

Transsexual and Transgender : Tracing the Portrayal of the Non-binary Identity in Indian Epics and Literary Texts

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Abstract. This research paper critically traces the portrayal of non-binary identities of the third gender, specifically transsexual and transgender individuals in Indian Mythological and Literary discourse. India has a rich culture and literary heritage that encompasses diverse gender identities, including, “ali, aravani, chhakka, hijra, jogappa, khasra, khasuaa, kinnar, kojja, maada, mukhannathun, napunsak, nau number, pavaiyaa, Thirunangai etc, depending upon the region” (Saxena, 2011 p.6). Historically these different regional identities were recognised as the third gender. However, the representation of this non-binary identity in Indian Literary text often been compromised, and hence falls victim to stereotypes and misinterpretations. The identity and the discourse attached to it have been peripheral, and most of the portrayals have substantiated the already existing popular myths about them. It is only recently that they are getting middle brow attention in academics of gender studies, literatures as well as in Hindi movies and the demystification about their identity and life is taking place. The present paper analyses the portrayal the non-binary identities in Indian mythologies and literary text.

Keywords: Transsexual; transgender; non-binary identity; Indian mythologies.

The third gender in India encompasses a wide spectrum of non-binary identities, representing individuals who do not conform to the traditional male-female binary. Historically, these individuals have held important roles in society and have been acknowledged in religious and cultural contexts. However, the portrayal of transsexual and transgender characters in Indian literature often lacks depth, perpetuates stereotypes, and reinforces societal biases. This article aims to critically analyse the existing literary works, evaluate their impact on public perception, and advocate for a more inclusive representation of non-binary identities in Indian literature.

The term “transsexualism” became popular only in the later half of the 20th century, with the advent of sexual reassignment surgery and

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the sexual revolution. “Virginia Prince, a pioneer in the crossdresser movement in the US, created the word ‘transgender’ in 1970. The term “transgender” referred to “those who refuse to identify with their socially given gender and the binary gender system” (Beasley, 43). Virginia Prince “pioneered the terms ‘transgenderist’ and ‘transgenderal’ to describe people who lived fully in the gender opposite to their biological sex without undergoing sex or gender reassignment surgery” (Prince, 21). Trans as a stand-alone term did not enter formal usage until it was coined by a parliamentary discussion group in London in 1998, with the deliberate intention of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating equality legislation. In the 'Forword' to *The Transgender Reader*, Professor Stephen Whittle, a trans activist, indicates that the term “trans” was first used formally in 1998 by a London-based parliamentary debate group with the aim of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating over equality legislation. The communities, the identities, the cultures, and the language were continually being reframed by cultural spaces and historiographies. We continually witness the emergence of new languages, such as the UK’s ‘per’ as a pronoun for persons who lack a binary gender identity and the US’s ‘hir’ for those who identify as both male and female. (Stryker, xi-xii)

In India, there are various labels used to describe transgender people. According to the region, they go by the names ali, aravani, chhakka, hijra, jogappa, khusra, kinnar, kojja, maada, mukhannathun, napunsak, nau number, pavaiyaa, Thirunangai, etc. (Saxena, 6). A few terms were defined with examples. For example, the phrase “Ali” is used to describe a man who acts and thinks like a woman and lacks virility. A lady encased in a male body was referred to as an aravani. And the term *Hijra*, according to Tripathi, is “a term of abuse. Its variants in colloquial language include expressions like number six, number nine, and chakka. The word ‘hijra’ derive from the Urdu word ‘hijra’. A hijra is a person who has walked out of his tribe or community. Thus, a hijra is one who has left main stream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras. But the hijra community isn’t a monolith. Its history and culture varies from state to state. (Tripathi, 171)

Many different terms have been used to characterise transsexualism, including physical handicap, ailment, sickness, disorder, mental illness, perversion, and paraphilia. However, the usage of such names frequently offends both transsexuals and non-transsexuals. The phrase may be found in two important diagnostic guides used by psychologists all over the world. They are the Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association. The International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (10 revision, CD, 10) defines transsexualism as “a desire to live and be accepted as a member of the opposite sex, usually accompanied by a sense of discomfort with or inappropriateness of one’s anatomic sex and the wish to have surgery and hormonal treatment to make one’s body as congruent as possible”. The DSM utilises Gender Identity Disorder as a synonym for Transsexualism, which is classified as Gender Identity Disorder in ICD code 10. The DSM adds, Evidence of strong and persistent cross gender identification, which is the desire to be of the other sex. There must be more to this cross-gender identification than a yearning for any imagined cultural benefits of being the other sex. Additionally, there needs to be proof of ongoing unhappiness with the assigned sex.

