

SHINING A SPOTLIGHT ON THE MARGINALIZED: TEJAL SHAH'S PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE HIJRA COMMUNITY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

A vibrant, filmy dream sequence, a blurry, yet intriguing image in the distance, and, an unconventional couple entranced in their love in the forefront, Tejal Shah's photograph *Southern Siren-Maheshwari* (see figure 1) undoubtedly calls for a second glance. While it is contemporary in the use of the newly trending digital photographic method and art photography technique, *Southern Siren – Maheshwari*, taken in 2006 as a part of the series *What Are You?*, captures a subject that has been a part of Indian society for ages, namely the hijra community. Hijras are emasculated men with neither a penis nor testes who dress like women, with makeup and jewelry, but have no surgically constructed vaginal openings; they are, as Serena Nanda explains, neither man nor woman.¹ A more comprehensive definition provided by Vinay Lal identifies hijras as “eunuchs, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, and gynemimetics; and as if this multiplicity of terms were not enough, they are also referred to as a people who are intersexed, emasculated, impotent, transgendered, castrated, effeminate, or somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional” who wish to be affiliated with the female sex in spite of their apparent biological anatomy and physical exterior appearance.² This community holds a unique position because of its association with mythological and religious beliefs; however, its presence as a powerful part of Indian history and culture is beginning to fall as a result of the Westernization of Indian society.³ In her photograph, Shah effectively employs the currently popular forms of art photography and digital photography in conjunction with the mainstream culture of Bollywood to highlight the marginalization of the hijra community. And consequently, her photograph questions our existing value system and the basis on which we categorize and classify society. Indeed, one finds that this controversial and thought-provoking topic is rooted in Shah's life experiences as well as her convictions about Indian society. Analysis of the treatment of hijras, the subject of Shah's photograph, the Bollywood context in which the subject is placed as well as the type of photograph Shah creates, all elucidate how Shah skillfully addresses this social issue, furthering her fight for the LGBTQ community of India, through photography.



Figure 1. *Southern Siren – Maheshwari* by Tejal Shah, taken in 2006 as part of the *What Are You?* series.

SHAH'S BACKGROUND

To analyze effectively the intentions with which Shah composes her photograph, and thus, the message she is trying to convey, an understanding of Shah's life and growth over the years is necessary. Shah (b.1979) is originally from Chhattisgarh, Central India, and moved to Mumbai in 1995, where she is now based. Shah was raised in a conservative, Indian, middle-class family in which she describes herself as feeling like an outsider. This feeling was perpetuated upon her acquisition of the 'feminist' title, and even more so by her compromised feminine appearance and independent personality that led her to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in India.⁴ With traits uncharacteristic and unconventional of women in India, Shah faced resistance, pressure, and seclusion. These struggles, both internal and external, drive her work. In an interview with Maya Koyskaya, Shah explains that while there are not always obvious wars involving guns or ammunition, there are constantly "invisible wars" within society and within ourselves.⁵ Her own internal fights involving the "sense of perennial displacement and hybridity" as well as those she has seen in others are her impetus. She explains that, "Questions of belonging, attraction or repulsion, emotional and psychological aspects of relationships between people fuel my work."⁶

Her interest in art started early with encouragement from her mother. Shah received private drawing lessons in which she learned watercolors, landscapes, and still life images, yet she found these forms to be "unimaginative" and "boring."⁷ This interest in art inclined her towards a career in architecture or interior design; however, her small town of Bhilai lacked any opportunities to develop these artistic interests. It was not until her move to Pune when she was 14 years old that she was exposed to art galleries, theatre, and more. The next important move in her life was to Mumbai, in 1995, where she took an interest in photography and gained membership in the National Centre of Performing Arts that exposed her to different art forms. While there, she met Simon Nathan, a specialized wide-angle photographer, who helped her learn to judge what is considered a good, worthwhile subject for a photograph. The city expanded her knowledge of photography, but also supported, if not enriched, her ideas and awareness of social issues through groups she joined such as a feminist group as well as a lesbian/bisexual organization in Mumbai.⁸

