Oscar Wilde and the Dead Hijra: Sexploitation and Neo-Colonialism in Gyles Brandreth's *The Murders at Reading Gaol*

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Abstract:
This essay presents a legal, anthropological and postcolonial critique of Gyles Brandreth's novel *Oscar Wilde and the Murders at Reading Gaol* (2012), dealing primarily with Brandreth's neo-Victorian depiction of a *hijra* character. The *hijras* are an Indian community of castrated men who pose as women and remain outside the idealised Western construct of binary sex. In 1871, the colonial government in India criminalised their community for cross-dressing and sexual ambiguity in the same vein that Oscar Wilde was arrested in London in 1895 for 'sodomy'. The first part of this essay delves into the history of the *hijras* in India and how colonialism produced their contemporary subaltern status, while the second part focuses on Brandreth's novel and the subversive potential of his *hijra* character's sexual performativity. I conclude that the stage that Brandreth sets up in his novel, despite its many positive attributes, remains conservative and exploitative in the final instance. In the guise of historical authenticity, Brandreth depicts the *hijra* character as being essentially criminal and, thus, as a threat that the neo-Victorian detective must contain.

Keywords: Gyles Brandreth, colonial, criminality, hijra, mimicry, neo-Victorian, sexploitation, sodomy, subaltern, Oscar Wilde.

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Neo-Victorian literature is well known for using sexual content in liberal, violent or gratuitous ways. This may be due to the assumption that contemporary readers feel distanced from the polite, bourgeois, heteronormative universe of popular Victorian novels. Neo-Victorian adaptations introduce sexual fetishists, prostitutes, rent boys and criminals as protagonists or primary characters. Such previously marginalised communities take centre stage in many neo-Victorian novels, films and television shows. The neo-Victorian as an aesthetic mode also relishes giving respectable and prudish characters of nineteenth-century canonical

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texts a secret, perverse life. This makes the Victorian age marketable as it creates the illusion that historical repression and censorship has been redressed in favour of a more 'realistic' picture of the period. For example, the heroine of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the* White (2002) is a prostitute, and the narrator warns the reader on the very first page to

> Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to, is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. (Faber 2002: 3)

But as we progress through Faber's portrayal of the dark underbelly of Victorian London, we realise that we *do* belong. The novel grafts a contemporary and anachronistic consciousness of rape culture, feminism and subjectivity onto the otherwise patriarchal and repressed nineteenth-century. Perhaps neo-Victorian authors believe that by travelling back in time to the so-called origin of sexual repression, they may prevent it from ever having happened. If the Victorians could be made to freely articulate sexual desire, it might somehow legitimise those communities still deemed abject, perverse, that are fighting for sexual rights and legal recognition today.

From the invasive speculum of Victorian doctors examining venereal prostitutes to the blade of Jack the Ripper, sexual repression and violence has become the main categorical image of the Victorian age. The first prerogative of neo-Victorian revision has thus been to create a balance between myth and reality. Matthew Sweet,[1] for instance, commences *Inventing the Victorians* (2001) with a typical neo-Victorian assertion

> Suppose that everything we think we know about the Victorians is wrong. That, in the century which has elapsed since 1901, we have misread their culture, their history, their lives – perhaps deliberately, in order to satisfy our sense of ourselves as liberated Moderns. It comforts us to imagine that we have escaped their influence, freed ourselves from their corseted, high-collared world, cast off their puritanism

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> and prejudices. But what if they were substantially different from the people we imagine them to have been? (Sweet 2001: ix)

He goes on to declare that his book attempts to re-imagine the nineteenth-century and by so doing re-interpret the available historical facts to dispel the myths. Sweet's book is worth reading to understand how the neo-Victorian justifies itself as a genre invested in such deconstructive and restorative historical exercises. Similarly, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in their seminal introduction to *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century 1999-2009* define the neo-Victorian novel as "re-imagining" the Victorians, by "*self-consciously engag[ing] with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis).

1. Defining Neo-Victorian 'Sexploitation'

If we accept these definitions, then Gyles Brandreth's *Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries* series is consummately neo-Victorian. In the series, the famous nineteenth-century wit and homosexual Oscar Wilde partners with Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker and E.W. Hornung to solve mysteries and catch criminals. Unlike Will Self's *Dorian, An Imitation* (2002) or the BBC television series *Sherlock* (2010-present), it does not cast Oscar Wilde in the twenty-first century but remains within the original period. Brandreth manages to keep one foot in modernity and the other in the Victorian age through the figure of Robert Sherard,[2] who narrates the plot. Sherard, recalling his friend Oscar Wilde's adventures with the nostalgia of an ageing man at the brink of the Second World War, provides an interesting liminal place to straddle both Victorian and modern culture. Sherard as the narrator is free to use the word 'homosexual' in lieu of the more Victorian 'urning', 'pervert', 'bugger' or 'invert'.[3] Through Sherard's relatively modern consciousness, Brandreth constructs a nineteenth-century London that is populated with serial killers, necrophiliacs, pornographers and child traffickers, incest, vampirism and drugs. It is no wonder that Brandreth includes a fictional conversation between Wilde and Sherard in the Foreword to his novels, where the former makes the latter promise "when you write of me, don't speak of murder. Leave that awhile" (Brandreth 2008: 1). This authorial manoeuvre indicates to the reader that the sex and

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violence described in the plot may have happened in the Victorian age, but the Victorians were not allowed to "speak of" it. It is only neo-Victorian narrators, like Brandreth's Sherard, that can reveal its secrets posthumously.

