(De)colonial Drag: Gendered Analysis of the Drag Scene in Kathmandu (2001 - 2024)

By Anugya Kunwar

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Gender Studies

In Partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women'sand Gender Studies (GEMMA)

Main Supervisors: Erzsebet Barat (Central European University)

Second Supervisor: Dr Boriana Alexandrova (University of York)

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Abstract

The current drag scene in Kathmandu is steadily emerging, however, no scholarly study has been done on the topic. Much of the broader scholarship on drag, highlights its subversive nature whereby the performance is viewed as a challenge to the naturalized status of everyday gender (Butler, 1999; Litwiller, 2020). However, critiques have pointed out that contemporary drag has been co-opted by the neo-liberal market to reproduce normative gender binaries, whiteness, and profit-making (Khubchandani, 2023, p. 28). Moving beyond the binary view of drag as either gender subversive or reinforcing the binary, for my thesis, I plan to look into the emerging drag scene in Kathmandu. For my research, I map the different drag shows that have been organized in Kathmandu until May 2024. Using Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity and Khubchandani's (2023) decolonial approach to drag, I analyze the roles of the different organizers of these drag shows in shaping the drag scene in Kathmandu. Through the study, I show that the drag scene in Kathmandu has three main organizers, namely, Queermandu, the Blue Diamond Society and Queer Honky Tonk. I further argue that even though the drag shows in Kathmandu have performers of diverse gender identities and sexualities, they are still boxed into the neo-colonial, euro-western construction of the gender binaries of 'drag king' and 'drag queen'. There is also the persistence of neo-liberal rhetoric of professionalism, inspired by Western frameworks of drag, in the drag scene in Kathmandu which displaces drag performances that do not or cannot fit into its curated polished model. While the drag scene has drag shows, such as the ones organized by Queer HonkyTonk that focus on the fun and comfort of the performers, such spaces are limited. Despite these critiques, the drag scene in Nepal has created spaces and opportunities for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, the question of inclusivity still remains.

Author's Declaration

I, Anugya Kunwar, declare that this thesis contains only original, previously unpublished work.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2019, Dragmandu, the first public drag show in Nepal, was hosted in Pink Tiffany - Kathmandu"s first openly LGBTIQ+ friendly restaurant/ bar. The event showcased drag artists from the USA and Nepal, who danced and lip-synced to pop songs in front of a live audience (Brush, 2019). This show helped propel the public drag scene in Kathmandu, which previously was limited to private conferences organized by non-profit organisations (Ammon, 2013). Since then, multiple drag shows have been hosted by the LGBTQIA+ organisation Blue Diamond Society, and independent collectives, such Queer HonkyTonk and Queermandu. The current drag subculture in Kathmandu is gradually emerging, providing a powerful space for drag performers "to express, explore and celebrate their own identities" (Shrestha, 2023) It has helped facilitate community building among LGBTQIA+ members and served as a platform for creating visibility and representation for the community (ibid.). While some of its elements are influenced by Western drag, especially RuPaul' s Drag Race (ibid.), we also see the incorporation of traditional clothing and Nepali/ Hindi pop culture.

Much of the scholarship on drag, highlights its subversive nature whereby the performance is viewed as a challenge to the naturalized status of everyday gender (Butler, 1999; Litwiller, 2020). However, critiques have pointed out that contemporary drag has been co-opted by the neo-liberal market to reproduce normative gender binaries, whiteness, and profit-making (Khubchandani, 2023, p. 28). Moving beyond the binary view of drag as either gender subversive or reinforcing the binary, for my thesis, I plan to look into the emerging drag scene in Kathmandu. For my research, I map the different drag shows that have been organized in Kathmandu until May 2024. Using Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity and Khubchandani's (2023) decolonial approach to drag, I analyze the roles of the different organizers of these drag shows in shaping the drag scene in Kathmandu. I further explore how 'drag' is formulated within this context and the formative role of "gender" and "sexuality" in this construction.

My research looks into three primary questions:

1. How is the drag scene organized in Kathmandu, and what roles do different organizers play in shaping it?
2. How is "drag" understood within this scene?

3. How is gender constructed and reproduced within the Kathmandu drag scene?

Through the study, I show that the drag scene in Kathmandu has three main organizers, namely, Queermandu, the Blue Diamond Society and Queer Honky Tonk. I further argue that even though the drag shows in Kathmandu have performers of diverse gender identities and sexualities, they are still boxed into the neo-colonial, euro-western construction of the gender binaries of 'drag king' and 'drag queen'. There is also the persistence of neo-liberal rhetoric of professionalism, inspired by Western frameworks of drag, in the drag scene in Kathmandu which displaces drag performances that do not or cannot fit into its curated polished model. While the drag scene has drag shows, such as the ones organized by Queer HonkyTonk that focus on the fun and comfort of the performers, such spaces are limited. Despite these critiques, the drag scene in Nepal has created spaces and opportunities for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, the question of inclusivity still remains.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the following sections, I discuss the diverse conceptualizations of 'drag' in the existing literature to understand its multifaceted and evolving nature that extends beyond the limits of binary gender crossing. I further explore the subversive vs. reactionary debate in scholarship around drag whereby it is either viewed as necessarily upholding or subverting the gender norms. I argue that both, either subversive or reactionary, understanding of drag is reductive since it boxes them into a binary that creates a hierarchy, dictating which performance succeeds and which does not. Instead, I draw on Butler's (1999) concept of performativity to explore the relationship between gender, sexuality and drag in my data. Lastly, I argue that the mainstream drag culture has been commercialized for mass consumption and profit-making.

2.1 What is "drag"?

In her work, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America,* Esther Newton defines 'drag' as a noun that refers to the "clothing of one sex when worn by the other sex" (1972, p.3). Furthering this definition, she describes 'drag queens' as "[homosexual] men who dress and act like women" (ibid.). Lorber's (2004) preface of *The Drag Queen Anthology* employs a similar binary approach, where she observes that the incongruity between the gender of the performer and the gender performed on the stage allows for the performer to 'reveal' the performative nature of their self-presentation to an audience that "knows" the "otherness" of the drag performer since the beginning of the act (2004, p. xv-xvi). In Newton's and Lorber's framing, the criteria to perform as the 'opposite gender' is assumed to be a necessary and defining characteristic of drag. This understanding of drag also permeates the broader academic literature around it (Halberstam, 1998; Schacht and Underwood, 2004). Additionally, as also seen in Newton's definition above, there is an assumption that most drag queens are cis-gendered homosexual men, whereas drag kinging is "about celebrating lesbian subcultures" (Hollister, 2022, p. 29).

While it is true that there are cis-gendered lesbian women who perform as drag kings and cis-gendered gay men who perform as drag queens, the generalization and the definition of drag as performing only as the opposite sex/ gender reinforces the gender binary and is eventually exclusionary. Within this essentialist framing, only drag kings and drag queens, performed by

cis-women and cis-men, respectively, can exist. This excludes (1) any individual who does not fit into the gender binary (non-binary performers), (2) different forms of drag genders that extend beyond the ‘king’ and ‘queen’ category, and (3) any performer, including cisgender, transgender, and non-binary individuals whose gender identity may resonate with the gender they perform on stage. Stokoe (2020) argues that this narrow understanding of drag presupposes the gender identity of the performer based on the perceived gender of their drag performance (p. 2). This essentialist approach not only naturalizes cisnormativity but also boxes drag into an "either/ or" category, not allowing performers the agency to explore diverse gender embodiments. Stokoe further contends that the binary approach also reduces the audience activities to viewing the onstage performance as if constantly looking out for the incongruency between the genders of the "performer/ performed" (ibid.). This constant need to identify the discontinuity shifts the attention away from the performance; instead, it focuses on the otherness’ of the performer. Similarly, the presupposition that drag queening is exclusively performed by gay men reifies the notion that the ‘real’ gender of the drag queen performer is that of a ‘man’. This trans exclusionary rhetoric can be used to further stigmatize transgender performers and deny them their self-identification. It further reiterates the essentialist notion that the femininity expressed by individuals perceived as ‘male’ equates with homosexuality and erases the experiences of heterosexual drag queens, for instance, who are assigned male at birth. Therefore, the ‘opposite sex’ definition of drag fails to capture the complexity and the evolving nature of identities within drag and reproduces the sex/gender binary.

Moving beyond the binary conceptualization, Khubchandani (2023) defines drag as a performance genre that takes place in nightlife, festivals, or entertainment spaces, primarily including and catering to people of diverse gender identities and sexualities (p. 26). For Khubchandani, drag artists use routinized aesthetics and elements of gender, such as facial hair, gendered fashion, poses, etc. to transform themselves while simultaneously performing activities like dancing, lip-synching, and emceeing (ibid., 27). They explain that this use of the gendered "aesthetic" in the performance can be employed to embrace, reject, or subvert normative codes of gender – at the same time. Most importantly, drag can allow performers to create new gender possibilities by mixing symbols and gestures and providing a space for "embodied imagination" (ibid., 55), especially for bodies that are often institutionally policed and inflicted with structural violence. In this way, drag can be a space that allows for non-normative bodies to explore themselves in ways that trouble the norm. For example, for transgender individuals, drag can be a site of awareness and experimentation, which often may

not be accessed in everyday life. However, drag is different from transgender embodiment and cross-dressing. In their conceptualization of drag, Stokoe (2020) emphasizes the importance of theatricality as a vital characteristic that sets drag apart from the rest (p. 2). While they note that drag can take place outside the theatrical context, its performance elements, such as the "use of gesture, acting technique, movement, light, and sound onstage" (ibid., p. 3), distinguish it as a performance genre. Cross-dressing, on the other hand, generally includes wearing clothes often associated with the everyday gender expression of the opposite sex/ gender. Similarly, transgender identity and embodiment include individuals whose sex assigned at birth is different from the gender they identify with. For transgender individuals, their gender expression may involve dressing according to their gender identity as part of self-expression, but this is not tied to theatricality or as a genre of performance.

One of the critical theoretical interventions in the literature on drag is Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), which explores the relationship between the performative nature of gender and drag. Butler (1999) argues that drag challenges the naturalized knowledge of a "true gender" by imitating and mocking its expressive model. They explain that during a drag performance, there are three interrelated elements of corporeality: gender identity, gender performance, and the assigned sex of the performer. When a disjunction between these three elements is performed and observed on stage, the naturalized causal unities of extension between them are questioned, challenging the inherent and stable characteristic of gender. The dissonance between gender, sex, and performance reveals the discontinuities of these gendered elements, which are otherwise assumed to be in congruent relationship with each other, and therefore "true". Butler contends that drag destabilizes this causal relationship and the notion of "true" gender identity. In a society that perpetrates violence against those who do not fit in the gender binary, it can be empowering to challenge the falsified illusion of a "real" and unified gender identity. However, Stokoe (2020) points out that Butler's critique of "true" gender identity can be perceived as disempowering and dismissive of the gender identities of transgender, non-binary, and intersex people, who are often denied their self-identification and face hostilities (p. 19). Here, it is essential to highlight that Butler's concept of gender performativity is directed against exclusionary discourses and practices that use the essentializing concept of "true gender" to delegitimize any individual, especially transgender and non-binary individuals, who do not abide by it. Therefore, the rejection of "real" gender identity not only deprives it of its status quo but also disavows any claim that embodiments outside the gender binary are false or derivatives.

Butler further develops the performativity of gender in drag performances and writes that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – "as well as its contingency" (ibid., p. 187). The performative nature of gender means that its ontological status is dependent on the reiteration of various regulated acts and gestures, without which the gendered self does not come about. For Butler, drag does not copy or appropriate a "true" gender; instead, it imitates the very notion of an "original" gender to reveal its fabricated nature. It theatricalizes different symbols and elements of gender to disclose that gender in itself is an imitation with no origin. These "stylized repetition of acts" (ibid., 191) are regulated by ritualized cultural protocols that discursively create a fabricated "gender reality". Here, the naturalized knowledge of gender as a stable category is actually a truth effect of a compulsory heterosexualized discourse of gender that reifies the causal relationship between sex and gender (if "male", then masculine). This gendered policing is further maintained by delegitimizing and punishing bodies that do not fit within the gender binary narrative.

2.2 The Subversive vs Reactionary Debate

Based on drag's critical potential to denaturalize gender, most academics emphasize its capacity to subvert existing gender norms (Butler, 1999; Hanson, 2007; Litwiller, 2020; Moore, 2013; Rupp et al., 2010). Butler's *Gender Trouble* is central to facilitating this reading of drag as a subversive performance genre in the broader drag scholarship. Butler writes that a part of the pleasure of drag performances is the recognition that the alleged reality of gender is in fact fabricated (1999, p. 187). While Butler's analysis of drag highlights its transgressive characteristics, they also contend that drag is not inherently subversive. In *Bodies That Matters*, they clarify:

> Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relationship between drag and subversion and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms (1993, p. 125).

