

# QUEER IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN INDIAN WRITINGS IN ENGLISH



Edited by  
**Dr. Sreekala. B**  
**Mr. Manik Mandal**

Foreword by:  
**Dr. Lopamudra Sengupta**  
*Associate Professor and Head of the Department of  
Political Science, Bangabasi College,  
University of Calcutta, W.B.*



# **Queer Identity and Culture in Indian Writings in English**

*Editors*  
**Dr. Sreekala B.  
Mr. Manik Mandal**



**UPANAYAN PUBLICATIONS**  
Delhi (India)

**Queer Identity and Culture in Indian Writings in English**

**Editors:** Dr. Sreekala, B.  
Mr. Manik Mandal

© Contributors

First Edition 2021

ISBN: 978-93-91467-22-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by means, electronic, mechanical, photo copying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher. The views expressed in the chapters of this book is of the concerned authors/contributors. The Editor/the Publisher does not endorse their views.

***Published by***

**UPANAYAN PUBLICATIONS**

772, Street No 6, B Block, Baba Colony,

Burari, Delhi, 110084 (INDIA)

Contact: +91- 7827665077

E-mail: upanayanpublications@gmail.com

authorspublication@gmail.com

***Typesetting by :***

**G. R. Sharma**

# Contents

vii

## Foreword

1. Merging Queer to Divine: An Exploration of the Hindu Mythological Tradition  
Dr. Sreekala. B 1
2. Mapping Gender Transition in Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*  
Dr. Anupriya Roy Srivastava 9
3. Transgressing Gender Boundaries and Exploring Sexuality in Vivek Shraya's 'I am Afraid of Men'  
Savita Boral, Dr. Divyabha Vashisht 29
4. Quest of Sexual Identity and Fluidity of Gender as the Means of Liberation: A Comparative Study of Queer Life in Indian Fictions  
Manik Mandal 37
5. 'Sharing the *Lihaaf* with the Nawab': Re-imagining and destabilizing the queer identity in Ismat Chughtai's story *The Quilt*  
Chitrlekha Biswas 45
6. A Critical Study of A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*  
Dr. Rabindra K. Verma 52
7. Understanding the Queer Otherness in a Homophobic Society: A Reading of Sharif D. Rangnekar's *Straight to Normal: My Life as a Gay Man*  
Surajit Senapati 58
8. Man, Masculinity and Motherhood: Deconstructing the Concepts of Sexuality and Gender Lines in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*  
Partha Debnath 66
9. Queering Rural Utopia through the Cinematic Gaze of Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Uttara*  
Victor Banerjee 73

## Chapter-1

# Merging Queer to Divine: An Exploration of the Hindu Mythological Tradition

*Dr. Sreekala. B\**

The concept of 'queer' is nothing new to the mythological narratives. Almost all the narratives including Classical, Christian and Hindu mythologies share this aspect which is explicit through the different versions of tales in these traditions. These narratives reflect the deep-rooted establishments and beliefs of a society. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik describes them as capturing the collective unconsciousness of a people. These myths act as a reminder that queer people have always existed. There are Greek myths of homosexuals and transgenders such as the tale of God Apollo, goddess Aphrodite and the story of Tiresias who became a woman when he struck copulating snakes, thus inviting the wrath of Hera. In Hindu mythology also there are elements of gender variance and non-heterosexual sexuality, though it is not a dominant theme in these narratives. In his essay, "The Role of Myth in Life", Malinowski regards myth as an apparatus that establishes and maintains the social order. He comments on the nature and the function of myth as follows:

Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. (18-19)

Hindu mythology is replete with narratives which deal with the fluidity of gender and several versions of the same story provides

\* Assistant Professor of English, N.S.S College, Pandalam

ample evidence of this gender variance and transgressions. The Vedas refer to a third sex, in addition to male and female and the members of this sex are not ostracised or treated as outcasts. Instead they were considered as having gifted with unnatural or divine powers. Though the reproductive connection between man and woman has always been honoured in every culture, queer sexuality is not discussed in ancient cultures and folk traditions. The *Kama Sutra*, a Hindu text which elaborately described sexuality advocated homosexuality as to be engaged in and enjoyed for its own sake as one of the arts. There are also third-sex citizens, sometimes greatly attached to one another and with complete faith in one another, who get married together. (Vatsyayana, *Kama Sutra*, 2.9.36)