In choosing Sherard, out of a myriad cast of Wilde's biographers like Lord Alfred Douglas, Robert Ross or André Gide, Brandreth deliberately shifts the attention away from Wilde as homosexual. In his address to the reader, one of the first clarifications that Sherard makes is that he and Wilde were not lovers, just friends. This disclaimer is aptly noted by Susanne Gruss

> Brandreth's novels are marked by a wariness of Wilde's sexuality that seems to border on the abject and can consequently be read […] as decidedly conservative adaptations of Wilde for the neo-Victorian market in which the transgressiveness of the decadent detective is consistently downplayed. (Gruss 2015: 3)

This is so that the reader focuses not on Wilde's homosexuality but on the far more violent and repulsive sexual transgressions of the criminals he catches. His homosexuality is reduced to a mere intellectual curiosity or pathological obsession. Just as Sherlock Holmes had his drugs, Oscar Wilde in Brandreth's portrayal has an addiction to male beauty. Wilde's interest in young boys and renters is portrayed to be purely aesthetic, unlike the murderer in Brandreth's first novel *Candlelight Murders* (2007), who engages in a covert ritualistic pederasty with them. This erasure of Wilde's homosexuality is necessary to cast him in the moral position of a detective who must self-reflexively diagnose the mysteries of his age and not be trapped by its so-called stigmas. When Wilde plays the detective in Brandreth's series, it reminds us how we neo-Victorians try to diagnose and detect the 'mysterious' Victorian age through literature.

In the final instalment of Brandreth's series *Murders at Reading Gaol* (2012), however, this clear ethical division between the detective and the criminal is temporarily suspended. Wilde solves the mystery from within the confines of the titular prison where he spent the final two years of his sentence. This is the closest that Brandreth comes to admitting Wilde's homosexuality and position as the Victorian outcast. The prison becomes a radical site for neo-Victorian investigation. As may well be expected, it

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exemplifies all that is evil about the Victorian age, proving to be repressive, violent, panoptic and hypocritical. For instance, even as they verbally abuse Wilde for being a 'sodomite', the prison warders elicit sexual favours from the prisoners, not even shying away from rape. The prison doctor in Brandreth's novel even declares one of the inmates to be in "mortal danger" from sexual abuse and violence (Brandreth 2012: 246). Murder is no longer a gentleman's game as one saw in *The Ring of Death* (2008) or a canvas for the dandy's perverse appetites as in *The Dead Man's Smile* (2009). It is slow, real, unsavoury and a consequence of sexual perversion itself. In this novel, Wilde is not interested in solving the murders to provide justice to the victims – the two prison warders, a blackmailer, and a chaplain – but only to protect a young inmate Tom from the "mortal danger" of being repeatedly raped by the warders. As Gruss avers, the "real 'Somdomites' are the murderers he pursues" (Gruss 2015: 175).[4] Homosexual rape is gratuitous not only as a sexual act, but as a criminal act that Wilde as the detective must prevent at all cost, even at the risk of turning murderer himself.

Much significant work has been undertaken in the field of neo-Victorian studies to contextualise and define such authorial decisions and moral manoeuvres. Influenced by Christian Gutleben's phrase "an aesthetics of the unsavoury" (Gutleben 2001: 123),[5] Marie-Luise Kohlke coins the critical term "sexploitation" to specifically denote amplified depictions of sex in neo-Victorian fiction. She defines it as "the extra shock-effect, sensationalism and titillation derived from displaying sex in historical fancy dress", whereby

> [t]he neo-Victorian employs an analogous temporal displacement to indulge in and 'justify' transgression, what I have elsewhere called "sexsation" – the eroticised re-imagining of the nineteenth century as a "sensationalised realm of desire and novelty, where any and every sexual fantasy may be gratified", a libidinal free zone of excess. (Kohlke 2015: 159)

Kohlke's phrase "analogous temporal displacement" is an effective way to describe the complex intersection between tradition and modernity in neo-Victorian novels. Not only must the Victorian age be rendered exotic in terms of its temporal distance, but it must also be made familiar to the

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contemporary reader through sexual and racial anachronisms so as to reflect the reader's perception of his/her own age as a comparable "libidinal free zone of excess". Kohlke's early work within the field is primarily dedicated to understanding this paradox. She argues that such postmodern depictions do not really question patriarchal and racial stereotypes but provide a kind of neutralised and "politically incorrect pleasure" (Kohlke 2008: 55) by sexing up the nineteenth-century. This "pleasure", while seeming neutral is actually a conservative use of niche historical settings to justify contemporary sexist and racist assumptions.

Kohlke also sees "sexploitation" in the neo-Victorian novel as a type of "New Orientalism": a need to present the nineteenth-century as the exotic Other, as remote and shrouded in time as the Orient once seemed in space. For the nineteenth-century West, the Orient was the symbolic centre of all sexual libertinism, and so it has become with the Victorian age vis-à-vis neo-Victorian remediation. Although Kohlke uses 'Orientalism' metaphorically, we see it quite literally at work in Brandreth's *Murders at Reading Gaol*. In the novel, the imprisoned Oscar Wilde occupies a cell adjacent to an Anglophone eunuch from India, named Private A.A. Luck. As the novel progresses, Luck and Wilde become good friends and inhabit the roles of the detective and sidekick respectively. This is the only novel in Brandreth's series where Sherard as the narrator and Watson-like companion to Wilde is replaced by another character. Their friendship is based on a shared sense of sexual subalternity and intellectual superiority over the other inmates at Reading Gaol. Simply by introducing an exotic sexual Other into his novel, Brandreth does not have to set the story in colonial India but brings its presence metonymically into the Victorian prison. By so doing, Brandreth forges a link between the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 that led to Wilde's incarceration for being a homosexual and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which imprisoned Indian eunuchs for sexual ambiguity and cross-dressing.

The eunuch in the Indian context, hailed by the derogatory cultural moniker *hijra* or *kothi*, is not the same as the white homosexual, trans-person, or castrati. The *hijras* are an ancient Indian community of castrated men who pose as women and thus remain outside the idealised Western construct of binary sex. Serena Nanda's anthropological study *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) is used in this essay to narrate the sexual history of this community in tandem with Judith Butler's theoretical

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construction of the sex/gender nexus in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). The first part of this essay delves into the history of the *hijras* in India in order to establish that they were not perceived as a deviant gender in pre-colonial times and had important religious and cultural roles varying from region to region. It seems that British introduced colonial law was the first to discursively produce their current subaltern status. This is an important clarification to make, since Brandreth's novel is based on recovering precisely this history of the *hijra's* criminalisation in the nineteenth-century. The second part of the essay analyses Brandreth's specific depiction of the subversive power of the *hijra*'s sexual performativity. Brandreth's invocation of Western ideals of sex/gender as well as his generic alliance to nineteenth-century English detective fiction, proves unexpectedly conservative, even neo-colonial. In the guise of historical authenticity, the novel portrays the *hijra* as always already criminal, and thus, a threat that the neo-Victorian detective must somehow contain.