For Butler, drag's subversive potential depends on the performer's intent, the context in which the performance takes place, and how it is received by the audience (1999, p. 189). This

highlights the dialogic nature of the production of gender, whereby its interpretation is co-constructed between the audience, performer, and location (Khubchandani, 2023, p. 70). As much as gender is a performance that we repeatedly enact, for it to be read as ‘intelligible’, it also relies on how other people recognize and react to it. This legitimization is contingent on the local cultural protocols that help individuals interpret gender expression and make sense of the perceived "deviance" or conformity of the body. Due to this, the audiences who attend drag shows have different views on understanding and inferring gender acts and symbols within the performance. Boxing all drag performances as inherently subversive does not factor in these differences and the importance of the actor-audience relationship when it comes to translating the performance. Therefore, it is essential to view drag performances in their totality and question what performances in what contexts challenge the naturalized truth of gender.

Given the contextuality and dialogical characteristics of drag performances, the blanket generalization of drag as inherently subversive is reductive. This line of thinking creates a schism between "successful" subversive drag and bad regressive ones. Stokoe (2020) terms it the "subversive/ reactionary dichotomy", whereby drag either necessarily upholds or subverts the gender norms (p. 5). In the subversive framework, it is not just sufficient for drag to expose the hegemony of heterosexual gender norms; instead, it becomes a necessary condition for the performance to qualify as a "good" drag. This is not only exclusionary but also deems drag performers responsible for gender subversion. Since drag is mostly interlinked with LGBTQIA+ subcultures, this affinity towards subversion puts the burden on individuals of diverse gender identities and sexualities to challenge the naturalized gender order rather than individuals who occupy the status quo. It also fails to recognize that drag performers are still very much a part of the gendered system and cannot entirely escape it. While their performances may guide audiences to challenge their perception of the stable gender category, the performance cannot directly change the systemic structures that enforce gender norms.

The reactive’ view, on the other hand, asserts that drag performances uphold gender norms and are particularly harmful to women. Critics argue that drag imitates and parodies harmful stereotypes that are especially targeted toward women and are embedded in patriarchy (Kotliuk, 2023, p. 10). They contend that drag performs an unrealistic version of femininity that is far from the quotidian gender expression of a ‘real woman (Khubchandani, 2023; Kotliuk, 2023). Davy (1994) even contends that drag is inherently misogynistic since it reifies the sexist notion that femininity is "artificial" by imitating and mocking it in their performances

(p. 24). Within the reactive framework, drag is criticized for reaffirming the gender binary and patriarchal stereotypes. While it is essential to discuss the entrenchment of gender binaries and misogyny within drag performances, categorizing it as entirely "regressive" is not productive. Classifying drag as necessarily perpetuating sexist stereotypes uses a singular framework of oppression - sexism and views gender as a stable and isolated category. Khubchandani points out that gender is not just the primary identity manipulated or transformed on the stage. Instead, we also see an interplay of presenting identity categories of race, class, ethnicity, or religion (2023, p. 62), which shapes the performance and how it is perceived.

The narrow understanding of drag as 'reactionary' also fails to factor in its dialogic production, which includes the interaction between the audience, the context, and the performer's intent. It negates any activist work that drag can potentially perform by encouraging audiences to question the gender binary and its stereotypes (Stokoe, 2020, p. 5). Similarly, the argument that drag performs an unrealistic version of femininity and reifies the patriarchal notion that all femininity is derivative is based on the assumption that 'femininity' is the sole property of cisgender women. This essentialist argument fails to grasp the potential of drag to reveal the performative nature of gender, whereby in parodying its expressive model, it exposes that all genders, and not just femininity, are an imitation with no origin. The ontology of gender is dependent on the repetition of regulated acts, without which it ceases to come about. Therefore, both the subversive and reactionary understanding of drag is reductive since it boxes it into an either-or condition that creates a hierarchy, dictating which performance succeeds and which does not.

2.3 Drag Binaries and the Neo-Colonial Gender/Sex System

A significant criticism of the dominant image of drag is that it often relies on binary gender crossing as the standard for measuring the success of the performance. Khubchandani argues that this globalized image only includes drag king and queen, performed by cisgender women and men, respectively (2023, p. 23). This understanding of drag as performing the opposite gender, is prevalent in its conceptualisation in academia. Even of the two, drag queens, performed mainly by cisgender gay men who use glamorous, feminine aesthetics, represent the predominant image of 'good' drag (ibid.), excluding drag kings. While binary gender crossing in drag and the use of glamorous aesthetics is not inherently problematic, the issue arises when it is used as the only determinant of the performer's excellence and the amount of pleasure and

entertainment the audience can obtain through these performances. This constricts what counts as ‘real’ drag by categorizing any performance that doesn't meet its standard as a second-tier performance. It also does not represent the diversity within drag performances, where we see diverse interactions between sex, gender and performance. Additionally, expecting drag performers to pull off ‘polished’ looks to qualify as ‘professional’ or as ‘real drag performers assume that they have the extra financial means to invest in their drag performances. These understanding, however, are not the reality of many drag performers, who struggle to make their ends meet. It also presupposes that drag requires accessories such as makeup, gown, wigs, etc. to perform gender. Bragin (2014) proposes the term "corporeal drag" to explain that drag can be also performed through bodily movements. This can include specific ways of moving the hips, using the wrist, performer's gait, etc (p. 2). However, it is essential to note that specific bodily movements might not be accessible to people living with disabilities. Thus, it is important to open up our understanding of drag to allow more space to incorporate numerous forms of performances, artistic practices, cultural contexts and gender categories.

The binary view of drag as either performing as ‘king’ or ‘queen’ stems from the notion that gender itself is a binary distinction, which primarily is a euro-western knowledge construction that consolidates patriarchal power and racial differences (E. Abruzzo, 2022; O’Sullivan, 2021; Khunchandani, 2023). The naturalization of sex and gender in a causal relationship helps reify the fiction that masculinity and femininity ‘belong’ to male and female-assigned sexed bodies, respectively. Butler (1999) challenges this relationship by arguing that ‘the body’ itself is discursively constructed to fit within the parameters of the sex/gender binary system (1999, p. 175). Within this discourse of gender, the naturalized status of both gender and sex as binaries confirm each other to assign cultural meanings to the body, which reproduces essentialized sexual differences. The constructed gender/ sex binarism creates a hierarchy by establishing a power structure that favours men, thus, consolidating patriarchal power. Khubchandani (2023) adds that this binary sex/gender system has been reified time and again by colonial power to justify settler colonialism and authorize racial differences to establish white supremacy (p. 43). For example, in the early nineteenth century, the British colonizers in India viewed Indian men as ‘effeminate’ since they wore unstitched clothes that were similar to those of women (ibid.). Indian men were characterized as individuals with underdeveloped masculinity who needed the paternalistic guidance of their white male saviours to be more civilized. The cultural differences between the British and Indians were used to feminize Indian men and consider them ‘weak to justify their colonial occupation in India. Therefore, colonisation and existing

neo-colonial structures has often used gender binary to differentiate white bodies from the racial ‘others’ to legitimize white supremacy.

The reliance on binary gender crossing as the epitome of ‘good’ drag, narrowly focuses on gender as the only analytical lens through which drag performances can be viewed, ignoring other intersectional identities that co-construct it. Khubchandani (2023) points out that it is not just gender that is manipulated or transformed on the stage. However, we also see an interplay of other identity categories such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, etc. (p. 62). They explain that colonial histories, consciously or subconsciously, shape our interpretation of how these identity categories are performed and perceived on the stage. As mentioned above, colonial powers typify racialized bodies as effeminate, hypersexual, asexual, or weak (ibid.). These racialized underpinnings are a part of gendering the drag performers even before they get on stage. For example, Asian men are perceived to be more feminine and, thus, are considered to have an "unfair advantage" when competing in drag competitions (ibid., p. 63). Similar colonial rhetoric is used to hyper-masculinize black bodies, whereby black drag king performers are seen to be more ‘successful in performing masculinity. Therefore, the lack of an intersectional approach toward drag can fail to incorporate the distinct experiences of performers, especially those who do not fit the status quo.

Similarly, analyzing drag performances only through the category of gender dismisses the performative strategies that racialized bodies may use in their drag performances. Khubchandani (2023) argues that drag performers of color tend to invest more in performing "realness" through their drag than using camp or genderfuck as their performance mode (2023, p. 65). While this may be read as ‘conforming’ to the gender binary, approximating ‘realness’ in drag allows racialized bodies to strategically challenge racial stereotypes. Using the example of a black drag performer, Khubchandani explains that racialized femininity is "already up for contestation, [thus they do not] need further exposure through ribald parody" (ibid.). Since white, middle-class, non-disabled, cis-gendered women represent hegemonic femininity, any racialized individual embodying femininity outside it is perceived as a failed derivative or a copy of the white feminine ideals. Within this colonial discourse of gender, exaggerating or mocking racialized femininity in a drag performance runs the risk of reinforcing harmful racial stereotypes rather than having a subversive effect. Instead, the use of "serious aesthetics" or "realness" as performance modes for performers of colour can, in turn, help reveal the constructed nature of the identity categories performed on the stage. Khubchandani asserts that

while gender binaries can be coercive, "performing realness" also has its benefits for black, brown and trans people in terms of safety, joy and income (ibid., 47). For instance, it can help in avoiding violence, mainly targeted towards transgender and gender non-conforming folks. In addition, approximating ‘realness’ in their drag performance can also affirm the gender identity of transgender individuals and allow them to embody their gender on their terms.

2.4 Neo-liberal Occupation: What counts as "drag"?

Despite drag’s potential to denaturalize gender, critics point out that neo-liberal market forces have co-opted mainstream drag to produce a commercialized form meant for mass consumption and profit-making. Munoz (1997) laments that these corporate-sponsored drag figures produce a "sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption" (1997, p. 85). Here, a drag performer (usually a glamorous drag queen) is meant to be a palatable entertainer who is tolerated by the audience made up of the majority and does not challenge the status quo. While cursorily, this form of drag is viewed as increasing social acceptance among the mainstream and a symbol for a ‘progressive’ society, it deviates attention from the hate legislation and homophobic violence that LGBTQIA+ people face in their daily lives. This version strips away the subversive and political potential of drag to transform it into a more commodified, heteronormative culture-friendly genre of performance.

Khubchandani (2023) builds on this argument and contends that this form of commercialized drag has been colonized by a particular form of whiteness, which reinforces gender binaries, hyper-professionalism, and particular styles that is only accessible to the most privileged (p. 25). According to them, this type of ‘colonized drag’ legitimizes only drag kings and queens, who produce profitable glamorous performances often featuring feminized aesthetics such as styled hair, flawless lip-sync and makeup routines, and high heels. Similarly, it establishes racialized standards of gender, whereby hegemonic ideals of white femininity are reproduced as the most desirable state. For example, within mainstream drag culture, bearded drag queens are sometimes seen as ‘lazy’ or not professional for not taking the time to shave while performing. This preference for ‘hairlessness’ is not just a gendered expectation of drag queens but also a racial one. Khubchandani points out that both "being too hairy or too smooth” are racialized markers of gender, where white ideals of femininity are set as the desired standard (ibid., p. 40). This emphasis and idealization of the ideal of white femininity reify its hegemony, classifying other forms as subordinates or as "not real drag" when they fail to approximate

these white ideals. Given the occupied state of drag, Khubchandani argues that it is important to analyse drag through a decolonial lens. According to them, a decolonial approach to drag includes: (1) exposing the neo-liberal logic of hyper-professionalization that sets heavily curated looks and choreography as 'real drag' for profit-making, (2) identifying ways in which gender binary as a colonial tool is used to marginalize and discipline those who do not fit within its boundaries, (3) recognizing that gender is not just the primary identity manipulated or transformed on the stage, but there is also an interplay of presenting identity categories of race, class, ethnicity, or religion, (4) loosening our parameters of what counts as 'drag' to incorporate drag performances that are sidelined (p. 25 – 41).

Chapter 3: Setting the Drag Scene Within the Broader LGBTQIA+ Movement in Nepal

Much of what publicly exists in the drag scene today in Kathmandu is facilitated by the legal and social developments of LGBTQIA+ rights in Nepal. In this chapter, I discuss the formation of the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), Nepal's first registered non-governmental organization that works for the rights of LGBTQIA+ people in Nepal. BDS is also the largest LGBTQIA+ organization in the country and is one of the key LGBTQIA+ advocates. Currently, they are one of the main organizers of drag shows in Kathmandu. In the second and third sub-section, I discuss the changes in the laws related to LGBTQIA+ rights, especially focusing on the legal recognition of *tesrolingi* by the government of Nepal and its contestations. The fourth sub-section explores the critiques around intersectionality within the LGBTQIA+ movement. Lastly, I explore the drag scene in Kathmandu and the lack of scholarly study around it.

