
GENDER FLUIDITY TO GENDER EQUALITY: A STUDY OF ANDROGYNES IN HINDU MYTHOLOGIES

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Abstract: Within the LGBTQIA communities, it is the transgender community who are discriminated the most. Devoid of basic rights and a decent living, they either beg or are forced into considering prostitution for a living. But it is a neglected fact that the idea of the ‘Tritiya Prakriti’ or the non-binary being has not only been duly acknowledged but also highly respected in Hindu mythologies. ‘Tritiya Prakriti’ literally translates as ‘third gender’; a being who is neither completely male nor completely female both in terms of the mind as well as the body. In them, both the masculine and the feminine principle co-exist. This makes gender a fluid concept. Androgynous figures are replete in Hindu representation of Gods and Goddesses like Ardhanarishwara, Vishnu, and other mythical figures like Shikhandi, Ila and the like. As it can be seen, Hinduism, since time immemorial, celebrated queer presence but it was with the advent of the heteropatriarchal notions of the British in the colonial period that the queer presence was stigmatized and silenced. Therefore, there is a need to revive that spirit in people of the contemporary society and assert gender equality. Hence, this paper seeks to examine the presence of androgynous figures in Hindu mythologies taking Devdutt Pattanaik’s Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You as the primary text and explore the stereotypical notions that such entities transcend.

Keywords: Androgyny, Equality, Gender Fluidity, Heteropatriarchy.

Introduction: Ever since the inception of Jacques Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction, binary oppositions have collapsed resulting in rejection of absolutism in any form. Though his seminal lecture “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of Human Sciences” (1966) was language-oriented yet it came to be applied to all fields of knowledge like literature, politics, sociology till it also embraced Gender Studies into its bosom. Gender and sexuality were rigid binary structures which were dismantled with the advent of modern strains of thought. Gender has always been problematic since it is regarded as a binary structure although it is fluid in nature.

The need of the hour is the freedom to express a fluid gender identity. Kirstin Cronn-Mills, in her book, *Transgender Lives: Complex Stories, Complex Voices* (2014), introduces the term Gender fluidity and thereby, defines gender-fluid people as “individuals [who] prefer to remain flexible about their gender(s).” (24) Gender fluidity is generally expressed through clothing though behavior forms an equally important part in showcasing the same: “Some dress in ways that reflect both genders at the same time, while others may express one gender and another gender on another day. Some gender-fluid people choose to express a gender that lies between a masculine and feminine presentation.” (24) Some other terms which are interchangeably used used for people

with flexible gender identities are gender queer, third gender, bi-gender and and rogyne. Thus, it is essential to re-read the mythologies and “look for the unwritten letters, the unspoken words” and examine the contemporary relevance of such narratives (Talukdar 26). Some of the androgynes in Hindu epics and mythologies are discussed below:

Ardhanarishwara: There are two stories behind Shiva becoming Ardhanari or half-a-woman: the first one being the story of the sage Bhagiratha invoking the river-goddess Ganga to descend on the Earth to was away the sins of humans and help them enter into their next birth. Though Ganga agreed to it but warned the sage that “the earth would not be able to withstand the force of her fall.” (166) Bhagirathi sought the help of Shiva who trapped the mighty flow of the river in his locks which angered his consort Parvati. When she complained how Shiva could let another woman other than his wife sit on his head, “Shiva embraced her until she merged and became the left half of his body.” (167) the other story concerns Bhrungi, an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva who wished to go round his lord to which Parvati objected explaining him that since Shiva and Parvati are one he cannot worship Shiva alone. But Bhrungi was stubborn. Hence, Parvati sat on Shiva’s left lap, but when Bhrungi tried to squeeze his way between them, Parvati fused into the left half of Shiva’s body but in vain. Bhrungi transformed into a bee and tried to force his way which angers the Goddess who curses Bhrungi that “he would lose that part of his body that emerges from the female seed.” (167) Bhrungi lost all his flesh and blood collapsing on the ground. Realizing his mistake, he apologized to the Goddess who pitying him gave a third leg to stand but his skeletal frame remained to remind him of the significance and position of the Goddess. Ardhanarishwara reinforces gender equality through the fact that both the genders complement and complete each other. They are equal halves of an organic whole. Neither of them is superior. Each has its own role to play. Hence, Shiva is known as the complete being. Ardhanarishwara

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Vishnu: Vishnu took the form of Mohini to enchant gods and demons. Bhasma-asura obtained a boon from Shiva that anyone on whose head he places his hand would be reduced to ashes. When Bhasma tried to kill Shiva, Vishnu transformed into Mohini, a beautiful dancer who lured Bhasma into placing his hands on his head. Even Shiva was so enchanted by her beauty that he left Parvati to seek Mohini. They have given birth to many warriors like Ayyappa, Aiyanar and Hanuman who vowed celibacy.

