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The Hijra Panel: Spectral Violence, Pictorial Marginalization, and the Politics of Non-Personhood in South Asian Graphic Narratives

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Abstract: This paper examines the pictorial representation of hijra (transgender/third-gender) figures in South Asian graphic narratives, arguing that their visual treatment constitutes a distinct and undertheorized mode of structural violence. Drawing on postcolonial visual theory, trans studies, and the semiotics of sequential art, it contends that hijra characters are systematically rendered as spectral presences within South Asian comics—visible in background crowds, liminal spaces, and peripheral gutters, yet absent from narrative agency, interiority, and panel-centered subjectivity. Through close readings of Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004), the Amar Chitra Katha mythology series, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), and select independent digital anthologies produced between 2015 and 2023, the paper identifies four recurring rules of a visual grammar of non-personhood—the Rule of the Background Register, the Rule of the Functional Appearance, the Rule of the Reactive Gaze, and the Rule of the Typological Body—and argues that this grammar is in structural correspondence with the juridical history of hijra non-personhood in South Asian law, from the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 to the ambivalent recognitions of the *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* judgment of 2014. It further theorizes the concept of "visual personhood" as a formal category for comics scholarship, drawing on Judith Butler's framework of grievability and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics to argue that the systematic withholding of the close-up, the point-of-view shot, and the interior caption from hijra figures constitutes an act of representational harm legible as violence. The paper concludes by examining counter-narratives in independent publications—particularly Priya Dali's "Aamchi Mumbai" in the *Gaysi Zine* (2019) and Meera Devi's work in the Queer Ink *Visible/Invisible* series (2021)—that propose an alternative visual ethics centered on the close-up as the primary instrument of grievability and personhood.

Key Words: hijra; South Asian comics; graphic narratives; spectral violence; visual non-personhood; transgender representation; postcolonial visual theory; sequential art; structural violence; Sarnath Banerjee; Amar Chitra Katha; grievability

1. INTRODUCTION: THE BODY IN THE BACKGROUND

In panel three of page forty-seven of Sarnath Banerjee's landmark graphic novel *Corridor* [1]—widely regarded as the first full-length Indian graphic novel in English—a hijra figure moves through a crowded Old Delhi lane. She appears in a medium-wide shot, colorfully dressed, clapping, her features rendered in Banerjee's characteristic scratchy cross-hatching. In the next panel, the protagonist Jehangir Rangoonwala continues his conversation with a street-side used-book dealer, undisturbed. The hijra does not return. She has no name, no dialogue, no narrative arc. She registers, in the visual economy of the text, as local color: an index of Old Delhi's teeming, transgressive street life, rather than as a subject in her own right (for a critical overview of Banerjee's place in the emergence of Indian graphic narrative, see [2]).

This brief, apparently unremarkable visual sequence is the point of departure for this paper. I argue that the hijra's appearance in South Asian graphic narratives is not incidental but structurally patterned, and that this pattern constitutes a form of what I term spectral violence: representational harm that accrues not through depictions of assault or degradation, but through the sustained denial of representational interiority. To be shown without being seen; to be placed in a panel without being given a panel of one's own; to be drawn as a type rather than as a subject—this is the visual grammar of non-personhood, and it is the central concern of this paper.

The stakes of this inquiry extend beyond the aesthetics of a specialized medium. South Asian graphic narratives have expanded dramatically since the early 2000s. The success of Banerjee's *Corridor* was followed by Vishwajyoti Ghosh's

Delhi Calm [3], Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* [4], and a proliferating ecosystem of independent anthologies, webcomics, and zines engaging with caste, gender, Partition, and postcolonial identity. Within this expanding corpus, the figure of the hijra appears with notable frequency, yet scholarship on South Asian comics—including important contributions by Nandana Dutta, Souvik Mukherjee, and E. Dawson Varughese [5], [2], [6]—has not systematically addressed how such figures are drawn, framed, and positioned within the visual grammar of the page. This paper begins to fill that gap.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SPECTRALITY, THE GUTTER, AND NECROPOLITICS

The concept of the spectral has its most influential theoretical articulation in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* [7], where the specter figures as something neither fully present nor fully absent, occupying an ambiguous ontological position that disturbs the clean binary of existence and non-existence. For Derrida, the specter is inherently disruptive; it haunts and unsettles. I appropriate this framework for visual analysis, but with a crucial inversion: in the graphic narratives under examination, the hijra figure is not disruptive. She is merely decorative. The spectral violence lies precisely in the graphic narrative's domestication of her potential disruptiveness—her neutralization into background texture, her transformation from subject into atmosphere.