These interests align with the path that eventually shaped her career. At 17, Shah went to Australia to study and earn her bachelor's degree in photography from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.⁹ Here, Shah believes she gained the exposure to race, colonialism, home and the 'other,' themes that shine through her photographs, including *Southern Siren-Maheshwari*. Following her education in Australia, she became an Exchange Scholar at the Art Institute of Chicago, which introduced her to post-modern art and brought her into such artistic fields as video, sound, installation, and performance. Her preference for photography, video, and performance stems from the idea that these forms are more relevant than painting, sculpture, and drawing.¹⁰

With her personal experiences as a marginalized member of her home and country and her professional training in photography and art, Shah combined these two aspects of her life into a meaningful career based on multi-disciplinary art forms centered on topics including queerness, feminism, gender, and culture. Shah explains her intentions in her work, saying that she likes to "underscore the contradictions inherent in the braiding of the political and the personal" and shed light on the idea that while there is biology and science that can explain the body, "the reality of a body is brought into focus only when one reads it also as a social construct that is perpetually fluid and mobile."¹¹ Shah's work attests to her goal to elucidate these ideas on gender. Georgina Maddox's article, "Hair Rising Experience" in the June 15, 2005, edition of *Mumbai Mirror*, discusses Tejal Shah's *Trans* video made in collaboration with Brazilian artist Marco Paulo Rolla. The two sought to challenge the female-male divide by questioning whether having females shave their beards and males wear makeup changes their classification as a male or female. Shah "grew" a beard using glue and fake hair and then shaved it much like her partner Rolla did his. From certain angles, the two cannot be distinguished as man or woman; instead, both can pass as male. Once Shah applies makeup, this manly appearance is lost. This work illustrates how external features mold the way in which we classify people into this binary divide of male and female, but these can, many times, be deceiving.¹² Moreover, this distinction serves to dictate the construction of the rest of society and facilitates the formation of oppression and marginalization.¹³ Such work highlights Shah's use of art as a lens through which to express her beliefs. Shah's photographs and work are engaging and powerful. She has exhibited her work in many places

including Manhattan, Brooklyn, Mumbai, Berlin, and Lisbon. Her individual shows include *What Are You?*, *The Tomb of Democracy*, and *In-Transit* and her group exhibitions include *Global Feminism*, *Sexwork-Art*, *Reality, Myths, Bombay: Maximum City*, *Saturday Live*, *Cross-Fertilization: Contemporary Indian Video Art*, and more.¹⁴ Shah, with Natashe Mendonca, also co-founded, organized, and curated India's first International Film Festival of Sexuality and Gender Plurality, titled *Lazarish*, in 2003-4.¹⁵ These works are socially moving, addressing gender norms, and are powerful, much like the photograph *Southern Siren-Maheshwari*.

Shah's personal experiences, as well as her social convictions, have taken shape in her various art projects. Shah regards the world as a dystopia, a likely consequence of the surprisingly rigid, judgmental, and unyielding society she uncovers through her own experiences as well her research amongst her subjects. She explains further in the interview with Kovskaya that reading the newspaper pushes her to question why anyone would want to live in such a world; but, she is encouraged by the idea that her work makes people uncomfortable and questions their principles.¹⁶ Shah's art is the means through which she explains and exposes the world as she seeks to make it more bearable for herself and others who are marginalized by society's preconceived notions, expectations and blindness.

THE HIJRA COMMUNITY AND SOUTHERN SIREN-MAHESHWARI

The particular marginalized group her photograph, *Southern Siren-Maheshwari*, focuses on is the hijra community of India and in addition to the preliminary information on Shah's life experiences, knowledge of the past and current role of hijras in India provides the context upon which a deeper understanding of the photo is formed. Unlike other countries where there is commonly a disregard for the ambiguous sex or no integration of these individuals into societal practices, people of India deal with what they call hijras in a unique way because Hinduism, Islam, and Indian mythology recognize the existence of these transgendered individuals and give them a basis from which to declare their place in society. While this role is changing, it is important to understand the historical and cultural features that distinguished them in the first place. As noted, hijras are neither men nor women, but emasculated men who dress and act like women.¹⁷ Charlotte Suthrell informs us that some members of the hijra community are individuals born intersexed, with ambiguous genitals, and consequently rejected by their families because of the embarrassment they bring.¹⁸ Such rejection experienced by many hijras is confirmed through research by Rupa Jha for her segment on hijras for BBC News.¹⁹ Many came to the hijra community asking to become members of a new family into which they could be accepted. Upon arrival, a dai ma, or midwife, a hijra with no medical training, operated on intersexual individuals to remove their penis and testes and then left them to bleed away their masculinity and achieve rebirth as a new person. Death was a possibility; however, those who lived were made members of the hijra community.²⁰ Nanda also recalls encounters with hijras who were not hermaphrodites, as commonly thought, but instead, men psychologically driven to live as women.²¹ As described in Jha's BBC News report, hijras are transgendered individuals who live in the space between the "parallel lines" of the dimorphic, male and female division. They have their own community, culture, and existence.²²