3.1 Blue Diamond Society and Formalization of the LGBTQIA+ Movement

LGBTQIA+ individuals and activism for their rights in Nepal have long informally existed. One of the sites of this activism was *Ratna Park,* a public park in central Kathmandu that also previously served as a common cruising site and a space to interact with other individuals of diverse genders and sexualities (Knight, 2014, p. 124). It was in this park that private conversations of formalizing LGBTQIA+ activism through a registered non-governmental organization, Blue Diamond Society (BDS) started in the early months of 2001. Before this, no registered organization working explicitly towards the rights of gender and sexual minorities existed in Nepal. During this time, there was an increase in police brutality, due to the unrest caused by the ongoing civil war that started in 1996. The war was instigated by the Maoists to overthrow the Nepali monarchy and establish a democratic republic of Nepal. LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially metis[1] faced the brunt of this violence due to their perceived non-

[1] Meti is a Nepali term that has been used to encompass several gender and sexual identities. Kapali (2022) in her work *A Lexicographical Study of Metti Bhasa* (language) defines 'meti' as a term mostly used to refer to transgender women, but also individuals who identify as non-binary within the feminine spectrum (Kapali, 2022, p. d). Knight (2014), on the other hand, defines meti as individuals who 'self-identify as transgender, trans-women, third gender or gay men' (p. 117). Tamang in her study describes 'meti' as a self-adopted identifier used by 'feminised men' who engage in sexual relations with other men, and use their feminine gender expression in public to sexually attract them (2003, p. 229). In a sexual relationship, they are also the one who are usually penetrated. Both Knight and Tamang also note that due to societal pressures, many metis are married to women and have children.

conformity. They were being subjected to targeted arrests, police extortion and blackmail, and sexual and physical forms of violence, especially in cruising sites by the police and individuals purporting to be the 'police' (Ammon, 2009; Knight 2014). The political unrest also added to the increase in HIV/ AIDS cases in Nepal, which was further worsened due to the lack of social support and awareness around the endemic (Knight 2014., p. 123). This particularly impacted the LGBTQIA+ community who were the most vulnerable during the HIV/AIDS crisis. The surge in violence against the LGBTQIA+ community and the increasing rate of sexually transmitted infections (STI) heightened the need for the establishment of BDS to be able to formally advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights. However, despite the need, the process of registration as an NGO was not easy for BDS. When the members of BDS submitted the necessary forms for registration in the district administration office, the clerk at the government office refused to officially register BDS unless the organization subscribed to the goal to "convert people back to heterosexuality" (ibid., p.126). Since in 2001 the constitution of Nepal did not recognize the rights of gender and sexual minorities, BDS had to register as a "sexual health and human rights organization", without including any mention of homosexuality (ibid.). This need of the government to exclude the mention of homosexuality during the process of NGO registration is reflective of the entrenched homophobic stance of the Nepali government and the lack of recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights in Nepal at the time.

In the initial stages of its establishment, BDS was primarily focused on securing bail for metis and delivering sexuality health education to those engaging in same-sex sexual activities (ibid., p. 127). As they continued advocating for the rights of gender and sexual minorities, they started gaining more public attention for their work. In 2004, Achyut Prasad Kharel, a law student filed a petition in the Supreme Court against BDS, alleging that they as an organization were promoting the "right to homosexuality" (Knight, 2014, p. 135**)**. Kharel argued that 'homosexuality' fell under the category of 'unnatural sexual intercourse', as outlined in Part 4, Chapter 16 of the Naya Muluki Ain, 2020 B.S. (National Civil Code, 1963), which addressed the issue of bestiality. However, since the Muluki Ain does not define 'unnatural sexual intercourse' in the chapter, the decision was dependent on the Supreme Court to determine whether the Ain criminalized homosexual behavior and its promotion. Initially, the court dismissed the petition, declaring that private homosexual activities between consenting adults were not subject to criminal law (ibid., p. 136). However, Kharel filed the petition again, reiterating that homosexuality was a criminal offense and challenging the legitimacy of the initial dismissal. This time around the petition was accepted, and after multiple postponements

of the review of the petition, it was ultimately rejected by the Supreme Court. The court declared that Chapter 16 of the Muluki Ain did not explicitly include homosexual individuals while discussing 'unnatural sexual intercourse, thus did not prohibit adult consensual homosexual activities. As of present, Nepal does not have 'clear sodomy laws' in comparison to other post-colonial states in South Asia (ibid., p. 140). This pivotal decision established a strong foundation for LGBTQIA+ activists to openly advocate for the legal recognition and rights of gender and sexual minorities in Nepal.

3.2 Towards a Less Discriminatory Law and the Recognition of the *tesrolingi*

In 2007, four local organizations, "representing lesbians, gays and people of the third gender" (NJA Law Journal, 2008) in Nepal, filed a writ petition against the State to advocate for the official recognition of people with diverse genders and sexualities as *tesrolingi* (third gender). The petition also demanded the government to issue identity documents such as citizenship, driver's license, and passport according to this self-identification as a *tesrolingi*. The main aim of this petition was to seek legal recognition of *tesrolingi* individuals, who did not identify as either 'male' or 'female'. It also called for the end of any form of legal discrimination against them. The Supreme Court ruled in favour and ordered the inclusion of a *tesrolingi* category in legal documents. It also directed the government to review any law in the constitution related to gender identity and sexual orientation and remove any discriminatory laws. Following this ruling, in 2012, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a directive that allowed gender and sexual minorities to specify their gender marker as "others" in official documents including citizenship certificates, voter's ID, passports, and national census (UN Women, 2023, p. 29). However, the 2012 directive also specified that if an individual of a sexual and gender minority applied to receive citizenship as *others*, the local body must undertake a "necessary investigation" before proceeding with the issuance process (UN Women, 2023, p. 31). As UN Women reports, this clause has often been used as a reference by government officials to seek proof for medical interventions (ibid.). For example, transgender individuals seeking to change their gender marker (male or female) to *others* in their legal document have been asked to present a medical certificate to prove that they have undergone gender reassignment surgery to substantiate their request (Singh, 2021, p. 9).

The perceived requirement of a medical certificate by government officials for transgender people to change their gender marker is based on the transphobic assumption that one's gender

presentation must align with their genital status. For example: according to the directive, a meti individual must undergo surgery to "obtain" a vagina to authenticate their gender identity. The forced disclosure of the genitalia while applying for a change of the gender marker, coupled with the coercive requirement to go under the knife for self-determination, infringes upon the rights of transgender people to assert their self-identification and maintain bodily autonomy. Moreover, it excludes those who cannot afford, or choose not to undergo such procedures. This mandatory requirement contributes to the state's discursive construction and reproduction of the trans body to uphold cisnormativity, where transgender individuals are coerced to conform to the constructs of a "proper" cis-gendered body. Ironically, despite undertaking gender-affirming surgery, there is no legal provision permitting transgender people to change their gender marker from "Female" to "Male", or vice versa (UN Women, 2023, p. 29). The law only allows the category of "others" (alternatively termed "tesrolingi") as a gender marker for gender and sexual minorities. Publicly available data indicates that only one transgender woman and one transgender man in Nepal have successfully obtained legal documents that are reflective of their self-identification as a woman and a man respectively (ILGA Database, 2023). In both instances, medical evidence of gender-affirming intervention was required. Additionally, despite the inclusion of "others" as a gender marker, transgender individuals still encounter bureaucratic and legal barriers to self-identification.

3.3 Contesting the Category of "tesrolingi/ third gender"

In Nepal, the term "third gender" (Nepali: *tesrolingi*) is used to characterize individuals who do not identify with either the category of male or female (Kapali, 2020; Bochenek and Knight, 2012). This encompasses those who do not conform to the gender identity and expression ascribed to them at birth based on their assigned sex. Findings from research conducted by the BDS reveal that individuals identifying with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations such as metis, intersex and transgender people, homosexuals, transexuals, etc. collectively self-identify themselves as the "third gender" (Bochenek and Knight, 2012, p. 20). Similar to the use of "queer" as an umbrella term in the global discourse of gender and sexuality, Nepal adopts the term "third gender" expansively, including all gender and sexual minorities (Birkenholtz, 2022, p. 71). This is also reflected in the directive issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2012 after the 2007 Supreme Court verdict. The directive defines "third gender" or "others" as any person who is not a (cis-gendered) woman or man. It also includes gay, lesbian, bisexual,

transgender, and intersex people as "gender and sexual minorities", thereby subsuming them under the "others" category.

This broad definition of the "third gender" category has been heavily contested within the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal. The definition has been criticized for conflating sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics by grouping them all under the same term (Kapali, 2020). Kapali (2020) argues that this framework compels individuals with non-heterosexual sexualities to select their gender marker based on their sexual orientation. In addition, it uses "transgender" and "third gender" (tesrolingi) interchangeably, failing to acknowledge the nuanced religious-cultural context of the "third gender" identity, which is used by individuals who do not identify as either male or female (ibid.). The existing provision dismisses the right to self-determination of any transgender individuals who want to identify themselves as "male" or "female" and not as "third gender" in their official documents. Birkenholtz (2022) contends that the use and the endorsement of the term "third gender" as an overarching category by the BDS and its legal authentication by the government homogenises the diverse group of gender and sexual minorities in Nepal, othering and erasing important differences within the community (2022, p. 82). Such an approach perpetuates the misguided notion that the experiences of challenges, oppression and discrimination faced by sexual and gender minorities are the same, thereby advocating for similar protection irrespective of their caste, class, religion and ethnicity. Furthemore, Birkenholtz (ibid.) posits that this reinforces the Euro-American binary constructs of gender and sexuality, manifesting in the Nepali context as an equally limiting trinary framework. Consequently, while the legal advancements have been able to recognize, at least on paper, the rights of individuals who identify as the "third gender", they fall short in addressing the broader needs of the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal.

3.4 Intersectionality within the LGBTQIA+ Movement in Nepal

In the recent years, within the LGBTQIA+ community, there has been a significant shift towards disavowing exclusionary categories and advocating for an intersectional approach towards inclusivity. Central to this is the "rejection of much of the BDS' terminology [of the "third gender"], ideology and practice" (Birkenholtz, 2022, p. 82). BDS has faced criticism for allegedly "privileging" specific groups and gender expressions over others, especially "favoring" meti individuals and homosexual men within the organisation (Birkenholtz, 2022;

Knight, 2014). Critiques contend that BDS has been characterized as being "only for metis" (Knight, 2014, p. 131). Notably, they have raised concerns that job opportunities, promotions and access to attend international conferences within BDS are exclusively offered to transgender individuals, who have the "financial incentive to wear women's clothing" (ibid.). Such decisions are frequently perceived as instances of "preferential treatment" (ibid.) rather than outcomes grounded in individual merits. Similar sentiments of exclusion were articulated in another study by two self-identified bisexual individuals, expressing a "lack of understanding and consequently, space in BDS for bisexuals" (Tamang, 2003, p. 242). These individuals contended that the organisation, dominated by metis, often tended to prioritise feminine expression and identity in decision making processes.

Members of the organisation also criticised BDS' tendency towards homogenizing differences within the LGBTQIA+ community to present a unified front for a simplified public reception (ibid., 81). A transgender member within the organisation shared that she could "only be transgender at the BDS" (ibid.) and often her identity as a Newar was denied. Criticism has also been directed towards BDS activists for their perceived Hinduistic approach in their sensitizing programs (Birkenholtz, 2022, p. 86). This criticism stems from their reliance on Hindu mythologies that reference gender-bending elements, which challenge binary constructs of gender and sexuality. While such a strategy facilitates culturally embedded communication with the Hindu-majority population in Nepal, it simultaneously excludes and erases members outside this religious framework within the LGBTQIA+ community. Furthermore, this narrative perpetuates a false dichotomy, where Hinduism is constructed as an inclusive, queer-friendly religion, whereas other minority religions in Nepal are construed as "conservative". In the context of escalating sentiments of Hindu nationalism in secular Nepal, the substantial reliance on Hindu mythologies for the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in the broader community risks the Hinduisation of the LGBTQIA+ movement. Additionally, the failure to recognize differences in religion, caste, class, and ethnicity contributes to the construction of an essentialised "LGBTQIA+ subject", representing only certain genders, sexualities and other hegemonic identities.

While compelling individuals to conform to specific gender and sexuality expressions is an exclusionary act of normalization and erases important intersectional identities, it is important to question the significance of such "preferential treatment", particularly considering the vulnerability of metis in Nepal. Tamang argues that metis are "doubly stigmatised" (ibid., p.

248) because of their feminisation, gender non-conformity in society and the perceived sexual role they play. Since most metis are sexually penetrated, they are perceived as effeminate (ibid.). This increases their susceptibility to targeted sexual and gender-based violence including rape, harassment and sexual abuse. Similarly, reducing transgender subjectivity solely to the act of wearing "women's clothing" is a "basic denial of authenticity" (Bettcher, 2006, p. 204). In the context of BDS, metis are construed as individuals opting to wear women's clothing for perceived "benefits", rather than expressing a genuine aspect of their gender identity through their clothing. This denial of their authenticity is a form of transphobia that systemically rejects the self-determined gender identity of transgender people, portraying them merely as individuals adopting the attire of the opposite sex.