Scott McCloud's foundational analysis in *Understanding Comics* identifies the gutter—the space between panels—as the site where reader imagination performs what he calls closure: the cognitive act of bridging two distinct images to construct narrative continuity [8, p. 66]. My argument extends this spatial metaphor inward, identifying a different kind of gap: not the literal gutter between panels, but what I call the representational gutter within the panel itself. When a hijra character is drawn as a recognizable social type—clapping at a wedding, begging at a traffic light, loitering at a market edge—without access to point-of-view shots, interior monologue captions, or narrative focalization, the reader is offered surface without subject, body without self. The representational gutter is the space where interiority should be but is absent.

This withholding of interiority maps onto what Achille Mbembe, following Foucault, theorizes in his essay "Necropolitics" as the sovereign decision over who may inhabit the category of the living subject [9, p. 11]. In Mbembe's formulation, necropower confers on certain populations "the status of living dead" [9, p. 40]: biologically existent but politically evacuated, present in space but absent in sovereign subjectivity. I propose that South Asian graphic narratives perform a visual analogue of this operation: hijra figures are drawn alive but represented without an inner life to draw. The necropolitical logic does not require the artist's conscious intention; it operates structurally, through the inherited conventions of a visual grammar that has not yet developed tools adequate to hijra subjecthood.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation of epistemic violence in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—the harm that resides not in material acts but in systems of knowledge, representation, and discourse—provides the ethical coordinates within which this argument operates [10, p. 280]. The violence I am describing is epistemic: it inheres in what the visual system of South Asian graphic narrative knows how to do with a hijra figure, and what it cannot, or does not, imagine doing.

3. THE VISUAL GRAMMAR OF NON-PERSONHOOD: FOUR RULES WITH EXAMPLES

Close reading of a range of South Asian graphic texts—from mainstream publishers including Penguin India and Campfire to independent anthologies like *Gaysi Zine* and Yoda Press collections—reveals a remarkably consistent set of formal conventions governing the representation of hijra figures. I identify four such conventions as rules of a visual grammar of non-personhood, each illustrated through specific textual evidence.

3.1 The Rule of the Background Register

The first is the Rule of the Background Register. Hijra figures appear almost exclusively in medium or long shots in which they share the visual field with multiple other figures. In *Corridor*, the hijra appears in a wide-angle street scene; the visual depth of field places her in the middle ground, behind the book dealer who is the panel's true focal point. Banerjee's cross-hatching technique, which lends such visual weight and tactile specificity to the objects and faces that populate Jehangir's world—the spines of used books, the creases in a vendor's kurta, the grime on a chai glass—is notably flattened when rendering the hijra. Where Jehangir's face receives five to seven distinct lines of shading in a typical panel, the hijra's face receives two or three, a difference that is not merely stylistic but semiotic: it encodes visual importance through the density of mark-making.

In Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*, a hijra figure briefly appears on a crowded Connaught Place pavement in chapter three, again in medium shot, backgrounded by the visual priorities of a scene nominally about state surveillance [3, chap. 3]. The irony compounds: in a graphic novel that deploys its visual grammar to make the invisible visible—showing the networks of informers, the undocumented detentions, the suppressed newspapers of the Emergency

period—the hijra remains in the background. Ghosh's rendering of state violence against journalists and activists gives those figures full-page spreads, intense close-ups, and interior caption access. The hijra, equally subject to state violence during the Emergency, is not accorded any of these instruments.

