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## Monstrosity, Crime, Medicalization, and Rehabilitation of Hijras in Bangladesh: A Critical Discourse Analysis

### ABSTRACT

Hijras are one of several forms of transgender people who have resided in Bangladesh since antiquity. They continue to be viewed as cursed and a nuisance, which forces them to make hazardous and frequently dangerous decisions. Their exclusion from heteronormative families and their isolated and unique existence within their groups are frequently cited as reasons for the public's misunderstanding of them. Due to this misunderstanding, negative stereotypes, dread, and hostility toward Hijras emerge. The dearth of opportunities compels Hijras to pursue unanticipated paths. The present study investigates these misconceptions about Hijras. This study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Hijra-related concepts, conceptions, and attitudes as reported in several extensively circulated Bangladeshi newspapers. Accepting Hijras into mainstream culture, according to the study, is the first step in dispelling false beliefs about Hijras. This acceptance is, however, hindered by a pervasive misunderstanding of Hijras, their identities, issues, and challenges. If identified through a Critical Discourse Analysis of Hijra depiction in specific newspapers, this misunderstanding has the potential to assist us in unlearning fear, prejudice, and hatred against Hijras. Consequently, we may be able to develop more efficient approaches and policies for Hijras.

**Keywords:** Stereotypes; Representation; Hijras; Critical Discourse Analysis; Rehabilitation

Scholarship on Hijras in Bangladesh has evolved along three main pathways: first, right-based discourses (Amanullah et al., 2022; Islam, 2016; Khan et al., 2009); second, the narrative of social exclusion,

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discrimination, and suffering (Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Aziz & Azhar, 2019); and third, official recognition and its problems (Aziz & Azhar, 2019; Hossain, 2017). While the issues of social exclusion, discrimination, human rights, and suffering vis-à-vis Hijras in Bangladesh are significant, a critical query would be how Hijras are represented in certain noted newspapers in Bangladesh. The reception of Hijras in the social spheres of Bangladesh can be traced from such representations. For Firoozi, Mostafaye, and Khaledian (2014), mass media can strategically form public opinion, awareness, and thoughts about sociopolitical issues. Hence, the representations of Hijras can consolidate understanding of the present social status of Hijras in Bangladesh. The present article collects data from certain notable newspapers in Bangladesh. The article then examines the representational tropes about Hijras in these sources using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research method. CDA takes a particular interest in the language used in any discourse and attempts to examine how power and ideologies work in creating knowledge. For Richardson, CDA is an approach to language use that explores and exposes discourse's role in reproducing (or resisting) social inequalities (2007, p. 6).

## I

In Bangladeshi newspapers, Hijras are frequently represented as criminals. A common allegation against the Hijras is that they take commuters on public transport hostage and force them to pay money. Often, they are alleged to demand large amounts of money from the parents of newborn babies. In the daily newspapers, they are routinely represented as hijackers, beggars, troublemakers, nuisances, criminals, and abominable persons. However, these claims are significant because they confirm misconceptions about Hijras.

From the perspective of CDA, the ideologies of mainstream society can be identified as anti-Hijra. The perception of the ordinary people in Bangladesh about Hijras develops in othering, stereotyping, criminalizing and stigmatizing Hijras.

The reports in the daily newspapers that reinforce these negative representations of Hijras do so in and through a strategy that the CDA experts would identify as 'suppression'. Suppression is a form of exclusion. The viewpoints, opinions, and thoughts of Hijras regarding their livelihood are frequently disregarded in traditional depictions of Hijras. While Hijra is not given any favourable conditions even to live in society, let alone to receive education and training, how are they supposed to earn money? Concerns like these are often missing in those news reports. This act of forgetfulness is not innocent at all. In CDA, this is called 'backgrounding'. Rahman (2009) reports:

Many Hijras (hermaphrodites) are now getting involved in criminal activities, especially mugging, stealing and toll collection at the city's different intersections, posing a threat to law and order.