The significant shift towards intersectionality in the late 2010s consequently gave rise to newly formed LGBTQIA+ non-profit organizations primarily including the younger generation of Nepali individuals, who self-identify as "queers" (Birkenholtz, 2022, p. 82). Queer Youth Group (QYG) started informally in 2018 and registered as a not-for-profit in 2020 by Rukshana Kapali, a prominent Newar queer activist. The organization aspires to provide an inclusive space for gender and sexual minorities in Nepal who have previously felt excluded from the LGBTQIA+ movement mainly led by the BDS. The organization is also the primary organizer of the Nepali Pride Parade, a recurring event since June 2019. The parade serves both as a celebration and a protest against the systemic erasure and violence targetting gender and sexual minorities in Nepal and aims to reclaim the heteronormative public space (ibid., p .86). QYG is committed to an intersectional approach in their work. They primarily seek to encourage other 'queer' members in their organisation to understand and engage with their queerness in conjunction with other facets of their other identities such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity and language. This commitment is evident in their diverse visibility and awareness programs conducted throughout the year including "Queer Womxn Pride, Queer Indigenous Pride, Trans Pride Parade, and the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia" (ibid., p. 87). Furthermore, the movement assumes a secular stance by advocating for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community grounded in critical thinking and research instead of relying on Hindu mythology for acceptance. For them, religion is just one of the "many axes of difference and identity" (ibid., p. 86). Currently, there is not much research done on their work.

3.5 The Public Drag Scene in Kathmandu

In 2019, the first public drag show in Nepal *Dragmandu* was hosted in Pink Tiffany – Kathmandu's first openly LGBTQIA+ friendly restaurant/ bar. The event showcased drag artists from the USA and Nepal, who danced and lip-synced to pop songs in front of a live audience (Brush, 2019). This show helped propel the public drag scene in Kathmandu, which previously was limited to private conferences organized by non-profit organisations (Ammon, 2013). Since then, multiple drag shows have been hosted by LGBTQIA+ organisations such as BDS, and independent collectives such Queer HonkyTonk and Queermandu. The current drag subculture in Kathmandu is gradually emerging, providing a powerful space for drag performers "to express, explore and celebrate their own identities" (Shrestha**,** 2023) It has helped facilitate community building among LGBTQIA+ members and served as a platform for creating visibility and representation for the community (ibid.). While some of its elements are influenced by Western drag, notably RuPaul's Drag Race (ibid.), we also see the incorporation of traditional clothing and Nepali/ Hindi pop culture.

Currently, there is no existing scholarly study on drag shows within the context of Nepal. However, Seira Tamang (2003), in her work *Patriarchy and Homo-erotic Behavior* mentions metis and MSMs (men who have sex with men), especially members of the BDS, "dressing in drag" (p. 231) and going to clubs to enjoy and engage in sexual activities with other men.[3] In the study, dressing in drag was understood by the participants as "dressing in women's clothes" (ibid., p. 231). An older MSM participant, however, described dressing in "women's clothing" as "to go as a girl" (p. 242). Tamang explains that the use of the Anglophonic word "drag" by some participants was indicative of the transnational knowledge exchange that was taking place due to the presence of international networks and friends of BDS in Nepal. For many of the participants, dressing in drag allowed them a space to explore their identity and sexuality while having fun. They described feeling like a girl (keti feeling), or feeling like a "real girl" (pakka keti) while dressing in drag (ibid., p. 243). However, they also added that dressing in drag increased their vulnerability to violence, especially harassment, beatings, and sexual violence perpetrated by the police. At clubs, they would also experience verbal abuse, where people would use slurs like "chakka" to derogate them.

There exists a critical gap in the academic literature on drag shows in Nepal that necessitates further exploration. For my research, I map the different drag shows that have been organized

in Kathmandu until May 2024. I analyze the roles of the different organizers of these drag shows in shaping the drag scene in Kathmandu. I further explore how ‘drag’ is formulated within this context and the formative role of "gender" and "sexuality" in this construction.

Chapter 4: Methodology

My research adopts a qualitative methodology that uses semi-structured interviews to understand the organization of the drag scene in Kathmandu and the role different organizers and performers play in shaping it. I particularly look into how drag is constructed within the scene and the formative role of "gender" and "sexuality" in shaping it. At the center of choosing this research methodology is my relativist and constructivist ontological and epistemological stance. This is the understanding that what we know of 'reality' is contingent on our existing knowledge and the interpretation of it; and therefore, it is important to situate this knowledge with the context it is produced in (Braun, 2013). Here, knowledge is "constructed through various discourses and systems of meanings" in specific social and cultural contexts (ibid.). Therefore, for my thesis, it is crucial to understand the way the drag scene in Kathmandu is organized and how the organizers and performers view 'drag' to further explore the formative role of "gender" and "sexuality".

For my research method, I used semi-structured interviews to explore my research topic. A semi-structured, face-to-face interview helped provide a nuanced insight into the "subjectivity, voice and lived experience" of the interviewees (Rapley, 2004). I had two sets of participants, (1) the three main organizers of drag shows in Kathmandu, and (2) five self-identified drag king performers and one transwoman feminine performer. For Butler (1999), drag's subversive potential depends on the performer's intent, the context in which the performance takes place, and how it is received by the audience (p. 189). While my research moves away from the subversive/ reactionary dichotomy of drag, Butler's view is productive in highlighting the dialogic production of drag shows, where the performer, the audience, and the context are crucial. The drag shows in Kathmandu are organized by multiple individuals and groups with unique objectives, formats, and audiences. My interviews with the organizers of the drag shows in Kathmandu helped me establish the context in which the drag performances took place and were shaped. By analyzing their understanding of drag, the choices they made to select the venue, participants, and audience helped me map the drag scene in Kathmandu. Similarly, the drag scene in Nepal has different drag performers from different gender identities and sexual orientations. Their experiences of performing in the shows of these organizers provided a more nuanced understanding of the scene. For my research, I did not interview the audiences of the drag show, which limited my understanding of the overall picture. However, to mitigate this

limit, I asked all the participants to reflect on any reactions they had received from the audience after their show and performance. My interview guide can be found in the Appendix to further see the semi-structured questions I asked my participants.

As mentioned, a total of nine participants were interviewed, including the three organizers of drag shows in Kathmandu, five self-identified drag king performers, and one transwoman feminine performer. The organizers included Avnish from *Queermandu*, Vishal from *Drag Show for Visibility*, and Samrat from *Queer HonkyTonk.* The drag performers included Raja, Kishan, Nina, and Chi. To maintain the confidentiality of my participants, I have randomly selected names to anonymize them. However, the names of the shows remain the same given the nature of my research. All the organizers consented to using the real names of their events. An information sheet and consent form were provided to all the participants. Before conducting the interview, I explained the purpose of the thesis and obtained their verbal consent. Out of the six performers, two withdrew their participation verbally, stating that they did not wish to participate any further due to personal reasons. I have deleted all their interviews and transcripts and have made sure none of their information is used in my work. The interviews took place between the 8th of April 2024 to the 3rd of May 2024, and thus my study does not contain information about drag shows that took place after, especially during the Pride Month in June 2024. However, the new drag shows that took place after May 2024 were organized by the same organizers I interviewed for my study.

Since I have been actively following the drag shows in Kathmandu, I was able to personally reach out to two of the organizers who I was connected with on my social media. During my interviews with them, they informed me of another drag show that took place in Kathmandu. Given my previous professional work with the organizer of this drag show, I was able to reach out to one of their members who was a part of the organizing. My interviews with one of these organizers indicated that a drag show existed before 2019. While I chose not to interview the main organizer of this pre-2019 show due to his current transphobic stance, I was able to interview one of the performers who participated in the show. Similarly, I was unable to contact the organizer of the 2019 *Dragmandu* show due to her relocation from Nepal. Due to this, I analysed the existing newspaper articles and online interviews to analyze the show. As for the drag performers, I primarily interviewed drag kings due to their lesser visibility in the Kathmandu drag scene. In addition, my previous research focus was to understand the construction of masculinities within the drag scene in Kathmandu. However, I decided to focus

on ‘gender’ more broadly to be able to make sense of the emerging discourse in my data. For the drag performers, I used convenience sampling, which allowed for the selection of participants who were readily accessible and willing to engage with the study. To reach out to the performers, I used Queer Honky Tonk’s Instagram page to identify potential participants, as it is known for its focus on working with masculine drag performers. Through this platform, I was able to interview five self-identified drag kings or masculine-presenting performers. This sampling method was chosen due to the limited visibility of masculine drag performers in Nepal and the central role that Queer Honky Tonk plays in providing a platform for these individuals.

The semi-structured nature of the interview provided flexibility and a generative space for co-producing knowledge between me and the participant (Rapley, 2004, p. 306). Our social identities, and our specific interactional context during the interview provided richness to the data collected (Reinharz and Chase, 2002, p. 22). Oakley (1981) suggests, when the researcher’s stance is ‘neutral’ it establishes a power hierarchy and imbalance between them and the participant, which is patriarchally informed and reproduces inequality (p.18). Thus, for this research, I took a non-hierarchical interviewer position by maintaining a non-hierarchical rapport through a ‘neutralistic conduct’ (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991, p. 45). Since neutrality is impossible to perform given my role as the facilitator, an active agent in the production of knowledge, (Gubrium, 1995, 1997; Rapley, 2001), my interviewing process included inquiring, asking follow-up questions and probed towards necessary key terms, and directions, in alignment with my research objectives. My ‘neutrality’ was however, maintained in my conduct by not asking leading questions and using the words used by the participants for follow-up questions**.** Ahmed (2014) argues that since our ‘inherited prejudice shapes our efforts to understand’, it is important to clarify information while interpreting (p. 300). Therefore, a crucial part of my interview facilitating process was clarifying and reiterating insights mentioned by the participants, ensuring I, to my best ability, was able to properly understand what they were sharing without any misunderstanding. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, providing sufficient time to delve into both the participants’ individual experiences of organizing drag and their broader reflections on the Kathmandu drag scene. The interviews were conducted either in person or online using Zoom. The choice depended on the participants’ preferences and availability. The interviews were made in both English and Nepali and were recorded for later transcription and analysis.

For my analysis, I used Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity and Khubchandani's (2023) decolonial approach to drag. Butler (1999) argues that the ontological status of gender is dependent on the reiteration of various regulated acts and gestures, without which the gendered self does not come about. For Butler, drag does not copy or appropriate a "true" gender; instead, it imitates the very notion of an "original" gender to reveal its fabricated nature. It theatricalizes different symbols and elements of gender to disclose that gender in itself is an imitation with no origin. These "stylized repetition of acts" (ibid., 191) are regulated by ritualized cultural protocols that discursively create a fabricated "gender reality". Here, the naturalized knowledge of gender as a stable category is actually a truth effect of a compulsory heterosexualized discourse of gender that reifies the causal relationship between sex and gender (if "male", then masculine). This gendered policing is further maintained by delegitimizing and punishing bodies that do not fit within the gender binary narrative. Khubchandani (2023) decolonial approach to drag includes: (1) exposing the neo-liberal logic of hyper-professionalization that sets heavily curated looks and choreography as 'real drag' for profit-making, (2) identifying ways in which gender binary as a colonial tool is used to marginalize and discipline those who do not fit within its boundaries, (3) recognizing that gender is not just the primary identity manipulated or transformed on the stage, but there is also an interplay of presenting identity categories of race, class, ethnicity, or religion, (4) loosening our parameters of what counts as 'drag' to incorporate drag performances that are sidelined (p. 25 – 41). I use both these concepts to analyse my data to understand the formative role of gender and sexuality in the drag scene in Kathmandu.

Chapter 5: Mapping Nepal's Drag Scene

"Nepal holds first-ever drag show," reads the title of a YouTube video posted in 2019 by the AFP News, one of the world's major news agencies. The video goes on to display behind-the-scenes clips of drag performers getting ready, the venue of the event, and a short interview with the organizer and drag performer, Meghna Lama, and transgender activist Rukshana Kapali. Named *Dragmandu,* a quirky combination of drag and Kathmandu, the drag show was hosted in 2019 in Pink Tiffany in Thamel – Kathmandu's first openly LGBTQIA+ friendly restaurant/ bar. The event showcased drag artists from the USA and Nepal, who danced and lip-synced to pop songs in front of a live audience (Brush, 2019). While *Dragmandu* is widely known as the "first-ever" drag show in Nepal, my research shows that drag performances and shows have a more extended, more complex history. In this chapter, I will discuss the interviews with three main organizers of publicly held drag shows in Kathmandu, and one participant, who was part of a private drag show in 2001, which has not been previously documented before. I will use Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity and Khubchandani (2023) decolonial approach to drag to analyse my interviews. While these four drag shows have been central in the drag scene in Kathmandu, there have been several independent drag performances that have not been documented below. These drag performances have taken place in private conferences, pride parades, open mics, opening ceremonies of events, etc. For my research, I have specifically looked into drag shows rather than independent performances, however this does not take away the fact that these singular performances are also a part of the drag scene.