Shikhandi: Princess Amba wanted to marry a man called Shalva. But she was abducted along with her sisters on the day of her marriage by Bhishma so that they would marry his less competent (almost sterile) half-brother, Vichitravirya. But when Amba begged Vichitravirya to set her free he did. But Shalva did not accept her as “she had been tainted, touched by another man.” (40) so Amba returned to Vichitravirya who refused to accept her as he believed that a “a ‘gift’ given away... cannot be taken back.” (40) She, then, went to Bhishma who rejected her plea as he had taken a vow of celibacy. He asked her to go back to her father’s place or stay as a maid in the place of Hastinapur. Furious, Amba prayed to Kartikeya, the God of War who gave her a garland of ever-fresh lotuses. Whoever accepted that garland could kill Bhishma. But to her dismay, nobody accepted it, not even Drupada, the mighty ruler of Panchala. Frustrated by her futile attempts, she flung the garland which hung from a pillar in Drupada’s palace.

Finally, she invoked Shiva, who pleased by her devotion, granted her the boon of becoming the cause of Bhishma’s death but in her next birth. And Amba leapt into the holy fire in order to fasten the process. She was born as Drupad’s daughter but the latter raised her as his son as he wished for one. She was named Shikhandi and was “taught all the skills reserved for men.” (41) She also considered herself as a man. However, on the wedding night when the bride discovered the truth, she left Shikhandi who, having come to terms with her real identity for the first time, ran to the forest to give up her life but is saved by a yaksha named Sthuna who, after listening to her story, lends her his manhood for a night. Shikhandi, proving his masculinity, brought back his wife and dispensed his duties as a husband. When Shikhandi went the following day to return the borrowed manhood to Sthuna, Kubera, the king of yakshas, was so pleased with the integrity of Shikhandi that he allowed the latter to keep it till his death. Finally, Drupada was happy to get a son and at that moment, Amba’s boon is granted as Shikhandi wears the garland which signaled that he would kill Bhishma.

Bhishma’s vow of celibacy had granted him the boon of choosing his time of death. Hence, during the war, the Pandavas found it difficult to defeat the Kauravas since they were led by Bhishma. But Krishna had a solution for this: “He cannot be killed but he can be pinned to the ground by arrows. For that we have to get him to lower his bow. He will lower his bow not before a man but certainly before a woman. But how do we get a woman into the battlefield? That is not permitted by law.” (45) Then, Drupada offers to take the help of Shikhandi whom Bhishma considers a woman since he was born as one. It happened as predicted. Bhishma refused to raise his bow against him declaring, “Born a woman you are always a woman.” (45) taking the advantage of this situation Arjuna pinned Bhishma down to a bed of arrows.

Ila: Ila is the feminine counterpart of prince Sudyumna who became a woman as per Shiva’s spell as he entered the forest where Shiva and Parvati were having their union. When he begged Shiva to

reverse it, Shiva modified it so that “the female Sudyumna or Ila would be a man when the moon waxed and a woman when the moon waned.” (126) Boodh, lord of the planet Mercury, approached Ila for marriage because he was cursed by Brihaspati to be born as indeterminate gender since he was born of the illicit affair between Brihaspati’s wife, Tara and the moon-god, Chandra. Ila accepted the proposal and it so happened that “When Sudyumna turned man, Boodh was his wife and when Sudyumna turned woman, Boodh was his husband.” (126) So here androgyny is present in two different forms: Sudyumna is both male and female while Boodh is neither a complete male nor female, in that he is also both.

Aruna: Aruna, the charioteer of Surya, the sun-god, was born with a deformed bottom. Hence, he was neither a male nor a female. Once, when he heard that the nymphs were about to dance for Indra in the palace of Amravati, he disguised himself as a woman called Aruni and entered the celestial city. Indra was enchanted by her beauty and made love to her out of which was born Bali. The next day, when Aruna reported late for duty, Surya sought an explanation and after listening to the entire story, wished to see Aruni. Surya, too made love with Aruni and Sugriva was born. It can be implied that one who was born incomplete could now be regarded as a complete woman who gave birth to two sons. This narrative seems to be mocking at the idea of being complete vis-à-vis one’s biological sex.