A narrow and conventional understanding of crime, law, and order gets invested in criminalizing Hijras. While breaching the law is a crime, not resisting exclusionary laws is a sheer act of irresponsibility and, of course, unethical work. The law is narrow, partial, and biased in the sense that it serves the interests of the non-Hijras as the law does not take into account the abandonment of Hijras, their alienation, and, above all, the unwillingness of the mainstream, heteronormative society in offering life chances: home, education, and training. Lia, a self-identified Hijra retorts:

I heard a boy complain, saying that Hijras only extort money. Well, what else should they do? They have to eat! No one hires Hijras to do proper jobs. Then, what should they do? Steal? They can't do that either. (Gender Spectrum, 2017)

Lia significantly has shown the dilemma Hijra are in. Newspapers from Bangladesh hardly focus on this dilemma, so the criminalization of Hijras in news reports remains pervasive.

While blocking the accessibility to everyday life for Hijras, criminalizing Hijras reinforces the stigmas about them. Rahman (2009) reports:

Meanwhile, six to seven Hijras broke into several residences on Road 3, Sector 5 in Uttara yesterday morning and demanded Tk. 5,000 from each of the residences. On information, police and RAB rushed in and saved the residents.

Apart from criminalizing Hijras, the text heavily relies on the narrative of victimhood and the narrative of the saviour in which Hijras are criminals; Non-Hijras are posited as victims of mugging; the police and the RAB as the saviours of the Non-Hijras. These narratives overlook and erase sub-texts that Hijras are victims of abandonment by the heteronormative societies—a subtle, invisible, heinous crime. Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco argue:

Letting die, abandonment and differential belonging are directly connected to the operations of forms of governance in late liberalism that constitute some subjects as morally deserving, while simultaneously justifying punitive measures on those deemed undeserving as necessary, just and rational (2015, p. 10).

Non-Hijras are deemed 'rational,' 'sensible,' and 'normal,' while Hijras are often reported as 'absurd,' 'unnatural,' and 'monstrous'. This binary configuration of Hijras versus non-Hijras dates back to the British

colonization of India. In the colonial laws, Hijras were included in the problematic term “criminal caste”, as Reddy writes:

The propensity for crime and its subsequent codification was, in essence, written onto the bodies of the so-called criminal castes. In addition to this literal embodiment, colonial control/reform efforts were also directed at the labour these bodies performed. In the case of Hijras, as the Criminal Tribes Act indicates, this labour was both sexual (Article 377 of the Penal Code, which prohibits sodomy) and asexual or work/occupation-related, that is, dancing, singing, and relating to public rules of habiliment (Reddy, 2007, p. 27).

It is shocking that Hijras in British India were categorized as a criminal tribe, an essentialist move and an unethical act. It is appalling that identical criminalizing tendencies exist in the depiction of Hijras in Bangladeshi publications.

Another polar opposite yet similarly disturbing trend in the representations of Hijras is what I would like to call “spectacularization”. Labonno Hijra, Nodi Hijra and Chokori Hijra were termed as “Hijra Heroines”<sup>1</sup>. However, the newspapers did not go beyond the move of individualizing and spectacularizing, nor did they relate it to the challenges of Hijras in Bangladesh. Ironically, Labonno, Nodi, and Chokori were out that day as they were begging alms shop to shop, an act for which they are routinely stigmatized. I believe the newspapers, in this case, missed the opportunity to mobilize the reports on Hijras to their right for social justice and equity. This failure is no innocent overlooking. This act of overlooking instead reflects the ideologies of the mainstream society that maintain non-alignment and disassociation from the Hijra communities in Bangladesh. Hiras themselves know this too well.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2015/04/05/hijra-heroines-speak-out-on-oyasiquir-murder>

2. See <https://www.dw.com/bn/%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%B8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%80%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%83%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A6%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%93%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9C->

Hijras know that even though the Bangladesh government has provided them with recognition,<sup>1</sup> the larger society has yet to accept them as humans, as those of the dominant gender group. In this context, spectacularization may help produce an exciting story that sells; on the flip side, it may also reinforce the stereotypes of Hijras as unusual, aberrant and deviant. At any rate, connecting the bravado of an individual to the larger context of miseries Hijras live with is much more required to ensure the “normalization” of Hijras. This normalization would help achieve acceptance that Hijras know would help them integrate into society.