Mythology and religious beliefs emphasize that hijras have the power to bless as well as the power to curse.²³ This belief can be traced to Vedic times and the stories written in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, such as the god Ram's journey to the forest to complete *Tapasya*, or a ten-year period of solitude and pilgrimage. People accompany him to the forest, but he asks that all men and women leave. By the end of this journey, he reaches the forest to begin his period of solitude, but turns around to find a group of hijras still behind him. After asking why they stayed, they explain that they are neither male nor female. Ram blesses them for their companionship and it is thus believed that hijras should be respected and hold the power to heal, bless and curse.²⁴ Hijras are also linked to the coming of rain. Once, a drought in the city of Hyderabad left even the ruler powerless and defeated. He asks that all his people request help from the hijras, who were their last hope. Since the hijras succeed in bringing rain, the ruler orders that all hijras be honored as the ones who saved the city.²⁵ These mythological stories made the hijra community an established group, capable of granting both good will and curses, one that is deserving of respect from the rest of the community in spite of their differences from the "norm."

Hindu scriptures and beliefs portray an analogous image of the hijra community and likewise, instill not only acknowledgement, but reverence for these individuals. Suthrell notes that “in contrast to the Bible in Judaeo-Christian cultures, Hinduism is capable of celebrating the issue of sexuality, with the ensuing implications for transvestism.”²⁶ Lord Shiva, for example, is a Hindu deity characterized by his asexual behavior despite his involvement in fertility and the union of people.²⁷ Shiva’s form as Shiva Ardhanarisvara is especially relevant to the hijra community because of the deity’s existence as half male and half female, and thus, in theory, a “Super-god.”²⁸ The sexual underpinnings of Shiva are symbolized through the phallus, by which he is known and worshiped, that is set in the yoni, symbolic of female genitals. According to some scholars, those who follow Shiva Ardhanarisvara give special treatment and respect to hijras because of the semblance between the two.²⁹ Like Shiva, Krishna and Vishnu are deities who also exhibit a duality in their gender. Hindu scriptures describe how Vishnu appears in a woman’s form as Mohini to get back sacred nectar and similarly, Krishna takes on his female form to destroy the demon Araka. According to hijras’ retelling of the story, upon Krishna’s return, he declares that more individuals will possess a duality like his and will have the power to make both the good and bad come true, reiterating that they should be accepted and respected.³⁰ Regional religious practices in Tamilnadu, South India, demonstrate the honorable role of hijras as well. In a festival, hijras marry and become the widows of the deity Koothandavar much as Krishna does in the religious tale. According to the story, a ruler agrees to sacrifice his son in order to win a war, but hopes first to have his son marry before he is killed. With no girls willing to marry a man destined to die soon after, Krishna appears as a woman, marries the son, and becomes his widow after his sacrifice that brings victory to his father. In this Southern religious festival, the hijras look ritually “to reaffirm their identification with Krishna,” as Nanda explains.³¹

Traditional Hindu scriptures acknowledge the existence of sexual ambiguity and a third sex explicitly, beyond the references to the deities mentioned thus far. Nanda explains that Hinduism recognizes a third sex and divides this sex into four categories: male eunuchs, testicle voided, hermaphrodites, and the non-woman or female eunuch, all of which are still capable of sexual pleasure in the *Kamasutra*.³² Moreover, a Sanskrit play revolving around the character Sukumarika, a member of this third gender, shows what Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty considers the advantages inherent in this condition: no pregnancy to limit one’s beauty, no menstruation to halt sexual pleasures and no breast to get in the way of embraces.³³ Respect for hijras exists beyond Hinduism, in the other prominent South Asian religion, Islam. In the Mughal Empire, hijras guarded the harem and were highly regarded by Mughal leaders. While the existence of the third sex was acknowledged in religious and mythical scriptures, ancient India looked down on castration and eunuchism.³⁴ This illustrates the ambiguity in opinions and reactions towards hijras.

