Revisiting Queerness in Indian Mythology

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Article Detail:	Abstract
  	The many stories, gods, and folk traditions that make up Indian mythology provide a fertile ground for investigating how gender non-conformity and non-traditional sexualities are portrayed. Concepts of gender and sexuality have always been varied, intricate, and culturally rooted; nonetheless, contemporary discussions of queerness tend to center on Western theoretical frameworks. Stories and characters in ancient texts like the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas, as well as in regional oral traditions, question traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. Examples include Shikhandi's gender transition, Arjuna's embodiment as Brihannala, and Ardhanarishvara's synthesis of feminine and masculine traits. These stories show how spiritual, social, and cultural frameworks ritualized and normalized queerness while also highlighting the acceptance of multiple identities. In order to highlight their significance in modern LGBT discourse, this article returns to such legendary depictions. Following these portrayals, the research places queerness inside India's indigenous knowledge systems, disproving the idea that it is an alien or contemporary concept. A more inclusive view of gender and sexuality in both historical and present contexts can be achieved by engaging with mythological texts via a queer lens, according to the research. This approach also helps to recover marginalized narratives.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this age of change, the LGBT community fights on, yearning for the embrace of acceptance, a vital thread woven into the fabric of our world. In countless corners of the earth, the very essence of love between souls of the same kind is cast aside, overshadowed by the prevailing tide of traditional unions. In the shadows of silence, voices rise, yearning to break free, to weave the vibrant tapestry of LGBTQ+ into the heart of the intellectual realm. The struggle echoes, a relentless pursuit for recognition and understanding, as the call for inclusion reverberates through the corridors of thought. Yet, the efforts faced a storm of fierce disapproval and a wave of collective fury. In the year of 1996, Deepa Mehta rose to the challenge, crafting a cinematic masterpiece that boldly illuminated the lives of lesbians in her unforgettable film, *Fire*. Yet, it faced fierce condemnation, branded as a dark force and shunned by many. In the shadows of the silver screen, darkness looms, as whispers of violence echo through the halls of dreams in parts of India. In the heart of a vibrant land, Salim Sadiq, a visionary of the silver screen, dared to weave a tale of love and identity in his 2022 masterpiece, 'Joyland.' Yet, as the story unfolded, it

met with a storm of fierce resistance, echoing the struggles of those who seek to be free. It faced the darkness of a ban, held back from the world, only to rise again after the whispers of necessary cuts set it free. In the stillness of time, the scene remains untouched, a quiet echo of what once was. Yet, these powerful initiatives shine a light on the struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community, igniting a flame of awareness that cannot be extinguished. In a world where love is often confined, the essence of queerness struggles to break free from the chains of conformity. In the shadows of the spotlight, where voices yearn to be heard, the tales of the brave are often silenced or mocked, leaving hearts heavy with unspoken truths. In the grand tapestry of existence, where the threads of society intertwine with the ink of literature and the light of media, the very essence of our collective soul is shaped and transformed. Each story, each image, resonates deep within, crafting the heartbeat of our shared consciousness.

In the grand tapestry of Indian mythology, stories unfold with a depth that resonates through the ages, tackling the weighty matters of caste, feminism, and gender identity. Each event and character shines like a beacon, illuminating the struggles and triumphs of the human spirit. The sages of old have poured their hearts into their writings, illuminating the shadows of our time, revealing the struggles that stir the soul and ignite the flames of discord in our world today. In the sacred texts of old, where wisdom flows like a river, the *Vedas* and *Puranas* rise, bold and unyielding. *The Kamasutra* whispers secrets of desire, while Ayurveda sings the song of balance. And in the grand tales of the *Mahabharata*, the struggles of gender echo through the ages, a powerful testament to the human spirit. Behold the voices that rise, echoing through the pages, each one a beacon of truth, illuminating the spectrum of gender identities in the tapestry of words below.