Along with criminalization, the monsterization of Hijras is a prominent phenomenon in Bangladeshi newspapers. Khairuzzaman (2017) argues:

People are extremely fearful of Hijras. Over the years, the Hijra community has occupied an extremely marginalized position in Bangladesh society, as in many other countries. Their presence has provoked mixed feelings of fear, awe and contempt from the general public.

Hijras are thus posited as ‘other,’ alien, and unnatural. A particular monstrosity is attached to the presence of Hijras. In *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), Foucault identifies monstrosity as a marker of limit or boundary. Heteronormative bodies are ideal, standard, and decent, whereas the bodies of the Hijras transgress the boundary of normativity. Beyond the level of identification/recognition in such binary configurations, attaching monstrosity to Hijras has severe implications in the reinforcing knowledge/power dichotomy fostering the inferior status of Hijras and legitimizing the act of abandonment and disposability pervasive in the heteronormative social spheres. Habibullah (2019) reports:

Kaisar Hasnat, a government employee, went to the Dhanmondi Lake with his wife last month when three Hijras approached him and asked for Tk. 300. “It was a scary situation. I offered them Tk. 50. They refused the money and started abusing me and touching my body in front of my wife. I had to give them Tk. 100,” said Hasnat, narrating his awful experience.

Habibullah (2019) assembles a few more similar anecdotes, aligning with his respondents portraying Hijras as fearful or scary. Tamal (2018) compares Hijras with terrorists as they collect money from pedestrians, residents and shopkeepers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2018/11/11/transgender-community-celebrates-recognition-date>

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From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) standpoint, the reporter's framing of the events about Hijras can be questioned. For Lakeoff (2004), "frames are mental structures that shape how we see the world". Framing allows us to understand events that we witness. Assuming Hijras as either nuisance or fearful and not understanding the larger contexts of their abandonment and poverty constitutes the framing of numerous reports on Hijras in Bangladeshi newspapers. Nuzzo (2013) argues:

The monster incarnates, paradoxically, a lack of differentiation, or better, it is that non-includable difference that threatens the capacity of knowledge and power to establish and reproduce differences within a given order. In this sense, the monster is, simultaneously, the effect and the bodily manifestation, and therefore the visible aspect of the crisis. In other words, the monster reveals a character that is contingent and, therefore, arbitrary of social, political, and cultural distinctions through which identities are constituted. It puts them in doubt and interrogates them on their presumed naturalness.

## II

Newspapers from Bangladesh regularly report the governmental policies about Hijras. They inform people about different governmental programs and initiatives undertaken to improve the life choices of Hijras. The recognition of the Hijras as the third gender in 2013 and later ensuring their voting rights in the national election are considered significant milestones in ensuring the rights of the Hijras. Chowdhury (2015), for example, reports:

In November 2013, the policy decision to officially recognize the Hijras or transgender as a separate gender or third sex in our community was approved in the Government's Cabinet Meeting presided over by the then-honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh. This decision will allow them to identify their gender as Hijra when personal information is required to be furnished, and their passports, too, would state their gender as Hijra. The transgender community is now enlisted as voters in Bangladesh. However, some legislative or judicial clarification is still essential to secure the fundamental rights of the transgender community in our country.

In the level of lexical analysis, words and phrases like "officially recognize," "allow them to", "personal information will be required to be furnished", "now enlisted", and "to secure the fundamental rights" frame the identification of Hijras from the perspective of the government, and noticeably any thoughts from the Hijra community regarding the official recognition were not included in the report. CDA scholars would identify this exclusionary trend as "absence." An absence is something that could be

present in language use or discourse but is not, possibly for ideological reasons (Van Leeuwen, 1997). Another news report published on November 17, 2022, informs:

Terming the association with the Hijra identity as a mental health problem, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Social Welfare recommended taking necessary steps by the ministry concerned to identify real Hijras through proper medical tests.