In a country where daily practices and culture are heavily linked to religion and mythology, hijras, a group of sexually ambiguous individuals like those so clearly represented and respected in these spheres of society, have traditionally been honored. Because of their reputation as powerful entities capable of bringing goodwill and blessings, hijras are many times invited to weddings, house-warmings and naming ceremonies where they perform, grant their blessings, and then expect payment, which serves as their income along with singing, dancing, joking, and begging in the streets.³⁵ Some hijras even prostitute themselves and are, in fact, popular partners because there is a lack of inhibitions or limitations as far as genitals. Suthrell writes that many times men find heterosexual sex with women boring after an experience with hijras.³⁶ Moreover, having sex with a hijra gives a different experience for a man, yet avoids the challenges of being considered gay, a big embarrassment in Indian culture.³⁷

HIJRAS AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

While these features were originally appealing, such behavior and what Suthrell sees as a “general move in India towards secularization, modernization, urbanization; in effect, a kind of Westernization” has led to changing opinions about hijras: a shift “from a quasi-religious or spiritual respect to a secular opinion of them as crooks, liars, trouble-makers and prostitutes.”³⁸ This shift is seen in how these individuals are currently treated in South Asia. Combined with the homogeneity and social constructs of male and female behavior stressed through mass culture and adopted by most middle class Indians, modernization is beginning to make the hijras and their high status a thing of the past.³⁹ The change in status of hijras is

illustrated as studied by Khan SI, *et al.* in Bangladesh in “Living on the Extreme Margin: Social Exclusion of the Transgender Population (hijra) in Bangladesh.” The study was conducted using 50 interviews with hijras, 20 key-informant interviews, and 10 focus group discussions. It highlights the marginalization of the hijra community in South Asia, giving insight into the way these individuals are treated and eventually deprived of their space in society through social, cultural, economic, and political limitations.⁴⁰

According to Khan, the exclusion of hijras starts young. Hijras prefer to dress as females, use make-up, jewelry, and perform house chores characteristic of females; and, while these are not major concerns during very early childhood, as they continue into the adolescent phase, these biologically “male” individuals are treated with more resistance and negligence. As parents become embarrassed and fear this blemish on the family name by their “son’s” behavior, they respond with abuse and a double standard against the hijra child that makes food distribution, clothing, and opportunities all favor the “normal” children. Even in school, the feminine boys are lonely, abused, and scolded by teachers for deviating from the norm. Without a comfortable learning environment, these feminine boys or hijras see no value in the education system and drop out. This problem is catastrophic because it limits the scope of occupation the hijras can hold as people with limited education. Excluded from both family and school, hijras ask, “who am I?” which is further exacerbated by the fact that hijras adopt two lifestyles, one as females around their peers and one as males around their relatives and families. One hijra describes herself and other hijras as, “Uportolain nayee eka nichertlai noyak,” meaning that hijras have a penis at the bottom like men and breasts at the top like women.⁴¹

With this internal struggle of identity comes a lack of dignity and confidence, Khan *et al.* explain. Hijras are excluded from family events, weddings, and funerals no matter how close the family member because their attendance and acknowledgement as family embarrasses. This leaves hijras without a family and place to live. They resort to living in slums with their new hijra peers as a family, but when evicted, these hijras move to unsafe places such as stations or parks. Economic constraints devalue them and further restrict them within the community. Because of their deviance from the dichotomic norm, hijras are rejected from mainstream jobs and have to resort to begging (see figure 2), prostitution, dancing, and even sometimes revealing their castrated genitals to force payment after their attendance at auspicious occasions. Even those who hide their hijra characteristics to enter the workplace are often revealed, abused, and fired.⁴² Regarding prostitution, changing opinions towards hijras are seen through the trend that whereas older men respect the prostitute hijras, younger men frequently end up abusing them. The younger generation, influenced by modernization, is losing respect for the hijra community.⁴³ The consequences of their decision to leave school as children as well as society’s stigma against the hijra lifestyle, inhibit their prospects for a meaningful and respectable occupation which likely also impacts their living conditions. Hijra resort to sex selling for income, but unfortunately face abuse, beatings, and exploitation even there. Naturally, these emotionally and physically trying pressures and marginalization impart a negative self-image. The hijras are dehumanized and belittled. This raises the question, how can hijras be helped? They are not given jobs because of the stigma associated with the culture and practices, yet without a job, they are forced to continue resorting to such socially disapproved sources of income; they have been marginalized, and forced into a vicious cycle.