2001: Drag Queen Show, Members of the Blue Diamond Society

In my interview with Nina, a transgender activist and a member of BDS, she recalls her first experience of performing in a drag show:

> It was the first time I was in a woman's attire … with the wig, clothes, and makeup. I was very happy. This happiness was my goal for performing in the drag show … For me, it was more about how I could become a girl since I had never gotten the opportunity to become one, you know? During rehearsals, while walking on the street [to go to the venue] … Now, obviously, at the time, I was young, and since I was dressed

> like a girl, men would look at me. I would feel very happy (Nina, 2024, translated from Nepali).

For Nina, the drag show organized at Vaishali Hotel in Thamel, Kathmandu, in 2001 was the first space that allowed her to openly express her gender identity as a transwoman and enjoy being seen and desired as one. At the time, she, along with most of the other participants of the show, publicly presented themselves in men's clothing despite identifying as transwomen. Nina says,

> 23 years ago, it was difficult. Nobody was visible. We did not have LGBT organizations. BDS was not even established yet. We did not know if people like us even existed … We were all transwomen [performing at the drag show], but we did not live in the attire of a woman. We had short hair. And, when we returned home [after practice], we returned as men (Nina, 2024, translated from Nepali).

The drag show Nina participated in took place in 2001 with the lead of Sunil Babu Pant, who months later founded BDS. At the time, the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal had no legal recognition. It was not until six years later, in 2007, that such a recognition was permitted by the Supreme Court of Nepal. The event was also being hosted in the backdrop of increasing violence against gender and sexual minorities, lack of social acceptance and knowledge towards HIV/ AIDS and other STIs, and proactive conversations around formalizing LGBTQIA+ organizing through the registration of BDS as an NGO. Given the legal and social barriers, Nina explained that most of the performers in the show, who were transwomen, had not come out to their families or their friends, and some were even married or pressured to be in marital relationships with women. They were also worried about becoming victims of transphobic violence when they were publicly dressed in drag. This was one of the reasons why the drag show was an invite-only event and was not openly publicized since most performers were worried about being outed. Even today, most people aware of the drag scene in Nepal do not know about the 2001 drag show due to the lack of documentation and consider 2019 as the 'start' of drag shows in Nepal.

Initially, it was difficult for the organizers to find a venue to practice and host their event. The final venue, Vaishali Hotel, was selected after many rejections by other venues, which refused to host the event due to the nature of the show. Since the performers could not practice in their

homes or any other places, Nina informed that they would gather at a friend's house to practice. The friend was also a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and was accepted and supported by his family, which allowed him to use his space for the drag performers. The final event was mostly attended by civil society members working closely with the HIV/ AIDS crisis in Nepal, close networks of Sunil Babu Pant, members of Embassies in Nepal and organizations like the United Nations (UN) and USAID. Most of the performers' family members were not present.

The initial goal of organizing the drag show was to raise awareness of the HIV/AIDS endemic and generate funds for it. The performers were primarily transwomen based in Kathmandu who had befriended each other through their close-knit networks and in cruising sites in *Ratna Park*. Since most did not have resources such as makeup, clothes, or wigs for their performance or knew how to use them, they relied on each other and the donated items Sunil Babu Pant had received from his time in Europe. The drag show included performances advocating condom use, short dramas, lip-syncs, and dances to English, Hindi, and Nepali songs. In our interview, Nina reminisced about her dance performance, for which she had written a song that talked about HIV/AIDS and the importance of practicing safer sex.

While the main objective for the organizers was HIV/ AIDS awareness and raising funds for it, the drag show meant more than that to those involved. Khubchandani highlights that for transwomen, drag can provide an "opportunity to try on other kinds of femininity that they do not have access to in their quotidian survival work" (2023, p. 54). As most of the performers of the drag show had not come out to their families as 'transwomen', and their public visibility risked their safety, the event allowed them to embody and express their femininity and sexuality through their performance. Nina further adds that the show facilitated community-building that let LGBTQIA+ people, especially transwomen, meet and support each other and celebrate at a time when such visibility was not possible outside the show's premises. She shares,

> Our cultural celebrations are related to families. For many of us [LGBTQIA+ individuals], we cannot join our families, stay with them, dance, or eat. This is not a possibility. So, for our community, drag shows are one of the ways to celebrate ourselves and celebrate it together (Nina, 2024, translated from Nepali).

In Nepal, as elsewhere, many of the cultural celebrations include family gatherings, which are not accessible for LGBTQIA+ individuals whose families do not accept due to their identity.

Nina's experience highlights the potential of drag shows that go beyond entertainment and serve as a venue for communal celebration, awareness raising, acceptance, and building a sense of family within the LGBTQIA+ community.

It is important to discuss how the Anglophonic term "drag" was adopted and circulated in the 2001 drag show in Kathmandu, a context where Nepali is mostly spoken among people. Nina recalls that, at the time, the word 'drag' or 'drag queen', was not as popular in Kathmandu, and most performers were unaware of what it meant. She explained that it was the organizer, Pant, who had told them about drag as an event that could be leveraged to collect funds for social issues. Since Pant had obtained his higher education in Belarus, his understanding of drag was based on his experience there. At the time, the need for HIV/AIDS awareness and funding was gaining momentum in Kathmandu (Knight, 2014, p. 113), which made them decide to organize, as Nina puts it, a 'drag queen' show to collect funds for it (Nina, 2024). Seira Tamang, in her work *Patriarchy and Homo-erotic Behavior,* explains that the use of the word 'drag' by some participants in her research was indicative of the transnational knowledge exchange that was taking place due to the presence of international networks and friends of BDS in Nepal. A similar trend is also seen during the organizing of the 2001 drag show, where Pant's experience abroad brought in the idea of organizing a 'drag queen' show. However, Nina clarifies that for her, the participation was not about performing as a drag queen' since she did not identify as one (ibid.). She says,

> We had decided to do a drag queen show, and we knew we had to perform. I sort of understood what it meant, but I knew I was not one [a drag queen]. I participated because I could dress in a woman's attire, wear makeup, and have men look at me. I performed for my happiness (Nina, 2024, translated from Nepali).

For Nina, the focus of her participation was not on defining her performance category as a "drag queen performance" or otherwise but on using the drag platform as an opportunity to express her femininity and sexuality openly. However, the emphasis on categorizing all the transwomen participants performing in Vaishali Hotel as 'drag queens' performing in a 'drag queen show' reflects an emerging binary understanding of 'drag' in Kathmandu, which has been influenced by the Western conceptualisation of it through transnational knowledge exchange happening at the time. This, as seen above, is aided by Pant's experience abroad, which shaped his understanding of drag that served as the basis while conceptualising and

organizing the event. As discussed in Chapter 2, the globalized dominant image of drag is mostly structured around a colonial dichotomy of ‘drag kings’ and ‘drag queens’, which are assumed to be performed mainly by cis-women and cis-men, respectively. This binary model sets performing as the opposite gender as the standard to measure the success of the drag performance (Halberstam, 1998; Schacht and Underwood, 2004; Berg, 2021; Khubchandani, 2023). This excludes any performer that does not fit into its essentialist framing of a ‘good drag’ and restricts the agency of the performer who wants to explore diverse gender embodiments and identities through their performance. While the 2001 show challenges the dominant idea that only cisgender men can perform as drag queens, it also simultaneously imposes the category ‘drag queen’ on participants like Nina, who may not fully resonate with it. Khubchandani points out that some transwomen performers avoid using the term ‘drag’ to reject the transphobic assumption that they are men "cross-dressing" on the stage (2023, p. 51). Even though this may have not been Nina's reasoning, the imposition that all transwomen performing in the 2001 drag show are ‘drag queens’ takes away their agency to define, or not define their performance. It also limits the local contextualization of ‘drag’ and new gender possibilities by restricting any nuanced exploration beyond the binary conceptualization. Additionally, boxing diverse gender performances on a drag platform within the categories of ‘drag queen’ and ‘drag king’ mirrors the neo-colonial euro-western construction of gender as a binary. Historically and even today, this binary structure is used to establish and enforce racial differences and consolidate patriarchal power (E. Abruzzo, 2022; O’Sullivan, 2021; Khunchandani, 2023). By imposing the ‘drag queen’ category on all those performing, the 2001 drag show uses the same colonial logic of gender binary to marginalize non-conforming identities and box them within its boundaries.

This brings us to an essential discussion about what types of performances count as ‘drag’ and whether they should be included in drag shows. Are performances by transwomen, who do not identify as "drag queens", dancing, lip-syncing, and enacting short drama for HIV awareness "real drag"? Khubchandani empahsizes that a form of decolonizing drag is loosening its framework and challenging its globalized, binary image that only includes drag kings and queens (2023, p. 23). This broader approach allows for including numerous forms of performances, artistic practices, cultural contexts, and gender categories that are often dismissed as ‘not drag. I argue that Nina's performance belongs on the drag stage, which provided her the space to explore, celebrate, and express her gender and sexuality openly in a context where non-normative bodies are inflicted with structural and physical violence. Her

performance uses the routinized elements of femininity, such as wigs, makeup, and feminine attire, to reclaim it and challenge the cisnormative idea that 'femininity' is an inherent property of those assigned female at birth. This denaturalizes the assumed stable characteristic of gender and the supposed causal relationship between gender, assigned sex, and performance, revealing instead its performative and constructed nature. However, this does not imply that all performances by transgender individuals should be categorized as 'drag'. The aim is not to confine every gender-dissident performance within the Westernized category of 'drag' but to argue that when gender performances that do not fit into the dominant idea of binary gender crossing appear on the drag stage, they rightfully belong there. This also allows us to consider the dynamic nature of performers' identities, which are not fixed, but they "move and shift" across different spaces (ibid.). A transgender performer can choose to perform in drag shows as a drag queen while also participating in a national pageant as a woman. Therefore, recognizing the fluidity and diversity of gender embodiments within drag not only expands its boundary but also serve as a powerful decolonial move to challenge the sex/gender binary system and legitimize performances that are often excluded.

June 2019: : Dragmandu, Pink Tiffany

Eighteen years after the BDS-organized private drag show, Meghna Lama, a transgender woman and the previous owner of Pink Tiffany, Nepal's first–ever openly LGBTQIA+ friendly restaurant/ bar, co-organized *Dragmandu*. With a quirky combination of 'drag and 'Kathmandu' in its name, this drag event held in Pink Tiffany in the Pride Month of June 2019 is widely known as the 'first-ever' drag show in Nepal. Even though the 2001 private drag show suggests the existence of underground drag events prior to this, *Dragmandu* marks as a pivotal shift in the drag scene in Nepal due to its public nature. Although I was unable to interview Lama due to her relocation from Nepal, in our interview, Avnish, one of the organizing members of *Dragmandu,* and host of his own drag show, *Queermandu Drag Night* in 2023, recalled,

> I think this is how it [the drag show] happened. There were 2-3 foreigner queer guys who wanted to do something related to drag. They reached out to Meghna and said that they should do a drag show the following week and, she agreed (Avnish, 2024).

Noah Emerson, a volunteer from the U.S. living in Kathmandu, proposed to Lama the idea of organizing a drag show at Pink Tiffany (Brush, 2019). His interview appeared in the Kathmandu Post (TKP), a widely read national daily newspaper, where he discussed his involvement in the drag show. TKP is also one of the few existing resources that documented *Dragmandu,* with their article titled *A Nepali Drag Show with an American Touch* (Brush, 2019). In his interview for TKP, Emerson stated that even though him and another U.S. resident, who performed in *Dragmandu,* were "not good representation of American drag queens", they wanted to "give the Nepali community the space to figure out what drag means for them" (Brush, 2019). He further noted that the drag show was a "significant event for LGBTQIA+ culture in Nepal", where individuals from the community were often discriminated (ibid.). Lama, the owner of Pink Tiffany, added that since such a nature of event had not taken place in Nepal before, and it was Pride Month, she had agreed to go further with hosting it (ibid.). In another interview with Agence France-Presse, Lama explained that her motivation to organize the drag show was to emphasize that Nepali LGBTQIA+ people existed and that she hoped the event would serve as a stepping stone for drag enthusiasts to gain more opportunities (Agence France Presse, 2019).