Shikhandi

In the grand tapestry of the **Mahabharata**, Shikhandi stands as a beacon of significance, a character woven into the very fabric of this timeless epic. He rises from the ashes of a forgotten tale, a spirit reborn as the fierce princess Amba, whose heart beats with vengeance. She swore an oath across lifetimes, destined to weave the threads of fate that would lead to the downfall of the legendary warrior Bhisma. Bhisma had pledged his stepmother to remain unmarried and serve the throne of Hastinapur. In a tale of valor and fate, he rode forth for Vichitravirya, the noble king of Hastinapur. With a heart full of ambition, he seized the daughters of Kashya, the mighty ruler of Kashi—Amba, Ambalika, and Ambika—each a shining star in the night sky. But Amba stands resolute, her heart bound to Salva, refusing to surrender to the call of Vichitravirya's love. With a heavy heart, Bhisma grants her the freedom to journey to Salva, understanding the weight of her choice. Yet, bound by the chains of Bhisma's hold, Salva stands resolute, refusing to embrace her light. When Amba returns to Hastinapur, she pours her heart out to Bhisma, begging him to take her hand in marriage. In a world where love and duty collide, Bhisma stands resolute, bound by a promise to his stepmother, choosing honor over the call of romance, forever a guardian of his vow. With a heart full of fury, Amba storms into the depths of the forest, vowing that she shall rise again, destined to bring about Bhisma's downfall.

Amba was reborn as Shikhandi to King Draupada. In a moment of celestial revelation, Draupada heard the call of the divine, guiding him to bring forth Shikhandi, a son destined to embody the profound essence of rebirth. Shikhandi, forged in the fires of destiny, is bestowed with the knowledge and warrior's might from the noble Draupada. In the great warfare of Kurukshetra, Shikhandi helped Arjuna make aside Bhisma from the war and became accountable for Bhisma's fall. Shikhandi was united in love with a woman. On the night of their vows, Shikhandi's beloved sees the truth that lies within his heart. She struck him with words that pierced the heart. In a moment of desperation, Shikhandi races into the depths of the forest, pleading with the Yaksha to transform her very essence. In a tale of transformation and destiny, Yaksha embraced a new identity alongside Shikhandi, weaving a story of love that led to a joyous union, forever intertwined in the fabric of life.

Brihannala

The *Mahabharata* figure Brihannala serves as another representation of the queer. On Lord Krishna's advice, Arjuna ascends to heaven to learn from Indra and Brihaspati how to wield celestial weapons that would be helpful in the upcoming war between the Kaurawas and Panawas. Arjuna learned

how to wield various heavenly weapons and art of dance in heaven. While receiving instruction in dance from Chitrasena, a heavenly Gandharva, Arjuna was escorted by Urvashi, a heavenly nymph (apsara), while she practiced dancing. Over time, she found herself drawn to Arjuna's manly personality and impressed by him. She offered her proposal of love, which Arjuna graciously turned down. Arjuna's reluctance offended Urvashi, who cursed him for being impotent (Napunsak) for the rest of his life. She later shortens her curse's duration by a year. In the final year of their exile, Lord Krishna counsels Arjuna to employ this curse to conceal his manly personality in the last year of their exile, which was conditioned to live incognito and hidden from identification. In the service of Virata, the king of the Virat kingdom, the five Pandawas undertake various duties. Yudhistira transforms into Kanka, a king's advisor and player of royal dice. Bhima transforms into Vallabha, a cook. Nakula takes up the role of Granthika and tends to the royal horses. Taking care of animals, Sahdeva transforms into Tantipala. The wife of five Pandawas, Draupadi, takes on the role of Sairandhri, the queen's maid. As a transgender person, Arjuna dresses like a woman and changes into a lovely Brihannala. The curse of Urvashi causes Brihannala to lose her manly identity and undergo a gender transition. She instructs Uttara, a princess of Virat, in music and dancing.

Mohini

There are several examples of gender fluidity in Indian mythology. Among them, the Mohini form of the god Vishnu is well-known. The ocean is crunched by gods and demons to extract valuable stones. They obtain the elixir (amrita) by the crunching. For the benefit of the universe, God Vishnu takes on the shape of Mohini there in order to prevent the demons from possessing elixir. The name Mohini is derived from the Sanskrit word "Moha," which signifies enchantment or delusion. Demons are enchanted by Mohini's feminine beauty and charm. Mohini captivates the demons and serves all elixir to gods.

The feminine form of God Vishnu, Mohini, is also associated with the birth of God Ayyappa to kill a demon known as Mahishi. Even God Shiva was attracted by the charm of Mohini towards her. Vishnu as Mohini becomes pregnant by God Shiva and gives birth to Ayyappa. Ayyapaa was left on the bank of river in shame. Ayyappa is also called 'Hariharputra', a son of Hari (Vishnu) and Har (Shiva). The birth of Ayyappa is celebrated in Tamilnadu as a Panguni Uthiram.