The debasing of hijra’s humanity extends to their desires for love as well and it is this truly human, natural characteristic that Tejal Shah uses to compare hijras and Indians who have characterized themselves as either male or

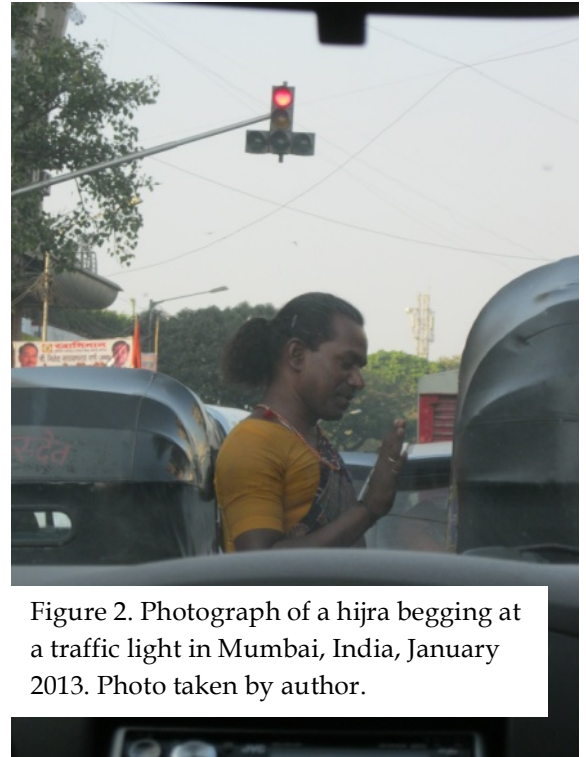


Figure 2. Photograph of a hijra begging at a traffic light in Mumbai, India, January 2013. Photo taken by author.

female. Hijras “pass their whole life in search of love in a sustainable relationship” and most commonly love the men to whom they sell their sex as Khan *et al.* inform through their research.⁴⁴ While hijras often fall for these men, they are left abandoned and rejected, even abused, because the men are merely fulfilling sexual desires. When South Asian culture is so heavily rooted in family and reproduction, the fact that hijras are incapable of procreation automatically eliminates them as potential lifelong love partners. Thus, socio-cultural norms of the “hetero-normative society” are further limiting the aspirations of the hijras.⁴⁵ The experiences of neglect, rejection, loneliness, and abuse make hijras internalize a self-image rooted in worthlessness, decreased self-esteem and a harmful pull towards risky behaviors such as more sex or alcoholism. Such behavior naturally increases the risk of health related complications. Unfortunately, hijras have such a stigma attached to them that health facilities deny their treatment even if they can pay above and beyond what is asked. Doctors have limited knowledge of the hijra culture and fear treating them at the risk of scaring away or discomforting their other patients.⁴⁶

The most challenging phase of a hijra’s life is old age. Without family for support, a means for economic gain beyond sex, or appropriate access to necessary health care, elderly hijras are left practically helpless. They are not even freed from the stigma after death. Religious leaders refuse to perform the appropriate ceremony on hijras and sometimes their burial in a cemetery is altogether denied.⁴⁷ Even after death, hijras cannot escape the binds and restrictions of this hetero-normative society. At the state level, hijras are not allowed to inherit property and are ignored by the state, more or less, because all documents, certificates, contracts, and forms leave only two categories for gender: male and female.⁴⁸ What is illustrated by this information is the idea that hijras as a group are completely absent from cultural and political spheres; they are just not recognized.