Not questioning the categorization of Hijra's identity as "a mental health problem" implicitly affirms the government's unjust attempt at medicalization. Medicalization is the process in which human experiences become subject to medical authority. Conrad (2003) discusses how medicalization is used to determine solutions to social problems. Using Conrad's (2003) classification, identifying Hijras by the medical test can be identified as institutional medicalization. From the CDA perspective, the government has "access" in determining the identities of Hijras. Access is concerned with "who has access to certain types of discourses or roles and who gets to control the access of other people." (Baker & Ellece, 2011, p. 1)

Since 2011 Bangladesh government initiated different rehabilitation programs for Hijras in Bangladesh. Newspapers often report these activities. Gain (2023), for example, reports:

There are eight SSNPs (Social Safety Net Programs) for some of the most marginalized groups in the country. These include but are not limited to, Harijans, marginal and disadvantaged tea workers, the transgender (Hijra) population, the Bede community, smaller ethnic communities and occupational groups in particular areas outside the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and recipients of food assistance in the CHT. However, while the population eligible for these SSNPs is pretty extensive, the budget is only Tk. 1,038.67 crores or 0.93 per cent of the total SSNP budget. So even though these communities do have access to some benefits, they need more financial support to migrate out of a vicious cycle of poverty and working conditions that amount to modern-day slavery. (2023)

While the report finds the requirement for "more financial support", it endorses the attempt to provide monetary solutions to complex sociopolitical problems. Another report (2018) informs about the 'rehabilitation' of Hijras:

On June 23, social welfare minister Rashed Khan Menon told the House that number of Hijra is now 11,039 in the country as per statistics from the social service department. He, however, said no survey was conducted to determine the exact number of Hijras in the country. The minister said the government provides Hijras with

employment training on various vocations, including haircutting, beautification, driving, farming, handicraft and security guard and Ansar and VDP. On completion of the training, each Hijra person is provided with Tk. 10,000 as financial support for their rehabilitation.

Apparently, the government's policy of rehabilitating transgender people is a proper initiative. The newspaper article also considers training and financial support enough for rehabilitating transgender people. From the CDA perspective, however, it may be otherwise. The verb "rehabilitate" means "to rehabilitate someone who has been ill or in prison, means to help them to live a normal life again. To rehabilitate someone with a drug or alcohol problem means to help them stop using drugs or alcohol ("Rehabilitate," 2019). Noticeably, the words "rehabilitate" and "rehabilitation" are frequently used in medical discourses and discourses about alleviating drug addiction problems. The other two areas of frequent usage of these words are poverty reduction initiatives (Lokshin, 2005; Bhatt, 1990; Griffanti, 2019) and disability discourses (Barnes, 2003; Moroz et al., 2017; Robertson & Brown, 1997). The phrase "rehabilitation" refers to education and vocational training to help them cope with mainstream society, a relatively recent phenomenon (UNESCO, 2022; Kannabirān, 2022). While some South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and some South American countries like Chile, Argentina, and Mexico have witnessed significant initiatives from both governments and NGOs for such rehabilitation for transgender people (UNESCO, 2022), what transgender activists are demanding is "equality" not "rehabilitation" (Bhagat, 2018). Due to the lack of a proper gender policy and negative stereotypes about and fear of the Hijras (Humaira et al., 2018) by the mainstream society, Hijras, despite having vocational training, cannot switch to professions of formal labour (Sumy, 2022; Humaira et al., 2018).

### III

The present Critical Discourse Analysis of some newspaper reports on Hijra has demonstrated how specific "problematic framing", "backgrounding," "overlooking", "spectacularizing" and "suppression" in the reports lead to monsterization and criminalization of Hijras. Also, regarding determining Hijras in and through medicalization and the rehabilitation of Hijras, newspaper reports uncritically reflect the viewpoints of the governments and NGOs. This article, as a vital task of Critical Discourse Analysis, identified some problems in such reflections, especially the problems in identifying Hijras and the mismanagement in rehabilitating them due to the lack of an all-inclusive Hijra policy in the purview of the governments and NGOs.



Another important finding of this research is the vicious circle of manipulation Bangladeshi Hijras are in: negative stereotypes about them make them go through criminalization; criminalization and stereotypes, in turn, lead them to monsterization and exclusion from the trajectory of life chances: education and training; and finally, exclusion leads to unemployment. While the government, instead of enabling common people or citizens to accept Hijras, attempts to rehabilitate Hijras by means of education and training, these initiatives fail because common people in Bangladesh are not yet ready to accept Hijras in mainstream society. Hijra themselves know it too well. Due to this non-acceptance, many Hijras get registered for vocational training, but instead of attending classes, they prefer to beg for money in traffic intersections.

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