2. Hijras and the History of Sexuality in India

Neither Man nor Woman introduces the *hijras* not through a discussion on what they *are*, but allows them to speak for themselves through their art and performative powers. In an extended description of the *badhai*, a ritual celebration performed by *hijras* at marriages and childbirth, Nanda follows the theatrical movements of the *guru* or leader of the group, aptly called Tamasha.[6] Upon the birth of a male child, the *hijras* perform a burlesque of maternity. Nanda observes how the *guru*

> twirled in a grotesque, sexually suggestive parody of feminine behaviour, which caused all of the older ladies to laugh loudly and all of the younger women to giggle with embarrassment behind their hands. […] Then Tamasha took the infant Ram from his mother's arms and held him in her own. As she danced with him, she closely inspected his genitals. Then Tamasha returned baby Ram to his mother. While the audience was watching the other *hijras*, Tamasha retired to a corner of the courtyard unobserved, where she stuffed a large pillow under her sari. She then returned to the group, clowning and imitating the slow, ungainly walk of a pregnant woman. (Nanda 1990: 1-2)

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These aesthetic details of the *hijra*’s performance preclude the sexological or anthropological impulse to define them. Nanda’s account effectively shows what the *hijra* is not. Though they may be born with male or intersexed genitals, they do not identify as male as they undergo voluntary ritual castration (*nirvan*). Nor are they classified as women since their castration is not succeeded by a surgical construction of a vagina and breasts (as in the case of some transsexuals in the West). Moreover, their mimicry of femininity is so exaggerated that it cannot be equated with ideal feminine behaviour in India. As may be seen from the description of the *badhai*, the women watching the spectacle are embarrassed or amused by the *hijra*’s burlesque of their femininity.

The *hijras* are a primarily religious community that worships Shiva and the *Bahuchara mata*, a manifestation of the mother goddess. They are variously called *hijras*, *kothis* or *aravanis* depending on the cultural region. The cult of the goddess elevates them above physical impotence and gives them “the power of generativity” (Nanda 1990: ix). They guarantee the fertility of the bridegroom and male child through their blessing. This is why they are still hired to perform at important religious ceremonies in contemporary India, like marriage and childbirth. If they are not appeased by gifts and monetary compensation, they may curse the family with impotence or, worse, insult them by revealing their castration. This is a definitive characteristic of *hijra* behaviour. Nanda reports that when she asked them “what is a *hijra*?” they answered by lifting up the skirt or *sari*. Others added, “See, we are neither men nor women” (Nanda 1990: 15). *Hijras* use their castrated genitals as a signifier of their irreducible sexual identity and religious power. It becomes a symbolic weapon to wield when they are insulted or slighted. Nanda confirms that they are recognised as a legitimate third sex in the Indian context. They are not homosexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, or bisexuals in conventional Western terms. In the absence of surgical reconstruction, they freely and openly use prosthetic enhancements and props, as may be seen when Tamasha stuffs her *sari* with a pillow. If there is a citation of idealised sexual norms (see Butler 1993 xxi-xxiv), they cite neither masculinity nor femininity. A *hijra* becomes one only by citing normative *hijra* behaviour imbibed from the *guru* and the community.

To that extent, Brandreth’s depiction of the *hijra* A.A. Luck in his novel *Murders at Reading Gaol* is accurate. Luck describes his pre-prison

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life as being "a happy way of life, it was a good living" (Brandreth 2012: 204). He learnt the *hijra* arts of performance and sexual seduction from his community: "We were a band of brothers who became sisters. […] I have always loved the eunuch's life. I am a man who dresses as a lady but is neither one nor the other. I like to be different. I like to be special" (Brandreth 2012: 210). This desire to stand apart, to "be special", is not merely sexual, but aesthetic and religious. It is not transgenderism – the inner psychological conviction of being trapped in the wrong body that may be surgically or sartorially 'corrected'. Instead it is a particular kind of sexual exceptionalism, of being "neither man nor woman" but a manipulator or parodic performer of gender. Within the binary conceptualisation of sex in the West, it comes closest to Butler's conception of the drag queen. Butler states that drag critiques the "truth-regime of 'sex'" which "is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as 'internal' and 'hidden' nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play between psyche and appearance" (Butler 1993: 178). Butler valorises drag for splicing the seemingly naturalised sex/gender binary through its "undecidability". In the case of the *hijras* in pre-colonial India, however, there was little confusion or anxiety at the "undecidability" of their gender. It was reasonably clear that they were *hijras*, neither men nor women. And their "play" or performance of femininity was couched in religious and mystic terms. They belonged to the cult of Shiva, who often manifests in Hindu iconography as part-man, part-woman or *Ardhanarisvara.* Brandreth appropriately chooses androgynous names for his *hijra* character. A.A. Luck's names are both masculine (Achindra) and feminine (Acala), and each is synonymous with Shiva.