PHOTOGRAPHY, MEDIA, AND THE HIJRA COMMUNITY

This blatant exclusion of the hijras from societal norms and practices explains Tejal Shah’s motivation for the work she does, particularly her photograph *Southern Sirens of Maheshwari*. As Paul Sternberger comments on photographs of India, there are a myriad of what he classifies as cliché images, “Images of dynamic public rituals, robed holy men and pilgrims, picturesque villagers, teeming city streets, and prostitutes and beggars” that are a result of the “exoticism” and “marginalization” of the Indian people and culture by photographers.⁴⁹ Shah is one who breaks this cliché pattern and, by contrast, addresses a portion of Indian society that is now suppressed and highly controversial.

After the introduction of photography, street photography was very popular, especially works by Raghu Rai, Ravi Agarwal, and Raghubir Singh. While street photography seeks to capture a moment or scene, art photography, like *Southern Siren-Maheshwari*, is often staged and planned by the photographer and/or the subject. Photos by Raghubir Singh show a combination of the two genres because his images “generate a pictorial complexity with the simultaneous transparency and reflectivity of a car window, which integrates different zones of pictorial space into a single plane” and this “helps create a bridge between the photojournalistic aspects of street photography and a more conceptualized and subjective contemporary art photography.”⁵⁰ Singh combination the spontaneity of street photography with a “more calculated, systemic approach” Sternberger deems characteristic of art photography.⁵¹

Interestingly, Shah takes a subject whose natural environment *is* the street, but removes it from this atmosphere entirely. Rather than finding a combination of the two styles as Singh does, Shah purposely removes any elements of the street from her image, making it completely composed. This is probably intentional, as Shah wants to place hijras in an entirely new environment, rather than the streets they are already associated with, in an effort to dispel the existing negative opinions and beliefs used to justify their poor treatment. As Shah’s photograph, *Southern Siren-Maheshwari*, makes clear, the image also has this “calculated” and “systematic” approach in which a hijra and her love interest are the center, and composed to resemble a dream sequence of a Bollywood film. Removal of street-like elements is also more characteristic of Bollywood style, and thus, furthers her development of the backdrop for her photograph. The photograph reveals not only composition, but signs of digital photography and editing work, a field of photography developing during the time when Shah published her work.

Media and pop culture greatly affect the shifting opinions of hijras. Bollywood films initially cast hijras in small crude roles, many times as the comedian, but movies such as *Tamanna*, *Bombay*, and *Square*

Circle attempt to create a more positive representation.⁵² Both these recent films as well as Shah's photograph use a prominent, influential part of the Indian culture, Bollywood, to stress an important aspect of society: the existence and changing role of the hijra community. Shah's choice of Bollywood as her composed set reflects Sternberger's argument that "Television, print media and



cinema permeate the complex federation of subcultures that constitute India as a nation ... as consumers of this ever present mass media and entertainment, Indians share a common, media-driven, visual and cultural language."⁵³

Figure 3. You Too Can Touch the Moon

Bollywood cinema is a big industry that influences Indian culture and permeates society; it is, as an epicenter of our cultural narrative and so typical characteristics are the love story fall in love, but are then faced with some challenge that they eventually overcome. But, this couple facing the challenge never includes a hijra as a major love interest, and that is precisely what Shah does in the photograph. Moreover, Bennington describes the degree to which Hindi movies stars such as Salman Khan are loved, practically "prayed to" and "idealized."⁵⁵ Placing a hijra in this kind of role contradicts the norms of Indian culture, because they are far from idealized, but Shah is

utilizing this idea to stress their presence and equal importance. Bennington compares the Bollywood industry to a festive marching band, suggesting unity and togetherness, and by placing a hijra in this industry, in a role atypical of hijras, Shah challenges society to accept these individuals as part of the family because they, too, have desires and a presence. Bennington mentions how Subhash Ghai's film school, Whistling Woods International, has a branch at Syracuse University.⁵⁶ Clearly, Bollywood reaches beyond India's borders and so, Shah's choice to use it as a context really gives it potential to be understood by, and move, outside audiences. A typical Bollywood actress is characterized by light skin, which is consistent, it is believed, with the Brahmins, the highest caste rank.⁵⁷ The hijra's dark and deviant appearance challenges the typical Bollywood scene, but that is Shah's point: to put someone uncharacteristic in a familiar setting to stress 'her' existence and dignity, too.