In Tamilnadu, eunuchs celebrate a festival called Thali during which they grieve over Aravan's passing for eighteen days. Before Aravan's death, when he was to be sacrificed, Lord Krishna, who is thought of be an avatar of Vishnu, takes on the form of Mohini to offer him the pleasure of love. In the guise of Mohini, Lord Krishna weds Aravan and laments his passing as his widow. Eunuchs joyfully celebrate the wedding of Krishna in the guise of Mohini and Aravan as well as Aravan's passing mournfully.

Other references

In addition to the figures mentioned above, queerness is mentioned multiple times in other texts. Laxminarayana and Ardhnarishwara are two among them. Both represent the totality of the fusion of masculine and feminine. The god Shiva and his consort Parvati are combined to form Ardhnarishwara. Additionally, Laxminarayana is a combination of the god Vishnu and his wife Laxmi. In *Kamasutra*, homosexuality is mentioned several times. According to *Kamasutra*, kama is the mental inclination for pleasure through mental and physical pursuits. Despite mostly discussing heterosexuality, *Kamasutra* acknowledges homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. Additionally, *Tritiya prakriti*, or the Third Gender, is mentioned frequently in *Kamasutra.*

However, the topic of queerness is now taboo. In Indian history, it was extensively explored. Therefore, one could say that Indian society was well-known to it. But the shadow of colonialism and Islamic dominance over Indian minds puts the discussion in bars. European mindset looks at the things in binary. One must be something opposite to it to be meaningful as light-dark, white- black, soft-hard and masculine- feminine. As Derrida says, Absence is present in the form of absence. They denied the existence of anything between binaries in language or society. But Indian social, mental and linguistic structures are very different from them. There is always a possibility of existence between

binaries in Indian mind. In Indian languages, there are many words which go beyond boundaries of binary. There is a word 'Mauli', which seems feminine but is used for both female and male and even beyond the male and female binary.

The queer characters discussed in the paper had respectable status and acceptability in the society. Shikhandi was from royal family. She was allowed to get proper education of administration and warfare. Even they were allowed to participate in wars. It was impossible to defeat Bhisma without Shikhandi. Shikhandi accompanied Arjuna on his chariot and faced Bhisma. Arjuna showered arrows towards Bhisma from behind Shikhandi. Brihannala, a feminine form of Arjuna had got a place in palace. She was assigned to teach the princess music and dance. All types of people make up society. In the Virat war, Brihannala vanquished every warrior or Kurus. The king of Virat, Virata, does not think a eunuch like Brihannala is capable of such bravery. He punishes Yudhistara in the form of Kanka for praising Brihannala.

Science also has acknowledged the existence of masculine qualities in female and feminine qualities in men. No one is complete male or female. The Indian scholars had realized the fact of totality in incompleteness very early. Ardhanarishwara and Laxminarayana represent such kind of totality. Both the gods are half masculine and half feminine and even Indians worship their totality. This incompleteness makes them complete or total. When the world was ignorant about the existence of queers, it was discussed in Kamasutra, the scientific discussion of sexuality and erotic. There are many references of gender transformation in the scriptures.

CONCLUSION

Classical Indian philosophers and thinkers were forthright and candid in their philosophical and social discourse. They had presented various social issues in their literature. Many things which are considered asocial even today, the Indian mythology has open and knowledgeable discussions about them. We are able to comprehend their depth of ideas and vision through their conversation. While addressing her concept of sexuality and gender identity in "*Gender Trouble*," Judhit Butler referred to gender as a social

performance. While many philosophers and thinkers in the world now discuss gender identity, Indian philosophers and thinkers who established the groundwork for Indian thought and culture discussed it and its normalcy thousands of years ago. They had come to accept LGBT people as an inherent and inevitable aspect of society. They had granted them the right to live with dignity and respect in addition to accepting their existence. The historical existence of these characters might be discussed. They exist in literature, because literature is a reflection of society, even though they might be regarded as imaginary. The societal knowledge of queers and how they are treated is reflected in these scriptures. They may teach the modern society that being homosexual or queer is just as common as being heterosexual. Additionally, they are equally entitled to a dignified and respectful life.

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