The term 'Transgender' is frequently used as a catch-all word for those who do not fit into the conventionally recognised gender categories. For instance, transgender people, drag queens, and those who identify as gender queer. But some transsexualists disagree with this inclusion. Since many gender therapists and members of the medical community now actively encourage their clients to look for support within the larger Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, some still feel that this inclusion might deter the true transsexualist from receiving medical and surgical care. The word People who are classified as neither male nor female against their will or by social consensus are said to be in the third gender destruction category. The definition of “third” typically signifies the *other*, who do *not fit into a rigid socially confined frame of female/male gender*. The term “third sex” or “gender” can also be referred to as an intermediate state between man and woman, a state of being both (such as “the spirit of a man in the body of a woman”), a state of being neither (neuter), or any combination of these. The phrase has been applied to Hijras from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India who have obtained legal identity.

Non-binary Identities in Indian Epics and Mythologies

Despite the fact that transgender people have a rich and diverse ancestry that includes Hindu gods and mythological heroes, these people are nonetheless “subject to various forms of ostracism”. (Kalra & Kalra, 71). Characters from the Puranas, Mahabharata, and Ramayana can all be considered mythical ancestors of modern transgender and third gender individuals. Sanskrit is thought to be one of the world’s oldest languages and is recognised for its use of all three genders, namely masculine,

feminine, and gender-neutral. The idea of “tritiyaprakriti” or “napumsaka” had been an essential component of Hindu mythology, folklore, epic, and the early Vedic and Puranic literatures for a very long time. Since there are so many references to transsexuals and transgender people in ancient Hindu texts, Goldman made the following observation in *Transsexualism, Gender and Anxiety in Traditional India* “Few cultures have accorded this phenomenon so prominent a place in the range of mythology and religion as has that of traditional India.” (Goldman, 374)

In the ancient period, transgenders were highly respected and held high positions. The presence of transgenders in India is witnessed in Puranas and in the Indian epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. In *The Ramayana*, King Dasharath exiled Lord Rama for fourteen years from the realm of Ayodhya in order to fulfil a vow he had previously made to his wife Kaikeyi. When Rama reached the kingdom’s border, he begged his followers not to weep and asked “all men and women of Ayodhya may return to their homes.” (Saxena, 11). The crowd accepted the request of their Lord, and returned to Ayodhya. However, the transgender waited their as they belonged to a non-binary group—neither “men” nor women” (11) After fourteen years of exile, when Ram returned to his dominion he was amazed to discover that all crossdressers stayed and waited for their Lord at the place where he had left them. They waited there for a period of fourteen years, homeless, bearing the heat, cold, rain, thunder and lightning, waiting for Lord Rama’s return from exile. Extremely touched by their loyalty, Rama blessed them with a boon:

The Hijras would be able to give blessings to people during auspicious and inaugural occasions, such as childbirth and marriage. This ceremony is also known as Badhai, in which hijras dance, sing and give blessings (Bhattacharya, 2016).

The tale of Ila, which is told in numerous Hindu traditional scriptures, is yet another example in this regard. Shiva and Parvati cursed Ila, a king, to be a man for one month and a woman for the following. In addition, Lord Vishnu’s incarnation as Mohini and Lord Shiva’s as the androgynous deity 'Ardhanariswara' are frequently described as the divine hermaphrodite and the divine transsexual, respectively. The feminine incarnation of Vishnu, Mohini, is the first known reference to transgender people. Mohini means “enchantress” when taken at face value. The devas and asuras churned the ocean with the help of Vishnu as the Kurma (tortoise) avatar to obtain Amrita (the elixir of immortality),

and *the Mahabharata* describes Mohini's first appearance at that time. She had to use her charisma to stop the battle between *the devas* and the *asuras* so she could give the Amrita to the *devas*. Mohini reappears in *the Vishnupurana* when she uses her cunning to rescue Shiva from Bhasmasura, whom he has blessed with the ability to burn to death anybody whose head he touches. In *the Lingapurana*, the union of Shiva and Mohini (Vishnu) is said to be the source of Shankara and Narayanan (Hariharan). Ayyappa (also called Hariharaputra, "son of Shiva and Vishnu"), the protagonist of this myth, was born of Shiva and Vishnu's procreation.