Hijras have been part of Bollywood before. Bobby Darling, for example, is a transgendered woman in Bollywood cinema who was disowned by her father and spent time living in train stations and on streets as the study in Bangladesh revealed. She became a go-go dancer and eventually began working in films. She is the first openly gay cross-dressing actor and while it is an improvement that she is even taken on the set, the stigma and cultural limitations mentioned before are still valid as most of her roles remain as the "outrageous gay person" and she describes having no friends in the industry.⁵⁸ Clearly, Shah chose a very popular and influential aspect of Indian culture and society to make a statement about a not so popular and influential part of society, hijras.

In the photograph, one can notice all these topics that concern Shah: the status of hijras, the changes in photography, and the influence of Bollywood on Indian mainstream culture are all utilized or exhibited. *Southern Siren-Maheshwari* is part of the *Hijra Fantasy Series* of *What Are You?* along with others (Figure 3 and Figure 4) that feature three hijras, Laxmi, Malini and Maheshwari, whom Shah met during her work with the hijra and LGBTQI community. The photographs are staged photographs in which Shah positions and poses her subjects in dramatized settings based on their desires as hijras who are kept from experiencing some of their dreams.⁵⁹ Through interviews, Shah was able to understand what these three



Figure 4. Shah's *The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne/burned on the water* is taken of Laxmi posed as the powerful Cleopatra.

hijras wanted to experience and how they wanted to be photographed; she then staged the scene and photographed and edited it accordingly, using both their requests and her artistry. To Shah's surprise, "her subjects articulated hyper-feminine fantasies – of being Cleopatra, a mother, and a Southern Indian film star."⁶⁰ *Southern Siren-Maheshwari* is a photograph of Maheshwari enacting her dream to be a South Indian movie actress; hence, the title and content of the image. Maheshwari assumes a pose typical of Bollywood dance sequences in which the hero and heroine are entranced – a love many, including hijras, desire.

Analyzing the photo from a technical standpoint helps to understand Shah as an artist and prompts us to consider why she used certain methods or techniques to contribute to or emphasize her overall message. The digital photograph is clearly an edited piece with artificial lighting and object layout. It is what Sylvan Barnet calls both a manipulated photograph involving computer and digital editing, and a fabricated photograph that is staged.⁶¹ This is critical to the photo because it portrays the very filmy and edited scenes depicted in Indian cinema. The rays of light are artificial, but give focus to the central image of Maheshwari and her lover as well as the glamorous image of cinema. The edited roses in the backdrop of the photo evoke a Bollywood dream sequence and reference the touching of flowers used in Indian cinema to symbolize kissing; it also serves as the symbol of the queer movement in India.⁶² The photo is two dimensional; however, the flowers seem three dimensional, as if they are rising out of the photo and the radial arrangement of light beams creates depth, making the hijra and hero stand out. The large photo is on archival paper with dimensions 38" by 58," approximately three feet by five feet.⁶³ Shah may have intentionally made the photo large to resemble a cinematic advertisement poster and give her controversial subject have a big presence. Obviously, the subjects are arranged in that position and not captured "as they are." The focus is primarily on the hijra and the hero; however, in the distance, one may notice Maheshwari dancing; though not as clearly. This may serve as a symbol of how, when alone and out of the fantasy world, hijras are marginalized, as she is in the photograph, to the side, not in clear view.

CONCLUSION

Tejal Shah's photograph *Southern Siren-Maheshwari* is moving; she hopes it will stimulate reevaluation and change. Shah took a bold step to make her opinions of the hijra community and the treatment they experience in this highly inflexible and dichotomous society known. Moreover, Shah used art and digital photography, along with conventions of Bollywood cinema, to normalize herself and stress that she, too, is a human being with emotions, aspirations, and most importantly the right to *have* her rights. These ideas presented through the photograph challenge the current division and organization of society and may lead to an understanding of gender as a spectrum in which the hijra community is acknowledged and accepted.

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