The contrast with Joe Sacco's *Palestine* [11] clarifies what is at stake. In Sacco's war journalism comics, Palestinian figures are consistently rendered in close-up: their faces fill panels, their expressions are particularized through dense cross-hatching, their eyes carry the specific weight of individual experience. Sacco gives his subjects the close-up as a moral act—as a declaration that these particular faces, these particular expressions, are worth the reader's sustained attention. The systematic denial of the close-up to hijra figures in South Asian mainstream comics is, by contrast, a moral act in the opposite direction: a declaration that these faces are not worth dwelling on.

3.2 The Rule of the Functional Appearance

The second rule is the Rule of the Functional Appearance. Where hijra figures appear in South Asian graphic narratives, they do so in one of a small number of socially scripted roles: the wedding blessing-giver, the traffic-light beggar, the street performer, the ominous or comic passerby. In the Amar Chitra Katha *Mahabharata* adaptations [12], the figure of Shikhandi—born female, raised male after a divine exchange, crucial to the Kurukshetra war because Bhishma will not fight one born female—is rendered with the visual grammar of pure instrumentality. Shikhandi appears in panels depicting the war sequence, positioned between the armies, consistently rendered in medium shot. Their gender ambiguity is legible in the visual coding: slightly softer facial features than the hypermasculine warriors around them, ambiguous clothing. But this ambiguity is never accorded interiority. No panel explores Shikhandi's inner experience of gender; no close-up lingers on their face. They exist to create the mechanism by which Bhishma can be defeated, and once that mechanism has operated, they disappear from the visual narrative.

This is especially significant given how richly Amar Chitra Katha renders the interiority of its other characters. Arjuna's moral crisis in the Bhagavad Gita sequence is conveyed through a series of close-up panels depicting his anguished face, his trembling hands, his tearful eyes. Krishna's wisdom is rendered through a visual grammar of serene authority: calm eyes, centered composition, warm colors. The visual apparatus of the series has a well-developed toolkit for rendering interiority—and it consistently withholds that toolkit from its gender-ambiguous figures.

3.3 The Rule of the Reactive Gaze

The third rule is the Rule of the Reactive Gaze. In the visual construction of subjectivity within sequential art, the direction and object of a character's gaze are among the most powerful tools for establishing agency. In the sequences under examination, hijra figures are consistently shown as objects of the protagonist's gaze—observed, assessed, reacted to—without themselves being given panels in which they look at others with narrative consequence. The reader is never sutured into the hijra's point of view through an eyeline match or a subjective shot.

The sequence in *Corridor* is exemplary. Panel one: the hijra in the street. Panel two: Jehangir's face, registering mild recognition. Panel three: Jehangir resumes his conversation. The visual structure of this three-panel sequence is unambiguous. Panel one establishes the hijra as the object of perception; panel two establishes Jehangir as the perceiving subject; panel three dismisses the hijra from the narrative. At no point does the sequence offer a panel structured as the hijra's point of view—no shot in which we see what she sees, positioned in her visual perspective. The gaze flows in one direction only: from protagonist to hijra. The hijra does not look back.

The contrast with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* [13] is instructive. Satrapi's protagonist Marji is frequently shown looking: at adults, at televised images of the revolution, at her own face in a mirror. These point-of-view sequences—panels in which the visual structure declares "this is what Marji sees, from Marji's position"—are the primary vehicle through which the reader inhabits Marji's consciousness. The visual apparatus of *Persepolis* consistently positions Marji as a seeing subject, not merely a seen object. In the South Asian graphic narratives examined here, hijra figures occupy the opposite position: they are always and only seen.

3.4 The Rule of the Typological Body

The fourth rule is the Rule of the Typological Body. The visual representation of hijra figures in South Asian comics relies on a small and stable set of iconographic markers: particular styles of dress (sari or salwar in bright colors), gestural conventions (especially the distinctive hand-clap), and the rendering of facial features that signals gender indeterminacy. These markers function as visual shorthand allowing instant categorical recognition without engagement with individual particularity.