Born to an English father and Indian mother, probably out of wedlock, Brandreth narrates that his mother castrated Luck at birth. His was a case of being born with intersexed genitals, unlike most *hijra* conversions that are sought voluntarily. Brandreth's character Wilde, watching "this absurd figure, with his crudely painted face, posturing before me in prison garb" (Brandreth 2012: 204), asks Luck if his mother was right in castrating him. It is clear from the tone that Brandreth's Wilde is not being sympathetic, but suspicious. Through that original act of castration, what kind of Frankensteinean monster has Luck's mother created? For the coloniser, the *hijra* body caused anxiety and became a sign to be deciphered. In 1871, the Earl of Mayo in his capacity as Governor General of India

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passed legislation called the Criminal Tribes Act. It monitored seven types of vagabonds or wandering tribes and was amended in 1897 under the Earl of Elgin to include *hijras*, even though they were not by definition vagabonds. Vagrancy, both physical and sexual, became inherently threatening to the colonial apparatus. It was no matter that India had no such legal precedent or moral censure when it came to the *hijra* community. The law sought not only to explain 'exotic' Indian culture to colonial authority, but also to bring it "culturally in line with right thinking Britain. Sexually, this meant teaching a slovenly tropical country to stand up straight" (Bubb 2009: 26). Additionally, the Tribes Act defined the *hijras* as "habitual catamites" under two clauses – a *hijra* or eunuch was a male who "dresses or is attired in the fashion of a woman in a public place" and "practices sodomy as a means of livelihood or as a profession" (Gupta 2008: 26). This double criminalisation was further codified as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that until quite recently remained a part of the Indian constitution. The Indian Penal Code was drafted by Lord Macaulay in 1837, but came into force only in 1860. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, "the dreaded source of homophobia throughout the former British colonies" (Narrain and Gupta 2011: xv), criminalised homosexuality under the vague term 'unnatural offences'. In legal and moral terms, it sounds uncannily similar to the charges of 'sodomy' and 'gross indecency' that were made against the historical Wilde in England.

'Sodomy' was derogatory shorthand in the nineteenth-century for homosexuality, masturbation, anal sex and other non-procreative forms of sexual pleasure. It also connoted sexual ambivalence, ambiguity or, to use Butler's term, "undecidability". In this regard, laws like the Tribes Act and Section 377 were not interested in punishing individual acts of sexual deviance but in discursively producing aberrant populations. Fittingly, the Tribes Act is specifically referenced in *Murders at Reading Gaol*. As Wilde and Luck share a conversation through the prison wall between them, the *hijra* ruefully tells his fellow prisoner that

> according to this act of Parliament, we are outlaws [...] because we *hijra* dress as ladies, it is a breach of public decency. The Governor-General of India wanted to stop the rot. He called us the "third sex" and accused us of corrupting

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> every Englishman in India with our filthy habits. He insisted on this law. (Brandreth 2012: 206)

The reader is left to wonder what the historical Wilde may have thought had he actually heard these words. Wilde was, after all, sentenced under a similar pretext. In 1885, the MP Henry Labouchere amended a bill passed by the Parliament that brought Wilde to ‘justice’, because it punished “any male person who in public or private commits or is a party to the commission of or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person” (qtd. in Gupta 2008: 20). Wilde was accused of corrupting young Englishmen and became perceived as the sexual criminal *par excellence* of the Victorian age. However, neither the Labouchere Amendment nor Section 377 ever clearly stated why sodomy was so offensive or why consenting sexual acts were deemed corrupt. *Hijras* and homosexuals, who had until then been tolerated so long as they kept their sexual activities private, were now discursively produced as criminals.

Michel Foucault’s celebrated *History of Sexuality*: *The Will to Knowledge* (1978) examines how sex changed from a spontaneous and unmonitored feudal reality to a productive and juridical structuring principle that founded modern life. He analyses a case in 1867, when a peasant in the French village of Lapcourt was arrested for public masturbation and ‘corrupting’ a peasant girl. When brought in for questioning, the accused merely said that they had been playing a “game called curdled milk” (Foucault 1978: 31). Foucault constructs a rather idyllic pre-modern history in the West, when men and women could creatively and quite publicly explore their sexualities and sex was seen as an extension of pastoral life. Identifying the beginning of nineteenth-century sexual repression with the moment the peasant was brought into questioning, Foucault decries

> the pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become, from a certain time, the object not only of a collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration. (Foucault 1978: 31)

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Foucault's theory that deviance and abnormality are not something real, discrete and independent, but identifiable only as something inexplicable or exceptional for a particular context, heavily influenced Butler's concept of gender citation and performativity. Butler's drag queen, like Foucault's peasant, became essential case studies or prototypes for criminal/aberrant behaviour. Examining their bodies through both a medical and moral lens became the paradigm for criminological practices in the nineteenth-century.

So it was with the *hijras* in India. In pre-colonial times, they had lived as artisans and ascetics requiring patronage for religious services rendered. Rarely were they shunned, feared or persecuted for being sexual deviants. However, just as the French peasant's body was studied "for possible signs of degenerescence" (Foucault 1978: 31), or the English prostitute's body was brought under the doctor's speculum through the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, Section 377 of the IPC allowed *hijra* bodies to be examined by colonial authorities. The first reported case of it being used against a *hijra* was in 1884 'Queen Empress vs. Khairati', cited in the *Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community* (2003). The accused (referred to as *khairati* or vagabond) was arrested on suspicion of engaging in anal intercourse and 'unnatural' acts, because he was seen on multiple counts dressed in women's clothes and dancing and singing with women. Section 377 allowed the police to investigate his body for 'telling' signs such as "a distortion of his anal orifice as well as his feminine behavior" (Narrain et. al. 2003: 47). Although Khairati had been brought to trial mainly for cross-dressing, that clue was no longer enough to confirm the *hijra* identity. Forensic medicine produced an imaginary set of signs to identify the 'habitual catamite' or 'pederast' that the word *hijra* became interchangeable with. In 1859, Auguste Ambroise Tardieu published a treatise *Étude médico-légale sur les attentats aux moeurs*, differentiating between a prostitute and a pederast through six 'signs' on the body. A 2008 study by the Human Rights Watch, titled *This Alien Legacy: The Origin of "Sodomy" laws in British Colonialism*, draws attention to this rather obscure nineteenth-century text by commissioning Scott Long to provide an English translation of Tardieu's scientific 'prognosis':

> the excessive development of the buttocks; the funnel-shaped deformation of the anus; the relaxation of the sphincter; the effacement of the folds, the crests, and the wattles at the

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> circumference of the anus; the extreme dilation of the anal orifice; and ulcerations, hemorrhoids, fistules. (Long qtd. in Gupta 2008: 32)

Khairati was not convicted for an act of sodomy, but on suspicion of sodomy based of certain physical abnormalities that became incriminating evidence. Consequently, *hijras* joined the Victorian tableau of discursively produced sexual monsters. Alexander Bubb, in his excellent review of *This Alien Legacy*, observes that "such practices, ironically always more sadistic and perverse than anything of which the homosexuals themselves are accused, continue to serve the purpose of intimidating those who deviate from social norms" (Bubb 2009: 27).