Queer theory explores and contests the categorization of gender and sexuality. It emphasises the fluid and humanly performed nature of sexuality or sexualities. It established that gender is something which goes beyond the binaries. It is defined as a theoretical approach that critically deconstructs and challenges binaries such as male and female or heterosexual and homosexual. If identities are not fixed, they cannot be categorized and labelled, because identities consist of many varied components, so categorization by one characteristic is incomplete. Queer theory in the field of post-structuralist critical theory in western literary criticism emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies and includes both queer readings of texts and the theorization of 'queerness' itself.

The female power is the potent force in Hinduism as it is hailed as 'Sakthi', and it is the supreme power. The power of the feminine is reinforced and worshipped due to this faith. The concept of *ardhanareeswara* in the Hindu texts reveals that the divine concept in Hinduism is neither male nor female but an amalgamation of both the sexes. "Simultaneously marginalized by nation-state and mainstream cultural discourse, the figure of the dissident sexual citizen in India has been, by and large, written out of history and visibility", S.M. Chaudhury commented on the collective attitude of society towards queer personalities. But the Hindu mythological tales with its innumerable versions acquire new dimensions while dealing with queer narratives.

In these narratives, gender transformation may be due to the intervention of divine forces, in order to deceive or to destroy the enemies, or due to a curse, or for the satisfaction of love and lust, or for the fulfilment of revenge. It may also occur due to a transformation in

a person's spiritual or moral character, either in the same life, or in the reincarnations. Ancient epics of Hindu mythology like the Ramayana, Mahabharata and even the depictions in the temples of Khajuraho give enough evidence to establish that homosexuality was prevalent in Hindu mythological narratives. Though, homosexuality was not a dominant or direct theme in these mythological texts, changes of sex, homoerotic encounters, and intersex or third gender characters are often found in traditional religious narratives as well as in regional folklore. There are many examples of gods changing gender, manifesting as different genders at different times, or combining to form androgynous or hermaphroditic beings. There are also instances of Gods changing sex or having a reincarnation in the opposite sex. There are also several incidents where sexual interactions have other non-sexual, sacred purpose. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (Maheswara/Mahadeva) are the chief among the pantheon of gods in Hindu mythology. Of these chief gods, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the protector and Maheswara is the destroyer.

The various incarnations of Vishnu on different times and on various occasions is to rescue the whole universe from asuras, demons and several other enemies of the Devas. Some of these incarnations are in the form of animals, amphibians and others were in human form. Mohini is the only female manifestation of Vishnu, though this form is not considered as one of the prominent reincarnations. When the arch rivals of Devas, the Asuras took away the 'amrit', the celestial food which provides immortality, Lord Vishnu took the guise of Mohini, to deceive them. He took the form of the enchantress, Mohini, in order to trick the demons into giving up 'amrit', the elixir of life. He cheated the Asuras by taking back the *amrit* which the Asuras took away by force. The Lord's feminine transition did not have its culmination with the cheating of the Asuras. He took the form of Mohini for a second time to save Mahadeva from a devotee who tried to test the power of his boon on the Lord himself. But this feminine transition has its pinnacle when a progeny was born out of the union of Vishnu -in the guise of Mohini and Mahadeva.

The gender variability of Vishnu as Mohini -the Preserver even procreates with Shiva, the designated Destroyer- and thus Lord Ayyappa was born. Vishnu as Mohini becomes pregnant from Shiva, and gives birth to Ayyappa, who was abandoned by his same sex parents. The narrative about the birth of Lord Ayyappa, the deity of Sabarimala temple is thus a tale of gender transformation and

homo-erotic relationship. Devadutt Pattanaik writes that rather than Mohini becoming pregnant, Ayyappa sprang from Shiva's semen, which he ejaculated upon embracing Mohini. Here the gender adaptability of Vishnu in the female form was to solve a problem. The dual genderism and sexual adaptability are evident in numerous other tales and belief systems of Hindu mythology.