Bhima: Bhima who is perhaps the mightiest man in the Indian history also embraced cross-dressing and it never changed his masculinity. His manhood was never questioned. Rather he becomes a hero figure. Bhima dressed up as a woman to kill Kichaka, brother of Sudeshna, King Virat’s wife. When the Pandavas were staying disguised at the palace of King Virat in the thirteenth year of their exile, Kichaka made sexual advances towards Draupadi and Bhima dressed in Draupadi’s clothes trapped him and killed him saving his wife’s honour. Here, Cross dressing does not render a man effeminate because he did it for saving the honor and life of somebody. Such accounts are replete in Indian mythologies.

Krishna: Krishna, being an incarnation of Vishnu, has feminine traits or tendencies like the latter. He is not masculine enough in the strict sense of the term. Krishna loves cross-dressing and is quite soft spoken and calm, traits attributed to women. Once when Krishna stole the clothes of the *Gopis*(milkmaids) when they were taking bath in the river, they punished him by dressing him up as a woman. To their dismay, Krishna was deriving pleasure out of it instead of being sad or angry: “He enjoyed it, insisting they give him the best clothes and best jewellery and they paint his face perfectly.” (138) Krishna even dressed like Radha to pacify her when she became angry in an aim to exchange roles thereby giving her the superior position yet Radha complained, “you can dress like me, talk and dance like me, but you can never feel what I feel for we can never exchange hearts.” (139)

The above stories reveal the hypocrisy of the Indian society wherein the Gods are gender fluid and their followers valorize them overlooking such facts. People worship lord Shiva as Ardhnanarishwara or Krishna as Gopeshwara but look down upon a transgender or mock fun at cross dressers. “People remain blind to their own frailties and search for them in others” (Sharma 127). This actually sheds light upon the fact that the Hindu society was essentially an inclusive one where gender binaries did not exist. Hindu philosophy conceives the Universe as a combination of ‘Purusha’ and ‘Prakriti’,

that is, of Spirit and Matter respectively. The Spirit can only manifest itself through Matter. Without Spirit the Matter is quite meaningless and purposeless as well. The deity Ardhanarishwara illustrates this principle of Universe: the Ardhanarishwara is represented as female on the left side of his body and male on the right. Shiva and Shakti are one. Shiva symbolizes Purusha while Parvati symbolizes Prakriti. Were it not for the balanced union of the two, the universe could not exist. Ardhanarishwara symbolizes the collective psyche of human beings as sexless and genderless, beyond the limiting constructions of masculinity and femininity. There are other Gods and Goddesses who sometimes transform or merge genders as they undergo different 'avatars' or incarnations and disguise themselves for certain purposes. Some instances would be Vishnu's transformation into Mohini; Shikhandi, who was born a woman but was brought up as a man; Ila, who became a man when the moon waned; aruna, who became a woman when the sun passed; Narada, who forgot he was a man and lived as a woman for years together.

It was with the advent of the British colonizers and their heteropatriarchal missionary culture that such binary oppositions penetrated deep into the mental and social spaces since Christianity preached that God made only men and women and no other being who was a mixed entity. Hence, trans* identities became queer and thus, discriminated and silenced. But it is certainly true that gender is but a social construct, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." (267) This statement is best understood when read vis-à-vis Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity". In her book, *Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), the author argues that gender is conditioned by culture and social expectations which a subject performs repetitively. However, such a performance is not acted out by the desire of the individual but is dictated by what Butler, influenced by Foucault, calls "regulative discourses". Such discourses are the sites where identities are generated and the individual is not even conscious of it. The problem lies in the fact that biological determinism is regarded as the guiding principle behind prescribing gender roles because one's sex cannot completely determine one's behavior. There are other factors like genetic mutations and hormones which guide one's 'masculinity' or 'femininity'. Hence, gender expression is quite subjective and cannot be generalized as fixed binary entities. This emphasizes the fact that every individual deserves a space of their own wherein they can express themselves freely without pertaining to rigid social ascriptions. What is the need of the hour, thus, is to understand and thereby, embrace gender fluidity and establish gender equality in the society simultaneously allowing freedom of gender expression and identity.

At this juncture, a slice of story from Ramayana as narrated in *Shikhandi* is worth noting. When Ram had been on exile for fourteen years, the residents of Ayodhya, out of their love for him, followed him into the forest but the former commanded his subjects to return to Ayodhya and they had to obey his orders. However, on his return after fourteen years, Ram could see some people on the banks of the river which separated Ayodhya and the forest. On enquiring he comes to know that these were the people, who were neither men nor women, whose mention Ram had not made in his order. Ram was moved to tears on hearing their part. He embraced them promising that they would never again be rendered *invisible*. Hence, let us build a *Rama rajya* where no human being is ostracized based on his gender and is not forced to subscribe to the stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity because the world is not only made up of blacks and white; they are mixed colours too such as greys and browns.

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