Despite the small space of the LGBTQIA+ bar, around a hundred people, mainly from the Nepali LGBTQIA+ community, gathered to watch the performers and celebrate Pride Month. One of the attendees of *Dragmandu,* Lex Limbu wrote in his blog that, on the night, there were around 2-3 participants who performed (Limbu, 2019). He also shared that the audience themselves wore outfits and makeup that added to entertainment of the drag event (ibid.). The drag performers primarily included Emerson and another U.S resident volunteering in Nepal in feminine clothing and make-up, dancing and lip-syncing to pop songs (Brush, 2019). The event did not have a specific layout and had makeup artists come in to do the makeup for the performers (Avnish, 2024). Since the bar had limited space with more than hundred attendees, the participants had to perform in a small platform, which made it difficult for the audience to watch the show (Limbu, 2019; Avnish, 2024).

While Emerson's intentions might have been well-meaning, the positioning of the American drag performers as space providers for the Nepali community to explore drag, subjugates local efforts by reinforcing the neo-colonial discourse that non-Western countries need foreign intervention to define their own cultural practices. Emerson, in his interview, frames Nepal as a country that discriminates against gay and transgender individuals to emphasize the cultural

impact of his proposed idea of *Dragmandu* as a "significant event for the LGBTQI culture in Nepal" (Brush, 2019). This framing of the drag show as a stand-alone significant event for the Nepali LGBTQIA+ culture in a discriminatory country (1) dismisses the local histories of drag and gender performance in Nepal, and (2) minimizes the long-standing local activism, legal and cultural shifts that made the event possible in the first place. It is agreeable that *Dragmandu* facilitated a space for Nepali LGBTQIA+ individuals to celebrate together in a public space, and showcased the existing interest of drag performances in Kathmandu, however the assumption that such a space did not exist before, is false. The 2001 private drag show, albeit underground, is one of the examples that suggest that pre-existing roots of Nepali drag culture did exist. In addition, the notion that the American performers – who, as Emerson puts, were "not good representation of American drag queens" (ibid.), would give a space to Nepali drag performers characterizes Nepali individuals as a part of an American-led project than as collaborative partners. It further constructs LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nepal as passive subjects who require paternalistic guidance from their American performers to explore drag. This narrative of drag shows as 'the West led' projects run the risk of reproducing the discourse that Nepali LGBTQIA+ individuals are 'brainwashed' by the Western media and ideals, which is often used to delegitimize local LGBTQIA+ efforts (Kunwar. 2023).

Additionally, if not for the shift in the legal landscape towards a less discriminatory LGBTQIA+ law in Nepal and consistent local advocacy, it would have been challenging to organise an event of such a nature in the first place. We can observe a drastic difference between the 2001 drag show and *Dragmandu.* For one, in the 2001 show, due to the concern of privacy and safety, many of the participants wanted the show to be a private one. Additionally, most of the audience members of the show were individuals from Embassies in Nepal, civil society members, or close networks of the organizer. In contrast, the 2019 show was publicly held and advertised, and most of the audience members were Nepali LGBTQIA+ individuals. In my interview with Vishal, a member of BDS, and the co-organizer of the 2023 BDS drag show, he pointed out the reasons behind this shift:

> In 2001, BDS had recently started, and not a lot of people were aware about homosexuality. The LGBTQIA+ community was not ready. We were scared. If there was media present, we would hide in the toilet. We thought that people like us did not exist and that we were the only one from the community. Also, in our country homosexuality was never criminalized. We never had the article 377 like the one

> previously in India that criminalized homosexuality. We should consider ourselves lucky. Then, we had the development in 2007, when we had the decision from the Supreme Court to include *tesrolingi* [third gender] in legal documents. Media has also played an important role in advocacy. If being LGBTQIA+ was criminalised in our law, we would have not been able to organize all of this. Our friends in Bangladesh and Pakistan are not able to organise drag shows in their countries. The law has helped a lot. (, 2024).

While the law related to LGBTQIA+ rights in Nepal has improved over time, as shown in chapter 3, it is important to remember that it still is not the most ideal.

February 2023: Queermandu Drag Night, Queermandu

"I really wanted to be a part of a drag show. However, after *Dragmandu* in 2019, nothing was happening in Kathmandu. So, I decided that if I wanted to attend one, I had to organize one myself", says Avnish, the organizer of *Queermandu Drag Night,* in our interview (2024). Apart from being an organizer, Avnish also performs as Momolicca, who he describes as a "glamorous, moody, witty and slutty" drag queen (Avnish, 2024). Avnish draws his inspiration for drag through RuPaul Drag Race, an American reality competition, and says he gets half of his personality from the queens on the show. In Avnish's view, drag is a performance art that can be showcased in different formats such as regular events, weekly drag brunches, a competition, or a show specifically organized for a political purpose. He further adds,

> Drag is expressing your gender energies. By definition, it is exaggerating one's masculine, or feminine energy, or both kinds of energies. If you want to portray your feminine energy as a feminine character, you always overexaggerate it. For example, if a woman says, 'hi', a drag queen will say, 'hiii', you actually make the syllables longer, you play with it. You make it big and bold and, in that way, it is art. You cannot just wear makeup, and a beautiful dress and walk on the stage and be like, 'I am a drag queen'. You need to have an idea of what your drag character is like. If I ask you a question, you should know how your character would reply (Avnish, 2024).

Avnish's understanding of drag emphasizes on the need for performers to create a drag persona that uses 'camp' as a style of performance to exaggerate, theatricalize and use humour to perform femininity, or masculinity. He draws a distinction between cross-dressing and everyday gender expression from drag, by highlighting the importance of 'over exaggeration' of gendered gestures, voice tonalities, and aesthetics such as clothes and makeup as a crucial performance mode for the drag performers. He further adds that through drag, performers get a platform to express their gender outside of what's expected of them in their daily lives, and can help serve as a site of experimentation and awareness of their gender identity. Before hosting his drag event, Avnish was also a part of organizing the Pink Tiffany event *Dragmandu* in 2019. In our conversation, he, however, said that for him the Pink Tiffany event was "barely drag". He explained:

> I do not count the Pink Tiffany drag show as 'drag' because it was barely drag. It was not very well managed. I was there, I was helping them. I do know that drag is an expression of true self, and you really do not need a wig, or something else, but no one [the feminine performers] was wearing a wig. They did not shave. Multiple people were just putting on some makeup and expressing themselves, but it was not top-tier drag. I compared the performances to what I saw online, and it did not meet the calibre of other countries. So, I decided if I wanted to see a drag show, I need to organize it myself (Avnish, 2024).

For Avnish, 'top-tier' drag includes a proper stage, a planned event with a layout, a strong management team, who have the song list ready for the smooth flow of the event, and well-rehearsed performers. While he acknowledges that drag performers do not necessarily need a wig to perform, for him, a professional drag performer, especially a drag queen, should shave and wear wig to put forward a 'top tier' performance. This view is reiterated when he discusses how a 'full-fledged queen' should know how to do her makeup, style her clothes and hair, know how to walk, talk, throw shade and sew if there is a wardrobe malfunction. In his word, "a full-fledged queen should know everything" (Avnish, 2024). For him, all these elements are important for "branding [one's] drag character" (Avnish, 2024). When asked if makeup was important for drag queens, he explained that makeup was a signature element of one's drag character that helped in communicating the type of personality the drag performer's character had. He says,

> Your makeup speaks who you are most of the time. The first impression of the drag person you get is from their makeup. You can basically tell they are a soft queen, or they are a bitchy queen, or messy queen through their makeup (Avnish, 2024).

He admits that curating a drag look can be expensive, and one look can require up to Nrs. 10,000 to buy proper heels, makeup, breastplates, and wigs. However, he explains that, often when drag queen performers cannot afford these materials, he tries to lend them the resources that owns which he has invested in over the years. The performers also tend to borrow and share their performance materials from one another. Some of them also use the wigs and dresses of their transgender friends who "dress up as women" (Avnish, 2024) for sex work.

Influenced by RuPaul's Drag Race and unsatisfied with the 2019 *Dragmandu* event, Avnish decided to organize the *Queermandu Drag Night*, four years later, in Temple Tree Restaurant and Lounge Bar in Thamel, Kathmandu in February 2023. The drag event was organized through Avnish's LGBTQIA+ tour company, *Queermandu,* which at the time, was unregistered. He explained that he had been working for the past five years as a tour guide in Kathmandu, however after COVID-19, he lost his job. Due to this, he started an Instagram page *Queermandu_np* to informally provide guided tours to LGBTQIA+ tourists in Kathmandu. Currently, his tour company is registered with the Tourism Board of Nepal, and most of his clients are gay, white men visiting the country. When asked what his main motivation was for organizing the show, he shared that through the show, he wanted to create more opportunities for himself and his business. He explains,

> If I keep on organizing these events, it will increase the value of my company. From a business perspective, if this gets popular and I am still working in this company, within ten years, I can branch out and open a gay bar here in Kathmandu. I can then use the bar as a venue to organize drag nights once a week. It also increases the credibility of the company by showcasing that we are not just a tour company that works for money, but we also believe in creating space. These events also show people that Nepal is one of the safest countries and we have young people who are actually interested in shaping queer culture and queer art. It also helps me learn more about drag and improve my own performance skills and scope (Avnish, 2024).

For Avnish, both his business and organizing drag show mutually benefit each other. Not only does the drag show help him promote his business, but his business also allowed him to organize *Queermandu Drag Night.* He successfully fundraised 70, 000 Nepalese Rupees (Nrs.), largely through his clients who had previously sought his services from his tour company. He was able to make the drag event free of cost for attendance because of this fund and collective support from people in his network who wanted to get involved. He explained:

> I had people reach out to me, saying they wanted to get involved. For example, I know the chairperson of House of Fashion [a modeling agency], we are friends online. She expressed interest in the event. And, then I made her one of the judges and she had a beautiful gift hamper for the top four queens, which included a *lehenga* [traditional attire]. Then, there is a designer friend of mine, Shashank Gurung, from Shashank designs, he provided some makeup items and small gifts. Pink Tiffany provided a gift voucher. All of this was voluntary (Avnish, 2024).

Avnish further added that people were interested in collaborating for two main reasons: (1) they wanted to be more inclusive in their business and promote it, and (2) Avnish, himself, had a good relationship with them and had indirectly helped some of them with their business. For example, due to the collaboration, the winner of his drag show got the opportunity to be featured as a model in the House of Fashion. Similarly, Avnish, for years, has been promoting Pink Tiffany among his friends and clients from the tour company so their help with the gift vouchers for the winners is a part of the relationship they share. This culture of helping each other during organizing events is not just prevalent in Avnish's show, but also seen in other drag shows discussed below. Even the venue Temple Tree Restaurant and Lounge Bar was recommended to him by the current owner of Pink Tiffany, who knew the venue manager.

The *Queermandu Drag Night* event included 11 drag queens who competed against each other for a cash prize of Nrs. 10, 000 and Nrs. 5, 000 for the first and second winners respectively. The event was organized as a competition that included three rounds (1) solo dance performances with a song of their choice, (2) lip sync battle to a Nepali and Hindi song among the top four participants, (3) lip-sync battle between the top two, after which the winner was announced. Avnish explained that he prioritised the competition format because he believed that this style would "harness the talent of the performers" and encourage them to think outside of the box and use unique styles and different stories to perform better than the others (Avnish,

2024). It also included special performances by other members of the LGBTQIA+ community as a part of the opening act. The show had a small round of catwalk, where the participant with the 'best runway walk' was selected and given a prize.

Around 500 individuals attended the show, and it mostly included Nepali LGBTQIA+ people, aged 20 to 30 living in the capital city. There were non- Nepali audiences as well, including a group of 30 foreigners who, as Avnish informed, were learning Buddhism in Nepal. Avnish used both Queermandu and his personal Instagram, and contacts to promote his show and search for participants. Most of the participants were mainly from Kathmandu with a few, who traveled to the capital city just for the competition. Avnish personally reached out to individuals who he thought would be interested and asked them to participate. There were no selection criteria included and whoever expressed their interest was invited to perform. However, Avnish pointed out that, for his next show, he will have a selection process to ensure that only a total of eight participants perform so that the show is not too long. Another reason, for him to introduce a selection process, is to make sure that the show has the best performers who have a fully realized drag character. According to him, the process would include the interested participants sending in a small introduction describing their drag character and participating in a live audition, where they would need to present their performance for the show.

Avnish's understanding and vision for drag shows organized by his tour company *Queermandu* is informed by the neo-liberal model of professionalism often observed in RuPaul's Drag Race. In his interview, he shares that RuPaul Drag Race is his inspiration that has shaped his view on drag. This influence is evident in his future plans to conduct auditions to select the 'best' drag queens, a process similar to the model used in the reality show. Similarly, his desire to curate a 'top-tier' drag show with 'full-fledged' queens emulates the goal of the Drag Race, where the drag queens are repeatedly told to perfect their look to maintain the illusion of the binary gender crossing (Khubchandani, 2023, p. 97). Under the neo-liberal rhetoric of professionalism, both the organizers of drag shows expect drag queens to not only polish their lip-sync performance but also to perfect their skills in doing their makeup, and styling their hair and clothes to even qualify for the show. The competition format is not just about the drag performance, but "branding of one's drag character" (Avnish, 2024) into a polished and overly curated persona. Even though Avnish's goal with the format is to push the participants to think outside of the box, the end goal remains for the participants to perfect themselves within a regulated and narrow space of what 'top-tier' drag means. The individual responsibility is placed on the

performer who has to ensure that they improve themselves to stand out from the rest and present a flawless performance.