In Banerjee's *Corridor*, the hijra is recognizable by her clothing and gesture before any other visual detail registers. This recognizability is achieved at the cost of individuation. Consider how Banerjee renders Jehangir: particular stubble, specific glasses, a distinctive way of holding a cigarette, a posture that changes across panels in response to emotional state. Jehangir is individuated through the accumulation of visual particulars; the hijra is typified through the deployment of categorical markers. Banerjee's visual system reserves individuation for its protagonists and offers only typification to its peripheral figures—but for hijra characters, the periphery is structural rather than incidental.

4. LEGAL NON-PERSONHOOD AND ITS VISUAL ECHO

The representational patterns described above do not emerge from an aesthetic vacuum. They are in structural correspondence with a longer history of hijra legal and civic non-personhood across South Asia. Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, hijra communities were classified as inherently criminal—a designation that produced juridical non-personhood in the most literal sense: to be identified as hijra was to be presumptively guilty, outside the protections extended to legal subjects. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code further criminalized the sexual expression most associated with hijra life.

The Criminal Tribes Act was formally repealed in 1949, but its afterlives—in patterns of police harassment, in barriers to property ownership, in the exclusion from formal employment and education documented by Gayatri Reddy in *With Respect to Sex* [14, pp. 17–42]—have persisted. The judgment in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* [15], known as NALSA, which recognized a "third gender" in Indian law, represented a significant legal threshold. However, as Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy have argued, the judgment's formal recognition has not translated into material protection, and its framework frequently reinscribes pathologizing discourses even as it nominally protects [16, p. 322].

The structural parallel between legal and visual non-personhood is particularly illuminating when examined chronologically. *Delhi Calm*, published in 2010, appeared before NALSA; its visual grammar reflects a pre-recognition episteme in which hijra figures have no legal personhood and no visual personhood either. The visual grammar of texts produced after NALSA begins, haltingly, to shift—a pattern most visible in the independent archives examined in the following section.

5. COUNTER-NARRATIVES: THE GAYSI ZINE AND THE ETHICS OF THE CLOSE-UP

The argument thus far risks a totalizing pessimism that the archive does not entirely support. There exist within South Asian graphic production—largely in independent, small-circulation, and digital formats—works that actively contest the visual grammar I have described.

The most sustained counter-example is found in the *Gaysi Zine*, an independent LGBTQ+ publication produced in Mumbai since 2008. In Issue 14 (2019), artist Priya Dali's twelve-page short comic "Aamchi Mumbai" (Our Mumbai) features a hijra protagonist named Radha as its sole focalizing consciousness [17]. The opening panel is immediately and deliberately in contrast with the visual grammar of the mainstream corpus: Radha's face fills the entire page, rendered in warm terracotta and ochre tones, her expression a precisely observed mixture of exhaustion and resolve. Dali's linework is not the typological shorthand of mainstream comics: Radha's face has a specific asymmetry, specific lines around her eyes, a specific way her lower lip sits when she is thinking. She is individuated from her first appearance in a way that Banerjee's hijra, Ghosh's hijra, and the Amar Chitra Katha Shikhandi are never individuated.

The visual grammar of the narrative that follows sustains this commitment to individuation and interiority. Interior monologue captions in the first person give the reader direct access to Radha's thoughts as she prepares for a day of work collecting on the local trains: her weariness, her irritation at a difficult commuter, her affection for a younger hijra colleague, her quiet satisfaction when a child on the train smiles at her without fear. Point-of-view panels structure her experience of the city: the reader sees what Radha sees, positioned in her visual perspective rather than observing her from outside.

The formal contrast with Banerjee's *Corridor* could not be more stark. Where Banerjee's hijra is in the background, Dali's Radha is in the foreground. Where Banerjee's hijra is typological, Dali's Radha is individual. Where Banerjee's hijra is reactive—the object of Jehangir's passing gaze—Dali's Radha is active: she looks, she judges, she remembers, she desires.