3. Posture and Subversion: On "The Truth of Masks"

Leela Gandhi's influential work *Affective Communities* (2006) studies the sexual and colonial politics of the late Victorian period. In a chapter on Edward Carpenter and his anti-colonial stance, she argues that the marginal position of the white homosexual in the nineteenth-century forged emotional and political links with other marginal positions, like the colonial native. This is enacted in Brandreth's novel where Wilde and the *hijra* Luck become friends based on their shared expulsion from Western heteronormative culture. While the former is verbally abused in Brandreth's novel as a sodomite and bugger, the latter is mocked as the "Indian Princess" (Brandreth 2012: 210). In Gandhi's estimation, Victorian law produced negative bodies or un-citizens like the *hijra* or homosexual in order to clearly define the boundaries of normative behaviour. By so doing, it brought these previously discrete identities nearer. Both the homosexual and the savage

> were exiled to the desert surrounding the heavily policed oasis of western heteronormative civilization, and in the ideological mirages to which this desert was prone, their features slowly began to merge into each other so that no one could any longer say for certain who was the "real" homosexual or who was the "true" savage. (Gandhi 2006: 51)

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Since colonialism was premised on racial superiority and difference, Gandhi uses affect theory to deliberately bridge the gap between the white man and the colonial native.[7] This creates the possibility for "radical kinships" (Gandhi 2006: 36) and shared subalternity between the West and the Orient.

Brandreth's novel initially places Wilde and Luck in a sort of 'radical kinship' with each other. The central moment in *Murders at Reading Gaol* is when Wilde's melancholic reflections are interrupted by a voice speaking to him through the prison wall. From the moment Luck addresses Wilde in his "girlish sing-song voice" (Brandreth 2012: 86), the *hijra* initiates the process of Wilde's psychological recovery. More than any other character in Brandreth's novel, Luck speaks to Wilde with intelligence, wit, subtlety and deference. He[8] provides just the audience that Wilde needs to rekindle his spirit and the friendship to guide him out of harmful self-pity and stoicism. Luck even tells him titillating stories of his sexual exploits with British officers in India. He reminds Wilde of the genius he once was as the decadent prince of irony and subversion. This is important to the novel's plot, as Wilde needs to be roused out of his melancholia, so that he can resume his novelistic duties as the detective. It is also a meta-reflection on the neo-Victorian process, whereby the Victorian past is re-discovered through memory and imagination as well as 'healed' by erasing historical repression and stereotyping. Luck's jollity and complete disregard for prison rules remind Wilde that he may be trapped within the prison walls of the Victorian age but they can be overcome. Repression, both physical and discursive, is thus never final. The *hijra* Luck functions as the subversive core of Brandreth's novel. He may represent 'sexploited' identities but that does not mean he is *solely* defined by exploitation.

When Wilde meets Luck for the first time in the novel, it is a deeply engaging moment: "I knew the grace of his gait and the quaintness of his way of speaking. But I had not seen his face before. The moment I did, I understood everything" (Brandreth 2012: 201). Wilde views the *hijra*'s body as the source of his 'sex', remarking on Luck's average height, coy feminine posture and face dabbed with rouge and colour sticks. Foucault notes that the scientific production of sexual deviance depended on empiricism and moral confession. The more the Victorians did not speak of sex, the more they were obsessed with defining it. Apparently,

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> an imperative was established: not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire into discourse. Insofar as possible, nothing was meant to elude this dictum. (Foucault 1978: 21)

However, Luck as a *hijra* eludes this Western scientific impulse. Victorian authorities examined the aberrations left on the sodomite's body (the earlier cited "funnel-shaped deformation[s]", "extreme dilation[s]", "ulcerations" etc.) and by discovering this body, drove it into hiding. The *hijra* asserts his sexual identity by freely displaying his body, with its aesthetically performed and prosthetic idiosyncrasies. Victorian law erroneously presumed that incarceration would prevent *hijras* from cross-dressing and thereby reveal their 'true' body. But Luck conclusively proves that being a *hijra* is about much more than castration or cross-dressing: it is a self-contained posture. Everything about Luck is always already *hijra*: his musical voice, graceful gait, light feminine figure, coquetry, and love for theatre and external adornments. He must have had to trade in sexual favours to obtain something as obscure and seemingly pointless as make-up sticks in prison. Without them, he has no citable identity, no subversive power – he would no longer be *hijra*.

If there was anyone in the Victorian age who could have understood this, it was the historical Wilde. It is therefore no accident that Brandreth chooses to situate his neo-Victorian character of Wilde spatially, morally and aesthetically congruent to the *hijra* in the novel. The historical Wilde wrote 'The Truth of Masks' in 1891, an essay on 'costumery' in Shakespeare's plays. Although there is little verisimilitude between the historical Wilde as a literary figure and Brandreth's portrayal of Wilde as a neo-Victorian character, an important point of intersection between them is their common love for theatre and rhetoric. Brandreth's Wilde and the *hijra* Luck are both aficionados of the theatre. Luck twirls coquettishly and lifts his prison veil as if it were the veil of a *sari*. Posturing thus, he dramatically quotes Olivia from *Twelfth Night*: "we will draw the curtain and show you the picture. Look you, sir, such a one I was this present: is't not well done?" (Shakespeare qtd. in Brandreth 2012: 200). The love for Shakespeare also creates scope for a 'radical kinship' between Wilde as white homosexual and Luck as an Anglo-Indian *hijra*. Theatre, specifically Shakespearean

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theatre, has long been the refuge of monsters, perverts and exiles. In 'The Truth of Masks', the historical Wilde drew attention to Shakespeare's expert portrayal of both morally elevated and evil characters through his fluid definition of identity and 'costumery'. He argued that identity in Shakespeare's plays were more than just effects of costume but through the power of language, actually constituted *the* metaphysics of identity. Costumes and adornments on stage thus connoted a paradoxical depth of surfaces for Shakespeare. Wilde in his essay showed how mere costume and accompanying rhetoric could transform a boy-actor into a beautiful woman, a criminal into a hero, or any marginal character into a dominant one (see Wilde 2007: 208-228).