Munoz (1997) describes this type of drag as a commercialized drag that produces a "sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption" (p. 85). In this commodified version of drag, the drag performer (usually a glamorous drag queen) is meant to be a palatable entertainer who is tolerated by the audience and does not challenge the status quo. Avnish's emphasis on heavily curated looks, branding, and the competitive format of the show, sets a standard to define what a 'proper' drag queen should look like. This neoliberal rhetoric of professionalism creates visibility only for a 'sanitized' version of drag, while simultaneously dismissing spontaneous and 'unpolished' performances as 'not drag'. This exclusivity in his understanding of drag is evident when he critiques the Pink Tiffany drag event, *Dragmandu,* as 'barely drag' since the performers did not use wigs or shave before performing. This expectation of 'hairlessness' reinforces a racialized beauty standard for femininity, where white, euro-centric ideals of a hairless (assigned) 'female' body are set as the desired norm to further naturalize gendered and racial differences (Khubchandani, 2023, p. 40). The flattened and depoliticized version of drag transforms it into a consumable product that is targeted to appeal to the entertainment of a wider audience, including Nepali LGBTQIA+ individuals and tourists. This shifts the attention away from the subversive potential of drag, instead focusing on perfecting performances that are popular among the audience and thus, are profitable.

This commodified drag is also used as a marketing tool for Avnish's tour company *Queermandu* to promote it as a business that creates spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals in Kathmandu. In his interview, he explicitly spoke about his plans to leverage the popularity of his drag shows to open a gay bar in Kathmandu and use it as a venue for more regular drag shows. He explained that this would help him showcase that *Queermandu* is not "just a tour company that works for money, but also [believes] in creating spaces [for LGBTQIA+ people" (Avnish, 2024). He added, that the drag events in his envisioned gay bar would also "show people that Nepal is one of the safest countries [for LGBTQIA+ people]" and has people interested in drag (Avnish, 2024). While opening a gay bar might help solve the issue of constantly searching for venues to organize drag shows and facilitate a physical space for LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies to gather, it is important to question which class strata of LGBTQIA+ individuals this 'space' caters to. Manalansan (2005) argues that the increasing visibility of 'gay culture' in bars, restaurants, and businesses uses the neo-liberal concept of

'freedom' for LGBTQIA+ people to reserve it to only those who have the privacy and the capital to consume (p. 151) This celebrated visibility and individualized freedom of LGBTQIA+ individuals simultaneously shifts the attention away from existing structural violence against the marginalized individuals with the LGBTYQIA+ community (p. 151 – 152). This neo-liberal discourse of LGBTQIA+ visibility and freedom is evident when Avnish emphasizes how the drag shows in Kathmandu help promote the image of Nepal as one of the safest countries for LGBTQIA+ people. However, as discussed in law…

While *Queermandu Drag Night* did not have selection criteria for the drag queens, the show was organized in a way that drag kings and masculine performers could not compete. Avnish explained:

> Me having this space for competition for queens does not take the space away from the kings. This is what I believe. It is a competition, you know? In some format, you can put the two together, but because my show has songs with feminine energy, with females singing the song, I do not think it is fair to have two different identities, two different genders. I personally believe it is a wrong mix. Also, if you look, there are not enough kings. I only know like three kings in Kathmandu. Some of them are also not fully fledged and some are not competing. So, right now, we only have queens, but I am always open if any drag king wants to perform on my show. They can perform as a special performance, but they cannot compete. Even for *Queermandu Drag Night*, we had *Phoenix Raj,* who is a drag king perform as a special performance. He also was one of the judges of the show (Avnish, 2024).

The decision to have a 'drag queen' only show because they are "two different identities and two different genders" (Avnish, 2024) reifies the gender binary. The idea that 'drag queens' and 'drag kings' are essentially different and need to compete separately naturalizes gendered differences, where gender is not seen as a performance, but a stable category. This reification of gender binary through 'drag king' and 'drag queen' categories is interesting to note since the performers in *Queermandu Drag Night* themselves are of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations including, transgender, non-binary and gay individuals. This shows the entrenchment of gender as a binary, where even in spaces with diverse identities exist, bodies are still policed to fit into its normative view. Similarly, as seen in the 2001 show, it imposes

the category of ‘drag queen’ on performers who might not identify as one. This risks marginalizing and even erasing drag performances that do not fit within its definition.

Even though the Kathmandu drag scene currently has relatively more publicly open, self-identified drag kings and masculine drag performers than they did when *Queermandu Drag Night* was organized, Avnish’s observation that there are ‘not enough kings’ in Kathmandu is important to discuss. When I asked the reason behind the smaller number of drag kings in Kathmandu in my interview with a transgender drag king performer, he reflected:

> There is a lack of knowledge. A lot of transgender men do not know what a drag king is. Actually, a lot of people do not know that there are drag kings too and it is not just drag queens. Before I started performing, I, myself did not know drag kings existed. I had drag queen friends who told me about drag kings and showed me their videos online. Now, whenever I perform as a drag king, I tell people there are drag kings as well. And, they are like, ‘Drag kings exist too?’ (A, 2024).

This phenomenon of less visibility of drag kings is not just an occurrence in Nepal, but also speaks to the drag scene globally (Halberstam, 1998; Haan, 2024). Halberstam in *Female Masculinities* argues that drag kings have historically been less visible because the dominant understanding of masculinity is that it is “non-performative” (1998, p. 234). What this means is that in a male-dominant social structure, while femininity is seen as a performance that ceases to exist if not repetitively performed, the performative nature of masculinity remains invisible. Here, masculinity, specifically hegemonic masculinity represented by white, cisgendered, heterosexual men is constructed as ‘real’ and ‘stable’, naturalizing the causal relationship between gender (man), assigned sex (male) and sexuality (heterosexuality). Drag Kings through their performance of masculinity have the potential to disrupt this naturalized idea, however, are not easily recognized due to the assumption that masculinity does not need to be performed. This understanding of masculinity as inherent, as something that just exist and is not actively performed is evident in the experience described by A, where individuals he met were surprised knowing that masculinity could be performed. Another transmasculine drag king performer expanded on their experience performing in drag shows in Kathmandu, they shared:

> To be flashy, in general, is not my style. I usually dress in shirt, and jeans and comfortable shoes for my performance. My makeup is also as natural as possible. I want to look like myself. However, I look so different compared to how much work other performers [feminine performers] put on for their looks. Sometimes, I question, should I even do drag? I look like a fakeout doing drag. I look like I am not putting any effort, but I know for myself that I am. Some people question my drag sense, but I am like, I do it for comfort (B, 2024).

B's experience of doubt and feeling like a 'fakeout' drag due to their choice of a minimalist and natural drag style is reflective of the expectations the audiences have with drag performers. Since their drag style does not follow the expected glamourous and showy style, often seen in the aesthetics of feminine performers and drag queens in Kathmandu, their drag style is questioned, and they are perceived to not be making an effort. Here, an exaggerated, 'flashy', overly curated style is set as a reference point for the standard drag style, which when not met by B, marginalizes their performance as 'not real'. Halberstam (1998) explains that since camp is used to expose the performativity of gender, it is difficult for performers of masculinity to use it since masculinity is dominantly seen as non-performative (p. 238). While camp through 'outrageous performance of femininity' can expose its performative nature, such an effect is not produced when performing masculinity. Due to this, drag kings use kinging instead of camp, an "almost antitheatrical performance", where an emphasis is given on "reluctant and withholding kind of performance" (ibid., 239). B's style of drag can be read as kinging, as well as, using 'realness' as a mode of performance to embody their transmasculine identity, however it is questioned as not doing enough. Therefore, the fewer number of drag kings in Kathmandu when compared with drag queens, reflects the hegemonic construction of masculinity as inherent and naturalized category. This perceived non-performativity not only makes it difficult for drag kings to make spaces for themselves in the drag queen-dominated drag scene, but also expects them to use camp in their performance.

June 2023: Drag Show for Visibility, Blue Diamond Society

Twenty-two years after their first invite-only, private drag show, BDS hosted a public event titled *Drag Show for Visibility* on June 16, 2023, drawing around 400 attendees. The event was supported by Save the Children's global fund in collaboration with Hard Rock Cafe in

Durbarmarg, who were the venue partners. Vishal, a member BDS, explained that the initial idea was to use the budget from the global fund to organise a rally for Pride Month. However, they decided to do a drag show instead as it had been some time since BDS last organized one. As the budget was originally allocated for a rally, it was not sufficient to fund a full-scale drag show event. Vishal says,

> We organized the event with a very limited budget of around Nrs. 300, 000 - 400, 000. Even with the venue, it came down to who could sponsor us. We had held events in Hard Rock Cafe before, and since they were also interested in doing something for Pride Month, we decided to collaborate (Vishal, 2024, translated from Nepali).

Hard Rock Cafe not only provided the space but also donated 5-10 percent of their sales from the event to support BDS. The primary goal of the event was to create a space for LGBTQIA+ people to come together, celebrate Pride, and raise awareness about the challenges they face in their daily lives. BDS' Instagram page, bdsnepal_, promoted the event as one that would "not only entertain but also educate, defying societal norms and challenging perceptions of gender and sexual identity" (BDS, 2023). The event focused on three themes - saving the planet, the visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and human rights. While the emcees of the event highlighted the legal and societal challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, the performers emphasized the importance of climate activism. As a part of the show, they were also required to design a dress made from recycled materials such as bottles, paper, old newspapers, etc. for the ramp walk and introduction round.

Unlike the 2001 show, where the performers participated voluntarily, the *Drag Show for Visibility* required interested individuals to apply through an application form circulated through BDS' Facebook page. Around 50 individuals applied (Singh, 2023), of which 21 were shortlisted based on their previous performing experience. They were then called for an audition round that included an interview evaluating their understanding of drag and an opportunity to showcase their performance abilities. Ultimately, 10 participants were selected for the final event, out of which only one was a drag king. These participants underwent a 10-day training that focused on teaching them how to "talk, walk, dress and describe the theme behind their recycled dresses" for the final show (Vishal, 2024). The training was conducted by Sarosy Neupane, the first-ever transwoman to participate in Miss Supranational Nepal 2023, along with Aryan Chaudhary and Sanket Bashyal, who provided the participants with a

background in drag culture and eco-friendly fashion, respectively (Desouzaa, 2023). The final event was divided into three rounds: (1) the ramp walk in upcycled dresses followed by an introduction, where the participants explained the meaning behind their dresses in a loud and enthusiastic manner often seen in pageants; (2) a talent round featuring performances to Hindi, Nepali, and English songs; (3) and finally, a lip-sync battle between the top six finalists. Shortly afterward, three winners were announced and awarded prizes by the judges, which included Miss Universe Nepal 2017 winner Nagma Shrestha, fashion designer Sonam Subba Limbu, and makeup artist Divinish Tamang.

The event was attended mainly by BDS' partner organizations, embassy representatives from countries like the US and Germany, ambassadors, Nepali policymakers, social media influencers, members, and allies of the LGBTQIA+ community. The drag show not only created a space for celebration, but the presence of some of these audience members also helped BDS and the participants to gain more collaboration opportunities. Vishal shares:

> "We have a project called Right Here Right Now (RHRN). We had been trying to convince them since last year to support us in organizing Miss Pink [a national beauty pageant for Nepali transwomen], but they were adamant that we should not proceed with it. However, after attending the *Drag Show for Visibility,* they agreed to approve Miss Pink"s budget. (Vishal, 2024, translated from Nepali)

According to Vishal, the drag show'"s emphasis on LGBTQIA+ visibility and climate activism helped the members of the RHRN project recognize that Miss Pink's platform could also be more than just a "fashion show" (Vishal, 2024). It could raise awareness of transgender issues and increase their representation in mainstream media and beyond. He informed that the Miss Pink event would be organized a month later, in May, on the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia, Interphobia, and Aphobia (IDAHOBITA) in Kathmandu, where the winners of the drag show would have the opportunity to perform. Similarly, he added that some of the participants will be collaborating with Save the Children on recycling-related projects. The drag show has set off a domino effect in Kathmandu, facilitating more spaces for LGBTQIA+ people to showcase their work and celebrate, create awareness around LGBTQIA+ issues, and challenge the normative world, where cis-heteronormativity and transphobia are deeply entrenched. However, it is essential to ask: Who is left behind?