The transgender warrior, Shikhandi, is another non-binary identity or a character with gender conflict. At her birth, a prophecy predicted that she would one day metamorphose into a man. Therefore, she was reared as a male and married a woman. It is also important to note that Shikhandi represents a certain cosmic balance to her twin siblings, the completely masculine Dhrishtadyumna and the completely feminine, Draupadi. Also, as per another story, he is known as the male reincarnation of Amba, whom Bhishma had abducted for his younger brother. Amba pleaded with Bhishma to let her go and marry Prince Salva. Her lover ridiculed her and refused to take her as his wife. Amba went back to Bhishma feeling defeated and asked for marriage. Bhishma was unable to comply with Amba's request since he was obligated by his lifetime celibacy vows. Amba's humiliation drove her to perform penance and offer fervent prayers in an effort to bring about Bhishma's demise.

Shikhandini, the daughter of Drupada, the King of Panchala, was then born as Amba's new body. It is also important to note here that Shikhandi borrows manhood from a forest demon, thus becoming a man for the rest of his life and preventing war. It is also important to note that Shikhandi represents a certain cosmic balance to her twin siblings, the completely masculine Dhrishtadyumna and the completely feminine, Draupadi. Commenting on Shikhand's non-binary identity Pattanaik says that Shikhandi's gender identity has a layer of ambiguity to the great War of Mahabharata. Women were not permitted on the battlefield, but Shikhandi fought in the battlefield; is Shikhandi a male or a woman? This case of binary conflict is raised arguably in Pattanaik's *Gender Identity in The Mahabharata*. Pattanaik says, "all those who knew this tale wondered if Shikhandi was man or woman. Is gender defined by the truth of birth or by the truth of this moment?" (250).

The character Shikhandi is born biologically female but later identifies as male and plays a significant role in the battle of Kurukshetra. During the War, Shikhandi fought at he Kauravas. He assisted his brother-in-law Arjuna. And when he encountered Bhishma, bound by his vow of celibacy, refused to fight Shikhandi because of their past history. it is also said that Bhishma had taken a pledge not to fight against a eunuch. The Pandavas, aware of this, strategically placed Shikhandi in front of Arjuna during the battle, knowing that Bhishma would not attack him. And, as a result Arjuna engaged Bhishma in combat. The incident illustrates Bhishma's perspective on transgender people. There is much of room for discussion to determine why Bhishma put down his gun after spotting Shikhandi. Is it possible that he did not accept Shikhandi as a member of the masculine group and found it amusing and degrading to battle a member of *the weaker sex*? Or did he feel bad and accept his destiny after seeing it was Amba? However Bhishma may feel about Shikhandi, his decision to lay down his weapons has given the character a bad reputation. Shikhandi is regarded as the personification of vengeance.

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Whereas Bhishma's annihilation episode had a bad effect on transsexual people's personalities, Brihannala, a figure from the same epic, had some beneficial traits to offer third gender individuals. Brihannala is actually the legendary archer Arjuna, who is identified by modern Hijras as one of their mythical ancestors. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna encountered Urvashi when he travelled to Indralok in search of divine weapons to defeat Drona, Bheesma, and Karna. According to legend, Urvashi was the most attractive "heavenly nymph" (Doniger, 156) or Apsara in God's Court. The name Urvashi is made up of two syllables:

“Uras” denotes the heart and “Vashi” denotes control—a person who has control over the heart. Urvashi attempted and approached Arjuna erotically, but he repelled her sexual advance and addressed her as ‘mother’. Urvashi was annoyed and surprised to see as to how a mere mortal was able to resist her, and so she cursed Arjuna, saying that he would turn into a eunuch and spend the rest of his life among ladies, dancing and singing. Later, upon Lord Indra’s request, Urvashi curtailed the curse to a period of just one year. (Kalra). The epic recounts and highlights Brihannala’s talent in the arts. This encounter may have given rise to the myth that transgender persons are naturally gifted in the fine arts. There are still certain communities that still adhere to this belief; in the state of Manipur in modern-day India, *hijras* are admired for their beauty and prowess in acting and dance. They control the local theatre, playing the majority of the female roles. However, in the majority of the nation, these noble arts appear to have turned into impolite forms of amusement, and *hijras* are mocked for their filthy behaviour in public spaces.

Representation of non-binary Identity in Modern Indian Literary Texts

Gender is a contentious issue in the context of multiple sexual identity claims. Literally meaning “strange” or “not-normal,” the term “queer” encompasses those who identify as male, female, buche-femme, cisgender, berdache, transsexual, and transvestite. In the context of gender, however, queer starts to mean something different than the binary of male and female. Over time, the term “queer” has come to encompass more than one gender identity while challenging the idea that there are fixed gender roles or sexual orientations. Similarly, since its inception in 1990 by Italian feminist and cinema theorist Teresa de Lauretis, Queer Theory has gradually overtaken gay and lesbian studies as a dominant academic discourse (McCann and Kim, 483). Today, it includes theorizations of “queerness” as well as queer interpretations of the texts. Suzanna Danuta Walters writes, “Queer Theory... positions itself as a challenge to the obvious categories (man, woman, latina, jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely” (484). However, the context of this idea is always shifting, and the meaning of the word “queer” is continuously developing.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) movement has made us more familiar with nonbinary distinct sexualities. People typically recognise gender, or more precisely, genders in diversity.