Judith Butler's concept of grievability, developed in *Frames of War*, is illuminating here. Butler argues that the legibility of a life as grievable—as a life whose loss would constitute a loss, whose suffering would constitute suffering—is a function of representational frames rather than inherent qualities [18, pp. 64–70]. The close-up in graphic narrative is

the primary instrument of grievability: to give a figure a close-up is to declare that her face is worth dwelling on; that her inner life is of consequence. Dali's opening full-page close-up of Radha's face is precisely such a declaration.

A second counter-example can be found in the webcomic series *Visible/Invisible*, produced by the Bangalore-based collective Queer Ink between 2020 and 2022. In Episode 7, artist Meera Devi narrates a childhood memory in a nine-panel grid, using a deliberately simple linework style that references the visual grammar of Amar Chitra Katha while subverting its hierarchies [19]. When the protagonist encounters a hijra figure at a family wedding, the sequence gives the hijra a close-up panel of her own, a point-of-view shot from her perspective looking at the child, and an interior caption expressing her own reaction to the encounter. The hijra is not merely the occasion for the child's experience; she has an experience of her own, made legible to the reader through the same formal instruments that make the child's experience legible.

6. TOWARD A THEORY OF VISUAL PERSONHOOD

The preceding analysis opens toward a broader theoretical contribution: the concept of visual personhood as a formal category for comics studies and cultural theory. I define visual personhood as the representational condition in which a figure is granted, through the formal instruments of the medium, the legibility of an inner life. In the comics medium, visual personhood is constituted by a cluster of formal features working in combination: the close-up, point-of-view focalization, interior caption access, narrative surplus (the capacity to be in a scene without being reducible to a function within it), and what I call panel sovereignty—the ability to occupy a panel as its primary subject rather than as background or compositional texture.

Visual non-personhood is the systematic absence of these features. It does not require that a figure be absent from the text; it requires only that she be present in the wrong way—present as a type rather than an individual, as a function rather than a subject, as an object of others' gazes rather than an agent of her own.

This concept has implications beyond the specific case of hijra representation. In Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* [4]—a graphic novel about the displacement of Adivasi communities by dam construction—the tribal figures who suffer most directly from the dam are rendered with significantly less visual individuation than the urban bureaucrats and activists who debate their fate (for an analysis of Sen's visual politics, see [5]). The bureaucrats receive close-ups; their faces are particularized; their expressions register psychological complexity. The Adivasi figures tend to appear in group shots, their faces less differentiated, their visual grammar closer to the typological than the individual. Sen's graphic novel is explicitly sympathetic to the Adivasi cause; its political argument is unambiguous. Yet the visual grammar of the text inadvertently reproduces the asymmetry it thematically contests.

7. CONCLUSION: DRAWING OTHERWISE

This paper has argued that the representation of hijra figures in South Asian graphic narratives constitutes a form of spectral violence: a systematic withholding of the formal features of visual personhood that leaves the body visible while rendering the self absent. Through close readings of Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*, the Amar Chitra Katha mythology adaptations, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*, and independent publications including the *Gaysi Zine* and the Queer Ink *Visible/Invisible* webcomic series, I have identified four rules of a visual grammar of non-personhood and argued that this grammar is in structural correspondence with the juridical history of hijra non-personhood in South Asian law.

I have also argued, through counter-examples drawn from independent and digital comics production, that this grammar is not natural but chosen, and that it can be contested. Priya Dali's "Aamchi Mumbai" and Meera Devi's Episode 7 of *Visible/Invisible* demonstrate that the formal instruments of visual personhood—the close-up, the point-of-view shot, the interior caption, panel sovereignty—are available to any artist willing to deploy them.

The title of this conclusion—"Drawing Otherwise"—is intended to resonate across multiple registers. It is a call for a different visual practice; it echoes Derrida's project of thinking otherwise [7] and Spivak's concern with an ethics of the other [10]; and it insists that drawing is never a neutral act. Every panel composed, every close-up granted or withheld, every caption written or omitted, is a decision about whose inner life is worth representing. The question is not of formal capacity but of ethical will: the decision to reach for the close-up when drawing a hijra face, and to declare, in that gesture, that this face is worth seeing.

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