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Agrawal, A. (1997). Gendered Bodies: The Case of the 'Third Gender' in India. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 31(2), 273-97.

Anuja Agrawal's article *Gendered Bodies: The Case of the 'Third Gender' in India* discusses the conception of third genders within feminist and social science discourse. Agrawal discusses the issues with the conception of sex and gender as two completely separate identities through some of the criticism it has faced in the past thirty years. She also explores the concepts of sex, gender, and third genders through a literature review of ethnographic works on the Hijras of India both from the British Colonial period, as well as academic anthropology in general. She concludes that sex and gender cannot be separated, as both cannot be fully understood without the other.

Agrawal explains the common distinction made between sex and gender, in which sex is biological and gender is cultural. The issues she explains, is that conceptions of sex are not universal, and thus culturally determined themselves. She questions then how one can determine exactly what constitutes gender, which is seemingly impossible when we separate it from sex. She offers Judith Butler's concept of "Intelligible Genders" in which gender is determined upon the basis of the human body within its cultural contexts. In order to further examine this concept and try and determine how a culture establishes individuals as truly a separate gender, she examines the ethnographic record of Hijras in India.

Agrawal examines Hijra accounts from both British colonial perspectives, as well as those of academic anthropologists. She finds that the Brits often classified them as a tribe or caste. Within the group they often would identify both men and women. Thus the Brits still used classic binary conceptions to try and understand the Hijras. When they did acknowledge their distinct position, they

focused specifically on the physical, explaining that the Hijras were born with mutilated genitals and/or castrated. In this way they were trying to mesh the behaviors of the Hijras which were more feminine with their bodies which were visibly masculine. The need for Hijras to be castrated to be considered “real” proves that atypical gendered behaviors is not enough to create a gender transformation.

Anthropologists considered Hijras in slightly different, but similar ways. Agrawal defines their classifications as either normal or pathological. Some anthropologists focus on the Hijras classifications of themselves as natural and born that way, while others focus completely on the physical. These individuals use almost completely medical and scientific language to describe the Hijras, focusing on the physical as a way to understand the behaviors. Agrawal criticizes the claims that because of the existence of Hijras, Indian culture is more accepting than Western Binary culture. Even with their presence, the Hijras are often identified through binary gender roles anyway. Either their feminine behaviors against their males bodies, or the presence of both masculine and feminines behaviors and appearances. Thus they are not truly separate from binary gender constructions. The author concludes that while third gender concepts do in some ways exist, they do so at the acquisition of appropriate bodies. Individuals can take on the behaviors or appearances, but are never really accepted as the opposite gender. Thus they are put within the third group, but only if they meet specific criteria. She also stresses that we must not assume that societies are more tolerant or open just because of the presence of more than one gender. The number of gender identities does not necessarily relate to the level of tolerance of behaviors.

I thoroughly enjoyed Agrawal's article. I enjoyed reading both her and other academic's criticisms of the sex and gender binary. While I do agree that sex and gender are both to an extent culturally constructed, I question then how the two can be distinguished. I really appreciated the author's treatment of the binary and third genders through examination of an actual group. By giving these thorough examples, it became much easier to understand the issues with these concepts. It also showed how inextricably tied sex and gender are to one another.