Many deities in Hinduism and heroes in Indian epics are represented as both male and female at different times and in different incarnations or may manifest with characteristics of both genders within a single birth itself. Alain Danielou says that "The hermaphrodite, the homosexual and the transvestite have a symbolic value and are considered privileged beings, images of the Ardhanareeshvara." (96)

Shivalinga, is worshipped as the symbol of male potency. But Mahadeva is often worshipped as *ardhanareeswara* which is based on the belief that male power is incomplete if it exists in isolation, i.e., not in combination with feminine power. Perhaps *ardhanareeswara* is an ideological concept. Though this concept may not be based on the actual physical manifestation of the two sexes on the same person but an ideal combination of both the masculine and the feminine qualities within a single personality, it obliterates the boundaries of gender binaries. In that sense, Shiva or Mahadeva achieves perfection with the amalgamation of both the genders within him. He and his consort Parvathi together represents the fulfilment of the ideal, the perfect form, the *ardhanareeswara* concept in Hinduism. A similar representation is evident in the Lakshmi-Narayana concept as there is the blending or merging between the masculine and the feminine and the formation of a hermaphroditic or androgynous divine concept. Lord Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth represents this *ardhanareeswara* -half body of husband is for wife without which the masculine is imperfect.

There are numerous versions regarding the birth of the elephant-headed, wisdom god Ganesha. He is the God who removed obstacles, Vigneswara or Vinayaka. Though he is portrayed as the son of Shiva and Parvati, there are numerous stories in several versions regarding his birth. He is believed to have been conceived outside the womb. There are versions which represented him to have been born purely by the actions of Parvati, who in the *Shiva Purana* fashioned him from clay. However, when Ganesha blocks Shiva, he is beheaded and later restored to life by Shiva himself by replacing his head with



an elephant's head. Another version regarding his birth, based on a Kashmiri text is that his birth is the result of Parvati's menstrual blood being washed into the Ganges, where it is swallowed by Parvati's handmaiden Malini, who in consequence gives birth to Ganesha, thus contributing the aspect of queerness in his birth by the non-involvement of a masculine partner.

The Hindu religious epic Mahabharata which narrates the tale of Pandava and Kaurava clan hails Arjuna, the third Pandava as the embodiment of masculine attributes. The celestial nymph, Urvashi's infatuation towards him is due to these very same attributes which leads to a terrible curse from her as he spurns her. Arjuna, transforms this curse to a boon as he becomes Bruhandala, the dance tutor at King Virat's court, training Virat's young daughter Uthara. The effeminate qualities of the paragon of masculinity are displayed through his adoption of a profession which is essentially feminine though Brihandala was a eunuch.

The tale of the birth of King Bhagiratha who brought the celestial river Ganga to the earth is also a narrative exemplifying queer concept. His birth was considered to be the result of a lesbian sort of relationship, if we judge it by the modern terms. He is said to have been born of two women, the widowed queens of King Dilipa. His birth was socially approved as the relationship between the two women was according to the blessings and instructions of the demigods to produce an heir to the throne after the death of their husband.

Within the folds of Mahabharata itself there is the story of Shikhandi, the synonym of a hermaphrodite or rather a transgender. According to mythology, Shikhandi's life is tale of revenge and its fulfillment. Amba was one of the beautiful princesses of Kashi who was in love with king of Salva and was abducted by Bhishma for the sake of his brother Vichitravirya, on the day of her *swayamvara*. Later rejected alike by her lover Salva and her abductor Bhishma, she committed suicide after taking a vow to take birth again to carry out her revenge towards Bhishma. Her rebirth was in the palace of King Drupad.

Shikhandi, the warrior in the Kurukshetra war was born Shikhandini, the daughter of King Drupad but she was raised as a son by Drupada. In another version, Shikhandini as a girl discovers the garland of ever-blooming blue lotuses hung on the palace gate and puts it around her neck. Drupad was afraid of Bhishma's wrath and enmity and hence he banishes his daughter. She performs austerities in the

forest and is transformed into a male named Shikhandi. Shikhandi is considered as a eunuch and hence Bhishma refused to fight with him in the Kurukshetra battlefield. Arjuna made use of the opportunity by hiding behind Shikhandi, whose name is synonymous with the third gender. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Shikhandi advised Draupadi

"... the power of a man is like a bull's charge, while the power of a woman moves aslant, like a serpent seeking its prey. Know the particular properties of your power. Unless you use it correctly, it won't get you what you want" (52)

Through his experiences Shikhandi realises the power of both and hence he can make use of it very effectively to carry out his purposes.

