

# The Vamps Take Manhattan

By FARAZ AHMED

The room is pitch black. As the coins on my belly chain chime rhythmically to the slow deep thrusts of this Desi version of Jean-Claude Vandamme, I am transported to years back to my mother's dressing table as I try on her wedding necklace for the umpteenth time in her absence. I am brought to reality by the soft girlish laughter emanating from the bathroom where another sexcapade is in progress. As is one on the staircase.

No, this is not a brothel in Hira Mandi, Lahore.

This is my duplex apartment in Manhattan. And these sari-clad girls are not girls but a posse of Pakistani, dare I say, crossdressing gender-benders.

How did it come to be that I am down on all fours, receiving anal sex, clad in a ghagra choli that would put Madhuri to shame (wincing from the rug burns on my knees, as I try to halt his hands advancing hands towards my pelvis, lest he discover my manhood)? This is a subculture within a subculture within a subculture (one I had the chance to experience from the inside, as I was trying to figure out the terrain of my own sexuality, but that's a different show). This is a club exclusive to Pakistani immigrant boys. As I write this, I try and classify their sexuality and fail. They loathe being called transgendered or gay, a term they associate with Hijras. One describes herself as "main aurat hoon! Aurat! (I'm a woman! A woman!)" Another firmly corrects a local newspaper reporter doing a piece on immigrant hijras: "I am an artist." All of these girls, including yours truly are dancers who regularly perform at various South Asian events.

Those performances are complete stories in themselves. Each one has his/her own circuit, a fiercely guarded territory. Bijli has the monopoly on Trinidadian and Guyanese population and is a

staple at their events dancing to songs like "Chanay kay khaith may" and appearing on Guyanese teleplays as a woman. Naina shimmies her ample fake bosoms (which are actually balloons filled with water) to Noor Jehan's Punjabi film tunes at private Pakistani parties, where rival gangs of men shower dollar bills in a testosterone match. I dance at local gay clubs and occasionally host SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association) parties, venues considered less appealing because they are "faggot" parties. According to Naina, dancing is only fun when the room is full of straight men peeling out money like monsoon showers!

The girls will usually hang out together on a Saturday night at a local Trinidadian club, one of the few that will play Indian house and Bhangra music, and has a fairly large South Asian following. These soirees are anything but relaxed. A normal night might include (apart from the usual bitch fights and diva tantrums), anything from car-chases, to knife fights to wild sex orgies. It's like being on a rollercoaster; once you are strapped in and the ride begins, your brain goes "Oh shit! What have I gotten myself into (again)!" Especially at four in the morning, your earring caught in Bijli's braid, as Naina tries to run her ex-lover's car off the Long Island expressway.

Preparations for these nights begin somewhere around 6:00 p.m. with a tangled web of conference calls as each of the girls tries to find out what the other is going to wear. If Naina says that she is coming out in a blue sari, you can be sure that she will be wearing anything but a blue sari! If you ask Halima to borrow her kundan set it will most definitely have been misplaced! As Naina comes round to pick you up in her Lincoln towncar, the best compliment paid, and the only one that counts is, "Haan, waise aaj tum



like hijras and make fun of each other's five o'clock shadow peeking out from under the pancake makeup. Thus comes to an end another emotionally and physically draining night. The forthcoming days mean less and less and the only thing real is the next weekend.

Why are these boys doing what they are doing? I don't know. I can only try and analyze my own short-lived participation in this subculture. I grew up in Pakistan, not the terrorist Muslim country portrayed in the Western press, but still a very very repressive Islamic society, with strict religious and moral codes. Survival for obviously gay boys like myself often depended on who you slept with and more importantly who you didn't refuse to sleep with. Needless to say, there were no gay role models. The only gay people you knew of were neighborhood legends surrounded by myths of sexcapades, police incarcerations and public humiliation. Some were even profiled by local newspapers under headlines like "Pakistani Boy George—A Story of Harmful Western Influences." One

was even typecast as himself in a teleplay and of course, his character committed suicide because of shame. The clergy passed a fatwa on this man who had to flee to America. For myself, I can say that it was the culmination of a long history of identifying with the fallen woman, the adultress, the prostitute—roles boys like me are often condemned to play. I was finally, physically playing the movie vamps I had aspired to and rebelling against all the social, religious and moral codes of conduct that had oppressed me. This was also my salute to the hijras, the only visible gay community I knew of, back home.

Why did I grow out of it? I don't know. Why do the other girls still go on? I can't say. This essay is not to "analyze" or "study" but to show a glimpse of their lifestyle.

So next time you see an Indian film and go "What unnecessarily bad dialog!" or "That doesn't happen in real life" take it from me—it does! I've seen it, heard it and done it!

By this time the girls are in shambles and way beyond caring. They clap