In light of this discussion on gender, theatre and performance, is it enough for us to read the term 'sexploitation' as the mere depiction of sexual exploitation and violence in neo-Victorian literature? Is it just about the gratuitousness of these depictions? Could it not wield a more complex postmodern connotation? The neo-Victorian mode has long been credited with the ability to convert a tale of exploitation into one of empowerment, just like Shakespearean theatre. In Brandreth's novel, one is struck by how Reading Gaol is not a "pit of shame" as Oscar Wilde had described it his 1898 poem 'The Ballad of Reading Goal', but a platform where criminals remain incurable and intractable. Brandreth's Wilde admits his homosexuality only insofar as it helps the investigation move forward. Wilde is not a mere victim, no matter how much he may think he is. Even Luck exploits his sexuality for power. Prison life does not deter him from cross-dressing, painting his face or seducing the warders. He negates the separate system at Reading Gaol through the 'feminine' art of gossip and eavesdropping. For him, there is no difference between a *hijra*'s life inside and outside prison. Narrain comments that

> being a eunuch was a criminal enterprise, with surveillance being the everyday reality. The surveillance mechanism criminalised [the hijras'] existence as the quotidian reality of a eunuch's existence, namely cross-dressing, was a criminal offence […]. The police were thus an everyday reality in the lives of eunuchs. (Narrain and Gupta 2011: xvii)

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Luck converts this repressive, policed existence into his advantage simply by being *hijra*. His theatrical mask is a weapon that may be exploited as an artist, unlike the masks we are forced to wear in society, whether they are Foucauldian masks of criminality or innocence, Butlerian masks of masculinity or femininity, or the ambivalent mask worn by the colonial subject.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) attempts a psychoanalytic critique of the colonial subject. Since the subject speaks in a language alien to his culture, he becomes an ambivalent or split subject. The white man and his language become the ideal image, which the colonial subject must mimic. It is only through this citation (which is quite similar to Judith Butler's construction of normative sex) that he becomes a legitimate subject. Though the colonial subject is born with 'black skin', he develops a 'white mask' through this encounter with Western language and culture. Fanon postulates that whiteness becomes so internalised that by the time the colonial subject viably functions as a linguistic cultural subject, his/her black identity becomes the mask (see Fanon 2008: 8-27). For instance, in Brandreth's novel, the *hijra* Luck is shown to be the catamite and disciple of the historical figure of Sir Richard Burton in order to explain his 'whiteness'. This whiteness is identified by the *hijra's* mastery over the English language and his erudition not only of Shakespeare's plays but much of Wilde's own writing. How else could a lowly, vagrant *hijra* from the colony become the intellectual equal of Wilde, who was the greatest wit of the nineteenth-century? Brandreth uses the figures of Shakespeare and Richard Burton to explain Luck's troubling presence in the novel. Brandreth requires Luck to be both the familiar *and* the Other, to be essentially white but maintain the appearance of exotic 'black skin'. Fanon pessimistically states that the psychic choice of the colonial subject in such cases is to either "turn white or disappear" (Fanon 2008: 75). This is not to say that whiteness is not already a part of Luck's identity as a colonised *hijra*. 'Turning white' is a linguistic and cultural strategy that he exploits quite effectively to survive within the power struggles at Reading Gaol.

A more appropriate theory to describe Luck's subversive presence in the novel is Homi Bhabha's concept of 'mimicry'. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha releases the colonial subject from Fanon's double bind, by proposing a "more ambivalent third choice: camouflage, mimicry, black skins/white masks" (Bhabha 1994: 172). His main argument is that

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the native's citation of the coloniser's 'superior' culture is never perfect, complete or final. By its very nature, this kind of imitation is produced through "slippage" and "excess" (Bhabha 1994: 122), and resembles the mimicry or parody of crude and grotesque theatre, like Butler's drag queen. Mimicry is both a tool of the coloniser, enforced through Western language, literature, and culture, and an interpretive strategy of the colonised. It may or may not be conscious on the part of the colonised, but it is subversive nonetheless. When the *hijra* Luck postures erotically, as a Shakespearean heroine in the corner of his prison cell, he undermines several things at once: the Criminal Tribes Act, Richard Burton's Orientalism, Oscar Wilde's invocation of Hellenism to defend white homosexuality, and finally, Shakespeare himself. Luck goes a step further than the bard by being a cross-dressed *hijra* who poses as a woman, playing the role of Olivia, a boy-actor acting as a woman dressed as a man. The layers of posturing and exploitation of both sexual and colonial identity are almost infinite in this performance. The word 'posture' is a similarly palimpsestic word, with many layers of meaning. It has aesthetic and theatrical connotations of "behav[ing] in an affected manner, or in a way intended to impress or mislead others; to adopt an attitude, etc., for effect; to take on an artificial or assumed role; to pose as" (Oxford English Online Dictionary n.d.: n.p.). Most importantly, it has military connotations and implies a method of wielding a weapon in drill or battle. Posture thus becomes the mask, or the weapon that Luck wields as a *hijra* in Brandreth's novel to counter the strategies of 'sexploitation' and colonialism. After all, as the historical Wilde asserted, "the truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" (Wilde 2007: 228).