Aravan, another character from the epic Mahabharata, was the son of the great Pandava prince Arjuna and his wife Ulupi, the Naga princess. He was also a brave warrior like his father. He participated in the Kurukshetra war with his father and the other Pandavas. There was a custom of ritual sacrifice in the battlefield in order to ensure victory in the battle. In this ritual, the most valiant warrior must sacrifice his life in front of Goddess Kali in order to ensure the victory of his side. Aravan volunteers to sacrifice himself in the ritual and he has to be married before the sacrifice, entitling him to the right of cremation and funerary offerings since bachelors were buried. But no woman wants to be his wife due to the inevitable widowhood. Krishna, the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu adopts a female form, Mohini, in order to marry Aravan.

Aravan's tale is narrated in the Tamil version of the Mahabharata. There are some folk traditions where Aravan is considered as a patron god of some transgender communities. There are versions of the tale relating Krishna's mourning as a widow after Aravan's sacrifice the very next day, following which he returns to his original masculine form. This marriage and death of Aravan are commemorated annually by some transgender communities performing and celebrating it as a festival. During those festivals, the persons of third gender commemorated Aravan by beating their chests in ritual dances, breaking their bangles and changing into white mourning clothes. In this version of the story it is believed that all the Aravanis (third gender) are married to Aravan and hence, when the sacrifice is re-enacted, the Aravanis become widows of Aravan and mourn his death.

Samba in Hindu mythology is the son of Lord Krishna. He is considered as the patron of eunuchs, transgender people and

homosexuals. Samba used to dress in women's clothes to mock and trick people. It is also to enter more easily into the company of women and to seduce them. There is a version in which Samba, dressed as woman, is cursed after being questioned about her supposed pregnancy. He along with his friends tried to befool some great learned Rishis who visited his father. The curse was the result of he and his friends mocking the learned men by asking about the gender of the child born out of his pregnancy. As a result of the curse, Samba, although remaining male appears to be pregnant and gave birth to an iron pestle.

Mitra and Varuna who are associated with two lunar phases and same-sex relations in ancient Brahmana texts are also worshipped by some group of homosexuals as their divine counterparts.

In Hindu tradition, there is a custom of people cross-dressing and participating in temple dances and rituals in connection with the festivities related with particular gods and goddesses. Devotees consider it as sacred and auspicious inviting divine blessings upon them. Another belief prevalent in Hindu belief system is the power of the persons belonging to the third-sex to curse and bless others. This belief system may be based on their ability to display gender variance like that of the Gods in their different incarnations. Historian Devdutt Pattanaik summarizes the place of homosexuality in Hindu literature as, though not part of the mainstream, its existence was acknowledged but not approved. Homosexual and transgender Hindus commonly identify with and worship the various queer deities in Hindu mythology. The androgynous form of *ardhanareesvara*, Lakshmi-Narayana and other divine and semi-divine characters and heroic figures in the Hindu religious narratives reinforced the fact that queerness is not a novel concept, but a long-accepted form of sexuality inherent in the collective consciousness of Hindu religious faith.

In addition to these narratives of gender variance and sexual transformation that are popularly known and accepted by Hindu religious establishments, modern scholars and queer activists have highlighted many other queer themes in various other versions of the Hindu texts and in some lesser-known tales and folk traditions. They even went to the extent of identifying queer themes in texts where one could not find such a possibility in an ordinary reading. It can be established beyond doubt that queerness is an indispensable part of Hindu mythological tradition though not a dominant one.

### Works Cited

- Choudhuri S M. *Transgressive Territories: Queer Space in Indian University of Iowa*, 2009
- Danielou, Alain. *Gods of Love and Ecstasy: The Tradition of Shiva and Dionysus*. Inner Traditions, 1984.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Pan Macmillan, 2009
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. "The Role of Myth in Life." *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Ed. Alan Dundes. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. 193-207
- Vatsyayana. "Kama Sutra, 2.9.36." Wilhelm, Amara Das. *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality*. Bloomington: Xlibris Cooperation, 2010