

Deconstructing The Gender Binary: A Study Of Gender-Fluid Mythological Figures

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*Gender has always been expressed vis-a-vis heteropatriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. Any alteration in the gender prescriptions is unacceptable and is subject to criticism and mockery. But it is a neglected fact that the idea of the non-binary being has not only been duly acknowledged but also highly respected in Hindu mythologies in the form of gender metamorphosed figures like Vishnu, Bhima, Krishna and the like. Hence, this paper seeks to examine the presence of gender-fluid figures in Hindu mythologies taking Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Man Who Was a Woman* as the primary text and explore the stereotypical notions that such entities transcend.*

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) It is crucial to understand the fact every person whether male or female has both masculine and feminine traits within him or her; hence, if s/he chooses to express it explicitly, there should be no problem. One should

not be bound by patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. Judith Butler rightly asserts, “gender is [not] the rightful property of sex, that “masculine” belongs to “male” and “feminine” belongs to “female” [is absurd]. There is no “proper” gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural property.” (Fuss 21)

Few instances from mythology which showcase gender fluidity are enumerated below:

Mohini fools Bhasma

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.

Even though Lord Hanuman is worshipped by all sexes without any restriction, Ayyappa is not. In his main shrine at Sabarimala in Kerala, entry to women in their fertile age, that is from 10-50 is restricted since he is a celibate deity. The reason behind such a rule is that being a celibate, Ayyappa had veered away from all kinds of worldly desires including contact with women who are potential threats to his celibacy, hence women are not permitted. Such a view was accepted until recently women protested against this kind of male chauvinism. God is supposed to be superior to man implying the fact that he is beyond mundane manly desires. No woman can tempt him. They are all his devotees and not enchantresses. In a historic judgment, the Supreme Court of India, on 28 September, 2018 overturned the ban with Chief Justice, Dipak Misra condemning the selective ban as a form of religious patriarchy.

Mohini fools the Demons

In their thirst for the most precious treasures dissolved in the ocean of milk, the *Adityas* and the *Daityas*, in Vishnu's patronage set up a churn using Meru, king of the mountains, as the spindle and Vasuki, king of the serpents as the churning rope. After eons of churning, out came several treasures out of which a pot containing the elixir of immortality, Amruta, was the most significant. The *Daityas* ran away with it. To rescue the pot, Lord Vishnu took up the form of an enchantress, Mohini to trick the *Daityas*. Mohini approached them offering to serve the Amruta to them. Bewitched by her beauty, they gave her the pot. But they could not notice that she was distributing it among only the *Adityas*. The Daitya Rahu took notice of this and sat amongst the *Adityas* and was about to take a sip when Vishnu's Sudarshanchakra cut his throat and the elixir could not enter his body. The *Daityas*, then, realized that it was Vishnu who betrayed and tricked them taking the form of Mohini. The *Adityas* become Devas after consuming Amruta and set up their celestial palace Amravati while the *Daityas* become Asuras and rule the nether regions.

Vishnu's disguise as Mohini is well accepted by the people yet drag culture and cross-dressers are always looked down with contempt. Patriarchy has prescribed gender roles and stereotypes attached to every gender. Switching between roles and costumes/ behavior is unpalatable. Gender fluidity is allowed and valorized in dieties but common people are bullied and ostracized when they practice the same.

Mohini kills Virochana

Virochana was the king of the Asuras who had been gifted a magical crown by the Sun-god Surya because of which nobody could harm him. But when he took advantage of the boon

and started troubling the Devas, Vishnu disguised as Mohini stole the magical crown which made him vulnerable to all weapons. Vishnu took advantage of the situation and killed him.

Mohini entices Shiva

Why only demons, the Gods were also bewitched by Mohini. Shiva, the great ascetic, whom no Apsara could enchant, not even, Kama, the love-God, fell for the charm of Mohini. He left Parvati and ran after Mohini till he shed his seed. Out of this union of Mohini and Shiva is born Hanuman. Lord Ayappa is also born of such union. But both are *Ayonijas*, that is, they are not born of the womb. Mohini does not get pregnant. S/he merely arouses Shiva to spill the seed. Shiva's semen is so powerful that it does not need the female seed to form a child.

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)

In a nutshell, 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 Ardhanarishwara or Krishna as Gopeshwara but look down upon a trans gender or mock fun at cross dressers. 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. Furthermore, Mohini is worshipped as the family deity of Gauda Saraswat Brahmins, who refer to her as "Shri Mahalasa Narayani."

But, the hypocrisy lies in the fact that though the Hindu philosophies admit the existence of the female principle in men and the male principle in female, yet a public display of the 'alternative self' is unpalatable. Though gender is freed from the binary restrictions when it comes to myths and religion, but reality seems to paint a different spectacle. The wide margin between the preached and the practiced is justified by conventionalists as such: the gender fluidity or androgyny in the celestial space is not aimed at carnal pleasures but with a noble cause of getting rid of demons or teaching the right things. However, that is not the case with the mundane world where everything has its roots in the carnal desires of beings, and when any law is disobeyed, it causes disruption of natural and social harmony. Divinity is always

metaphysical, much higher and incomprehensible than the erotic selves of mundane human beings.

The other factor which aided in the promotion of such stereotypical binary restrictions was Christianity. 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*¹ 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

¹ Trans* (trans with an asterisk) is an umbrella term for all non-normative queer identities

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, it is time to build a *Rama rajya* where no human being is ostracized based on his/her 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; there are mixed colours, too, such as greys and browns. They have a distinct and unique identity of their own. They are beautiful in their own way and are equally worthy of love and respect.

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