4. (Im)Posture and Containment: The Limits of Neo-Victorianism

The neo-Victorian as a literary mode can remedy the sexual and racial stereotypes of the Victorian age through a postmodern cast of characters and devices. It relies on the historical particularities of the nineteenth-century for authenticity, but the narrative itself is quite free of Victorian rules. The amplification of sexual violence and erotic content is also in the service of the plot and not merely gratuitous, as may be seen from the *hijra's* subversive presence in Brandreth's novel. Sexploitation in neo-Victorian texts also performs the important function of alerting the reader to the fact that 'Victorian' sexual repression and violence continue to operate even

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today. Not least, the way Brandreth references the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and depicts the colonised *hijra* highlights the state of the contemporary queer rights movement in India. In 2001, the Lawyers Collective HIV/AIDS Unit, on behalf of a non-profit organisation called the Naz Foundation, filed a constitutional challenge to Section 377 on the grounds of equality, privacy and freedom of expression. Its main concern was that as long as the law existed, alternative sexualities would remain underground and those suffering from AIDS and HIV could not admit themselves for rehabilitation. Finally, in 2009, Section 377 was read down to decriminalise 'carnal intercourse' as long as it was a consensual act between adults. Simon Joyce accurately observes that the neo-Victorian mode is opposed to using the past to predict the future, instead comparing it to looking in the rear-view mirror while driving: "the image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us" (Joyce 2007: 4). Joyce's provocative metaphor also implies the inevitable distortion of the past and the mediated image of the Victorians that the neo-Victorian works with. It makes them 'appear closer than they are', while also maintaining the simulacra of a remote, distanced, "New Orient" (Kohlke 2008: 67). It is, however, worth probing whether neo-Victorian authors are actually 'driving' forwards or backwards.

For all its radicalism and well-researched historical setting, Brandreth's *Murders at Reading Gaol* ends on a surprisingly conservative note. The day before he is to be released from prison, Sebastian Atitis-Snake, a prisoner on death row, attacks the hijra Luck in an orchestrated prison brawl. Atitis-Snake punches Luck's face and throat so as to make him unrecognisable. Luck can no longer speak, and the prison mask that is forced upon his face by the guards covers up his distinctive identity. As the warders separate the prisoners and drag them to their cells, Atitis-Snake exchanges places – and bodies – with Luck. The next day, a badly bruised and wounded Luck is sentenced to death in Atitis-Snake's stead. To add insult to injury, on the very same day Atitis-Snake takes advantage of the fact that Luck was due to be released and calmly walks out of the prison posing as a *hijra*. Admittedly, this makes for a stirring read, but what are the sexual, moral and neo-colonial implications of this body exchange; this diabolical imposture? It raises many questions, the most important being: can one really learn how to pose convincingly as a *hijra* overnight? In the final instance, Brandreth's plot reduces the complexities of *hijra* identity to

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a stolen *sari* and some makeup sticks. However, the process of becoming *hijra* is a gradual one involving years of training by the *guru*. It follows from a ritual castration performed during an intensely spiritual initiation ceremony or rite of passage called *nirvan*. It constitutes a state of suspension or liberation from the finite human consciousness and material desires. The process is not a mere sex-change operation but a rebirth that includes a *dai ma* or midwife. The operation itself is a rather rudimentary removal of both penis and scrotum, but the initiate assumes a hypnotic state by chanting the goddess' name as an anesthetic. The initiate is then allowed a forty-day recovery period which is the same time given to Hindu women for post-natal care. After this period comes "reincorporation" during which the *hijra* is dressed up as a bride and milk is poured over the head to signify freedom from impotence and access to the powers of generativity and performativity (Nanda 1990: 28-29).

Aside from the religious aspects of this conversion, being *hijra*, like being a man or a woman, has its own set of well-defined stylised acts that must be acquired through years of conscious and subconscious citation of gender norms. This *is* Judith Butler's concept of the gendered body; it has no biological existence or *a priori* nature outside the citation of sexual norms pertaining to that particular gender. Luck's case, as discussed previously, is even more complex and layered than that in terms of colonialism and 'mimicry'. Hence, it is hardly convincing that the prison guards at Reading Gaol could not detect an imposter leaving the gates. Did Atitis-Snake, in his guise of the *hijra* Luck, hurry out under the veil of his *sari*? Did he perhaps try to pose provocatively, joke and flirt with the guards, as Luck would undoubtedly have done? Did he mimic Luck's Anglo-Indian accent and mannerisms? If Bhabha's concept of mimicry insists that the imitation of whiteness is always imperfect and parodic, would it not also apply to the white man's imitation of the Indian? In Richard Burton's case, for instance, Dane Kennedy avers that in order to disguise himself as an Arab, he not only had to wear the costume but learn the language, read and translate the holy and literary texts – in other words, completely immerse himself in Muslim culture for years. Even so, he was still called a "white nigger" (Kennedy 2007: 57) – never truly belonging either to the West or the East. This is the nature of colonial mimicry: always in excess, ambivalent, slippery and never a perfect imitation or producing a perfect impostor. Brandreth, however, allows his villain Atitis-Snake to

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escape prison and provides no details as to how this feat is achieved except through the superficial donning of the *hijra*'s costume.

Even if we, as readers, accept this fictional indulgence, another disturbing question raised by the novel is why the *hijra* had to be murdered in this violent manner at all. He was, after all, the most amiable, playful and subversive character in Brandreth's novel. But his throat was crushed so that he literally could not speak. His identity was assumed by a white man in order to hoodwink prison authorities. He was executed for Atitis-Snake's crimes and his corpse lay desecrated in the prison yard. It is worth asking if he was being penalised for his sexual transgressions and ambiguous colonial/moral status. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, in her canonical essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (1995), identifies the subaltern precisely as a person or group that is denied the position of a visible and viable subject due to a violent erasure of desire and speech. She argues that most Western writers and academics, like colonial authorities, are interested in the preservation of "the subject of the West or the West as Subject" (Spivak 1995: 66). Only this "Subject" can and may represent itself through "desire". On the surface, Brandreth's novel is radical and affective in its depiction of the *hijra*, but it ultimately becomes more like a morally conservative and 'Victorian' detective novel in which the detective must wrap up all loose ends. In his containment of the *hijra* at the conclusion, Brandreth thus exercises what might be termed neo-colonialist power: his right to signify the subaltern, assuming that he can 'speak' for him. This is why Spivak is so critical of revisions of the past in which the subaltern, though present, is 'represented' only to be once again contained in one way or another.