The pageant format of the *Drag Show for Visibility* is based on the neoliberal logic of professionalism and individualism, which displaces drag performances that do not or cannot fit into its curated, polished model. To begin with, the application process in itself eliminates performers who have no previous experience performing, thereby excluding those who are new to drag or just performance in general. It also assumes that the "individual" they are targeting has access to technology, can read and understand the application form, and is familiar with applying, further privileging only certain socio-economic strata of individuals. In addition, during the audition, the participants are expected to present a competitive performance and demonstrate knowledge on LGBTQIA+ issues, drag, human rights, and the importance of climate activism, and their ability to talk confidently about it. This expectation highlights the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-presentation, where those who cannot perform the intellectual labor or confidence are sidelined. The neoliberal mission of "individual responsibility" is furthered in the training sessions, where participants are expected to work on their "personal development". In an interview with *Gaylaxy* magazine, one of the trainers of the drag show mentioned that a significant part of the training was the "personal development" of the participants, teaching them to be "resilient and outspoken if they wanted to go out into the world and integrate with society" (ibid.). This attention towards being "resilient" and "outspoken" uses the neoliberal language of individualism, where the attention shifts away from the structural barriers and inequality that LGBTQIA+ people face to place the responsibility on the participant to overcome their lack of ability to advocate for their rights.

Similarly, the mandatory 10-day training for the drag performers also creates a standardized, pageant-inspired style of presenting oneself, homogenizing the participants and their modes of performance. This can be observed during the show. For example, in the ramp walk round, aside from the masculine performer, the rest emulate a similar style of walking, makeup, and costume. They all displayed a pageant-style rhythmic walk, using the cross-step technique, where one foot slightly crosses in front of the other. Throughout, they maintained a straight back with hands either swinging by their sides or resting on the waist while walking on the stage in their heels (Waiba, 2023). They also wore strikingly similar makeup with long fake lashes, drawn eyebrows, and colorful eye makeup, paired with upcycled gowns of varying lengths or long skirts with tops. While all these elements are not inherently problematic and can add to the appeal of drag performances, the issue is with its standardization that flattens drag as a performance genre. The professionalization of *Drag Show for Visibility* necessitates

the participants to perform femininity only through a particular cadre of visual elements such as glamorous makeup, model-like walking, crowd-pleasing performances, and pageant-worthy costumes. Anybody who does gender and the identities that co-constitute it differently, either do not make it to the show, or are "trained" (read: disciplined) to fit in. This flattens drag as a performance genre by wiping out variation in the and creating a standard that needs to be achieved that is further exemplified by the winners of the show.

June 2023: Queer Honky-Tonk: A Drag Show

"Queer Honky-Tonk was never meant to be synonymous with drag, but when people hear about drag in Kathmandu, they automatically think Queer Honky Tonk," says Samrat, a queer transmasculine grey-ace drag performer, organizer and curator of Queer Honky - Tonk. Samrat, started Queer Honky-Tonk as a part of their residency project in December 2022, organized by Kaalo 101, a queer/femme-led brave art space. The fully funded residency by Kaalo 101 provides capacitating training to the selected participants to work on their project idea, including learning how to prepare a concept note, write an event proposal, and develop their idea further. Currently, Queer Honky-Tonk is a non-registered queer collective platform that organizes queer performance arts such as drag shows, queer cabaret, and open mic. They also organize queer networking events and workshops on drag that focus on creating a dragsona - drag personality/ character. Samrat draws their inspiration for Queer Honky-Tonk from Fake Mustache Drag and Burlesque Troupe in Calgary, Canada, where they pursued their higher education. The group is a community collective that organizes drag shows every month and connects event organizers with queer performers. While Queer Honky - Tonk is mainly known for its drag shows, Samrat aspires it to be a platform that hosts different queer performance arts and connects the performers to other event organizers.

Samrat shares that the reason behind starting Queer Honky - Tonk was to create more spaces for drag and for LGBTQIA+ individuals to perform and meet each other. They say,

> "When I moved back from abroad to Nepal in 2019, I was completely new. I did not know anybody in the queer scene or any LGBTQIA+ organization. In Nepal, unless you are connected to an organization that works for LGBTQIA+ individuals, you do

not get to meet queer people. At the time, I wished there was a space. I needed a creative outlet. I needed to perform." (Samrat, 2024).

Samrat's first drag performance in Kathmandu was at the 2022 Pride Parade. This performance made them realize the need for a platform for other LGBTQIA+ performers since there are limited spaces in Kathmandu. In Pride Month the following year, they organized their first drag show on 24th June 2023 with eight drag performers that included both masculine and feminine performances. Since then, they have organized two more in 2024, one in February and a recent one after our interview in Pride Month, June. Given the popularity of their events, they also got the opportunity to perform the opening act for the poetry and comedy show of AloK V Menon in February 2024 in Kathmandu. Alok V Menon is an internationally renowned queer comedian and poet.

Unlike *Drag Show for Visibility,* where performers undergo rounds of selection process and have requirements for each round, for Queer Honky - Tonk, participants are selected on a first-come-first-serve basis. Samrat explains that they want the drag performers in their show to not only have a space to perform, but also have fun. They say,

> "I want my shows to be fun and stress-free for performers. I do not want them to worry about rigid things, you know? One of the performers who had taken part in *Drag Show for Visibility* asked me what they were supposed to wear. How many dresses do they need? And I told them to wear whatever they were wearing for their performance, to do their makeup according to it. If they were wearing heels, then to make sure they brought them. If they were wearing regular flats, then to wear that. This performer thought they needed all these different things to perform, and I was like no! People here think that drag show automatically is a competition. But, no, it is not that. It is literally for fun." (Samrat, 2024).

Their shows usually include 7-10 performances by drag performers, who select their own songs, outfits, and makeup. The call for performers is put out on their Instagram page through which participants apply. Once the required number of applicants is received, the application process closes. Samrat explains that the application form is to assess the availability of the performers and is not based on any criteria as they do not have any intention to turn their drag shows into a competition:

> "I am not going to judge people. I don't have the skills and the expertise to do it. RuPaul has set what drag is to the majority of the population. A lot of people come to my show and they are like they know about drag because of RuPaul. Then they see my show, and they are like, okay, that was different. And I tell them that it is different and it is also what drag is. Some people question my drag sense, but I am like, I just do it for comfort. I wear what I am comfortable with and what works for my performance. Drag is not just for competition; drag is also for fun. Drag is literally an expression art form, artistic expression, art performance." (Samrat, 2024)

The comparison of Queer Honky - Tonk with RuPaul's Drag Show highlights the hegemonic influence it has on defining the global image of drag, to the point where any deviation from it is questioned or dismissed. RuPaul's brand of drag, popularized through mainstream media such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, has set a particular aesthetic and competitive format as the dominant understanding of drag. Consequently, many audience members, as Samrat notes, enter alternative drag performances with preconceived notions shaped by RuPaul's influence, often expressing surprise when encountering forms of drag that do not conform to this model. This phenomenon illustrates how RuPaul's dominance has marginalized other styles of drag, as performers like Samrat face skepticism for embracing more personal or comfort-driven approaches that emphasize drag as a form of artistic expression rather than a competitive spectacle. The exclusion of these diverse expressions from the mainstream narrative of drag underscores the broader issue of cultural gatekeeping, where alternative or non-conforming practices are questioned or devalued.

Samrat further shares that given the nascent stage of drag in Kathmandu, it is often financially and logistically difficult to organize the shows. Since they want their shows to be accessible to LGBTQIA+ individuals from different social backgrounds, the first two of their drag shows were free events with a small, recommended donation amount. However, this was not sustainable while organizing the second event in the following year *Queer Honky Tonk: Drag Expressions*, as they had to use the fund collected from the donation of the first event. They explained,

> Labour takes time, money, and energy. You have to make sure that performers get paid accordingly, right? How am I going to make money? How am I going to sustain myself?

> Unfortunately, I have to think about that. I am a freelancer. I am an organizer. I have to cover the costs of performers and other logistic spaces. I need to be able to sustain all these in some way." (Samrat, 2024)

They shared that their upcoming drag show would be ticketed to meet the costs; however, if anybody required any financial assistance to attend the show, they have provisions in place to provide free tickets. Given the financial and logistical constraints, it is difficult to organize drag shows frequently unless they have venue partners. The first drag show *Queer Honky Tonk: A Drag Show,* in June 2023, was hosted with support from Alliance Francaise Kathmandu, a French language and cultural center, Goethe Zentrum Kathmandu, which provides German language classes, and Kaalo 101. Since Samrat had participated in a panel discussion on *Gender and Sexual Identity in Nepal* earlier in the year for Alliance Francaise, they were able to send in their proposal to seek support for their event. For the show, Alliance Francaise provided their venue, whereas Goethe Zentrum financially supported the performers with a small amount to cover their per diem. Similarly, Kaalo 101 provided its space for the second event *Queer Honky Tonk: Drag Expressions,* which took place the following year in February. The audiences of their drag shows are mainly members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Kathmandu. However, the second show was also largely attended by foreigners visiting or living in Kathmandu and from collaborating partners such as the Alliance Francaise and Goethe Zentrum.

Conclusion

From the early invite-only drag show in 2001 to the widely attended public shows in 2024, we witness a drastic difference in the drag scene in Kathmandu. This highlights the various signs of progress in LGBTQIA+ rights, especially legal rights, that have taken place in the country. Through the study, I show that the drag scene in Kathmandu has three main organizers, namely, Queermandu, the Blue Diamond Society and Queer Honky Tonk. While the different shows have provided a platform for LGBTQIA+ individuals to perform and come together, we also see the reinforcement of the neo-colonial, euro-western construction of the gender binary. The categories of 'drag king' and 'drag queen' have been imposed on performers who may not identify with it. There is also the persistence of neo-liberal rhetoric of professionalism, inspired by Western frameworks of drag, in the drag scene in Kathmandu which displaces drag performances that do not or cannot fit into its curated polished model. While the drag scene has drag shows, such as the ones organized by Queer HonkyTonk that focus on the fun and comfort of the performers, such spaces are limited. Despite these critiques, the drag scene in Nepal has been able to create spaces and opportunities for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, the question of inclusivity still remains.

Appendix

Questions to the organizers:

1. What does drag show mean to you?
2. How did you first decide to organise a drag show/ drag performance?
3. Was there any international/ regional/ local inspiration?
4. Can you tell me about [name of the show]? When did you start?
5. Since then, how many drag shows have you organized?
6. What has been your goal with these drag shows? Has that changed over the years?
7. Have you collaborated/ received funding from other organisations to organise these events?
8. How did the funding conversation start?
9. How did you decide on the venue to host it?
10. Who were the participants?
11. How did you find them?
12. Do you have any selection criteria?
13. What was the format of your drag show?
14. Who is your target audience? / What type of people attend your drag shows?
15. How do you reach out to them?
16. How has their reaction been after attending the drag shows?
17. What types of songs and attire are usually selected by the performers?
18. What local elements have you observed in the drag performances?
19. Can you highlight what you see as notable successes of your show?
20. Do you think the drag shows have contributed to the lives of members of the broader LGBTQIA+ community in Kathmandu?
21. Can you recall any stories about the challenges you had to deal with when organizing these shows?
22. Have you faced any challenges regarding the safety of the performers especially from the police during and after the performances?
23. Do you know any drag performances that took place before 2019? Can you tell me more about it.
24. Do you know any other drag shows that are currently being organised in Kathmandu?
25. How are they similar/ different from your shows?
26. How would you describe your relationship with them?
27. How has the landscape of drag in Kathmandu changed since you entered it?
28. Is there anything you would like to add?
29. Is it okay if I contact you in the future to ask any further or clarifying questions?

Questions for the Drag Performers:

1. Can you please tell me your name, age, and preferred pronouns?
2. Were you born and raised in Kathmandu, or did you move here?
3. How did you first come to know of drag/ drag show/ drag performance?

4. Was there any international/ regional/ local inspiration?
5. What do drag shows/performances mean to you? / What constitutes a drag performance for you?
6. What made you decide to do drag?
7. Has this motivation changed over time?
8. How frequently do you perform? Is it with the same organizer? If not, are there any differences/ similarities in your performing experiences?
9. Can you tell us more about your drag persona?
10. How is your self (gender expression) in daily life different/ similar to your self (gender expression) on stage?
11. What made you select this specific name?
12. How do you see your relationship with them?
13. What steps do you take to develop your drag performance/ drag persona?
14. How do you select your outfit, makeup and song choice?
15. How did you plan your performance movements/ dance ?
16. How do you manage the expenses related to these costs?
17. What influenced you to develop this specific drag persona?
18. Has your drag persona changed over time? If yes, what brought these changes?
19. Do you think doing drag has influenced the way you understand your 'self' (gender identity)?
20. How have the audiences responded to your performance?
21. Do you think you make changes to your performance choices based on who you are performing for?
22. Can you recall any stories about the challenges you had to deal with when participating in these shows?

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