' peoples of the world. This difference will prevent them to assimilate with the global LGBTQ movements and share in the success of that movement. Therefore, it can be used as a clever state policy to undermine their demands. So it can be used in an exclusionary

policy in the form of special naming. This form of identity politics put them in a distinct pocket with their constant marginalisation and social vulnerability.

Conclusion

Examining 'Tran peoples' lives and experiences through the critiques of sexuality and queer studies helps us to problematise the categorisation of identity into different and numerous 'name' boxes. Disidentification was thought to be an effective tool to dismantle the binary of identification and its opposition. However, it also remain strapped within the labyrinth of the identity. The concept of assemblage not only provides a way to completely bypass the focus from the identifying 'name' thing that continuously demarcates the object on which power works, it also can lead us to focus on the processes and situations by which the politics and power relations works. The lived experiences of marginalised people like transgender and 'hijra' communities in South Asia helps us to look on the compositions of power dynamics woven in body with time, space, situation and context. That can be analysed by their embodied assemblage that can encourage further research with Puar's conceptualisation. It can provide a move from objectification to the politics of process. The problem with 'identity politics' is that power worked under the cover of identity and categorisation. For me, the focus point should be therefore, the relational threads by which self is connected and situated in the field of power relations. I want to show that, while naming is always exclusionary, feelings of marginalisation can be this relational thread of sharing which have the possibilities to connect. Therefore, I want to argue for a more focus on the process of the oppression than the name of the object where it works; more on politics and less on identity.

End note:

1. The term 'terrorist' used here before 9/11 and its discursive re-construction of this term. Here it was used as a queer political act of making terror to the normative sexuality and it politics. However, Jasbir Puar later analyses this term within the new context of 9/11.
2. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2829481/Transgender-Bangladeshis-hold-Dhaka-s-pride-parade-mark-year-official-recognition-gender.html> last accessed 15th April 2015

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3. See <http://tribune.com.pk/story/864482/bengali-transgender-changes-community-perceptions-after-catching-murder-suspects/>, www.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/world/asia/an-act-of-courage-catches-murder-suspects-and-changes-perceptions-in-bangladesh.html?_r=0 and <http://tribune.com.pk/story/864482/bengali-transgender-changes-community-perceptions-after-catching-murder-suspects/> last accessed 15th April 2015

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