Brandreth cannot see the *hijra* except through a residual Victorian criminological lens. In their consistent production of criminality, Victorian laws such as the Tribes Act of 1871 or Section 377 categorised *hijras* as thieves and blackmailers, probably because eunuchs were later added to the list of wandering tribes and vagabonds. Victorian criminologists believed that crime and pathological tendencies could be transmitted from one generation to another, thereby creating criminal classes. Meena Radhakrishna identifies eugenicists who included pauperism and criminality in their list of hereditary traits and forcibly sterilised prisoners. She states that in colonial India, the law was an idiosyncratic mixture of Victorian criminology and the Hindu caste system (Radhakrishna 2001: 5). Since the

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caste system was hereditary, Victorian theories fit well with the Brahmanical perception that tribes were scavengers, troublemakers, and untouchables. Both strains concurred that criminal groups were mostly incurable and passed on their traits to the newer generation, the only difference being that the Victorians believed in genetic transmission while the Hindu caste system operated as vocational and religious transmission. As a consequence, it was believed that *hijras* concealed other criminal trades like blackmail, extortion, kidnapping and prostitution behind their religious and theatrical facade. As Rachel Tolen writes

> the theory that a concealed criminality pervaded Indian society was further manifest in the concept of the "ostensible occupation". Criminal castes were said to engage in legitimate pursuits only to divert attention from their "real" occupation, crime. (Tolen 1991: 111)

This certainly explains the narrative volte-face in the *hijra's* character in Brandreth's novel. Towards the conclusion, after laboriously winning the trust and affection of not only Wilde but also the reader, Luck suddenly begins to blackmail Wilde. He threatens to expose Wilde's continued practice of sodomy in prison and to frame him for a young inmate's illness caused by penetrative rape unless Wilde pays him a hefty sum. Because he is a colonised native and a *hijra*, the neo-Victorian detective novel makes it inevitable that Luck must be a 'concealed criminal', to reiterate Tolen's phrase "concealed criminality". This is the only 'presence' he can ultimately have as a neo-Victorian character. It invokes Bhabha's phrase "metonymy of presence", which aptly sums up

> those inappropriate signifiers of colonial discourse – the difference between being English and being Anglicized; the identity between stereotypes which, through repetition, also become different; the discriminatory identities constructed across traditional cultural norms and classifications, the Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic. (Bhabha 1994: 128)

To these pejorative categories of 'presence' or perceived identity, one may add the 'concealed criminal' in the *hijra*'s case. In Brandreth's novel, Wilde

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confesses, "I went on speaking with him in the belief that so long as we were in direct contact, I could in some way contain him" (Brandreth 2012: 209). This confession clearly reveals Brandreth's neo-colonialism. Even within the 'radical kinship' of the white homosexual and the colonial subaltern, it is presumed by the neo-Victorian novelist that the former can "contain" the latter. Mimicry must not exceed its moral bounds. It is no wonder that Brandreth's Wilde shows no sympathy or desire to avenge the *hijra's* horrible death at Atitis-Snake's hands. He only feels cold relief.

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Notes

1. Matthew Sweet's main aim is to excavate certain Victorian texts, like advertisements, obscure newspaper illustrations, lesser known biographies and testimonies, to prove that the Victorians were not the prudes and racists they are made out to be. Their cultural preoccupations, including reading sensation and crime fiction, visiting shopping malls, watching picture shows and even prodigies on display, were thoroughly foundational for the twenty-first century. In his chapter 'Monomaniacs of Love', Sweet conducts a study of Oscar Wilde, homosexual pornography and aestheticism. He insists that Wilde's preoccupations were not scandalous but typical of masculine behaviour in his age. In fact, Sweet argues, "the freedoms he enjoyed were not available to post-Victorian men" (Sweet 2001: 193).
2. Robert Sherard was an English writer and journalist, who met Oscar Wilde in 1883 in Paris and wrote the first biography, *Oscar Wilde: The Story of an*

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Unhappy Friendship (1902), and later *Oscar Wilde: Twice Defended* (1934) and *Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris and Oscar Wilde* (1937) around the time that Gyles Brandreth's fictional Sherard is reminiscing. Brandreth maintains a sense of affinity and "kinship" with Sherard as a historical figure, since they both went to the same college at Oxford University and pursued journalism; most importantly, Sherard's heterosexuality allowed Brandreth to pitch his novels to "the general reader", whom "Sherard represents" (Brandreth n.d.: n.p.).

3. The term 'urning' or 'uranian' was a pseudo-scientific word for homosexuals coined by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in 1864, which referred to the myth of Aphrodite, who was born of Uranus's castrated genitals. The term was appropriated by Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter and J.A. Symonds to advocate homosexual love. Wilde also preferred to use the term 'Socratic love' as his version of homosexuality had added intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual connotations.
4. In her use of the word 'somdomite' instead of 'sodomite', which was the common Victorian anathema for the male homosexual, Gruss refers to the misspelled libellous card that was left for Wilde at the Albermarle club on 18 February 1895 by the Marquess of Queensberry.
5. The phrase connotes the deliberate linguistic violation of Victorian decorum in neo-Victorian literature.
6. The word 'tamasha' is derived from an Arabic term *tamāšā* and means a show, spectacle or performance, but it also means great chaos or confusion. *Hijras* often adopt symbolic words as names after the *nirvan* process is complete.
7. According to Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "'affect' arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1). Similarly, Gandhi's adoption of affect theory is based on the 'force' or 'intensity' of colonial encounters. She looks at colonialism not only as outright conflict but also an occasion for the creation of affinities and "kinships" based on "the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra. Affect is born in in-between-ness and resides as accumulative beside-ness" (Gandhi 2006: 2).

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8. The masculine pronoun is used consistently to refer to the otherwise sexually ambiguous *hijra* character simply in order to maintain the uniformity of the reader's transition from Brandreth's novel to the essay.

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