We occasionally record information regarding these sexual outcasts, whether it is their surrogacy rights or their right to individual autonomy and self-determination. In a landmark decision, the Apex Court upheld transgender people's constitutional rights and freedoms, including those who identify themselves as third gender and those who identify themselves with a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth. By recognizing the third gender in a new gender construct, the court did away with the *had been* binary construct of man and woman. The case of National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India & Ors., filed in September 2012 by NALSA, was decided on 15 April 2014 by Justices K. S. Radhakrishnan and A. K. Sikri in writ petition no. 400 (Civil). The writ petition asked the Supreme Court to do several things, including guaranteeing transgender people's legal equality and safety. Election cards, passports, and drivers licences are only few examples of the identification documents that have been affected by these new regulations.

Khushwant Singh's literary work *Delhi* is one such endeavour that examines an alternative to the previously idealised man-woman interaction. The plot revolves around an unnamed narrator known as Mr. Singh and Bhagmati, a transgender woman from Delhi. The book raises some intriguing possibilities because it depicts a non-normative individual's visibility and engagement with society rather than the typical feature of queer novels in which a gender queer person is essentially hidden and cannot dare to be visible. The novel tells the extraordinary tale of Delhi's queer protagonist, Bhagmati. Her parents, who had three sons before her, were at a loss as to whether or not she was a girl, and hence they named her after one. She had "a bit of both" genitalia, so the doctor said he couldn't be sure what sex she belonged to (Singh, 29). And when she was only four years old, her parents decide to abandon her and hand her away to a "troupe of hijdas". Handing her over to them, her father remarks, "Now I have three sons and two daughters, you can take this one. It is one of you" (29). Later in the narrative, we see how Bhagmati has grown up among hijras and picked up their customs; She learned "to sing, clap her hands, and dance. develops normally as a girl up to the age of thirteen, when "her voice shattered and became like a man's. Her upper lip, chin, and chest started sprouting hair. Her breasts and thighs could have easily fit a boy.... However, she began to menstruate; her clitoris grew and the rest of her genitalia matured normally. According to the doctor, "you can do everything a woman can but you will have no children" (29). Just at the age of fifteen, ". . . the leader of the troupe took her as his wife. He already had two hijda wives; but such things do not

matter to them. Instead of shunning her as a rival, the wives . . . escorted her to their husband's room." Later on, Bhagamati was forced to sleep with the other wives of the head of the *hijra* clan. There was no way out; no choice but to succumb: She took up sex work and surprisingly she has got "more patrons than anyone else in her troupe"(30).

The physical and emotional plight of a hermaphrodite is best expressed by the novelist when Bhagamati says, "I'm like the Purana Qila you've conquered; now you want the Red Fort and its palaces made of white marble, she adds, brushing the back of her palm to wipe away the tears that aren't there". Bhagamati's marriage at the age of fifteen with the leader of the troupe, her sex work and her rootlessness uncover the pangs of the non-binary identity. Revathi's autobiography, *A Hijra: Life Story*, is yet another literary text, which not only covers the story of her personal account, but it also takes us to a reality, which is very cumbersome. Revathi was a sex worker forced by circumstance as she had to help her age old parents. Most of the transgenders are forced to be sex workers because of their circumstances. Initially, the police and rowdies were not aware of her gender. They assumed her to be a woman. But in a short span of time, her physiological dilemma was revealed and they started to abuse her. Revathi says that during the day, policeman snatched her money in the name of penalty (bribe) and in the night, rowdies came to her hut, checked her purse and took away all the money. Further she adds, If her purse was empty it meant they would rape her and beat her badly, "How many times they've caught me thus, beaten me in full view of the road, snatched money from me as a bribe and sent me off" (*A Hijra Life Story by Revathi*, 202). Revathi claims that police officers never view transgender people as living beings. Revathi was once jailed when a police officer booked her in a prostitution-related nuisance case. She pleaded with each police officer individually while clasping her hands together. But instead of sending her out, they utilised her as a trap to make further arrests. A two-star police officer entered the station after midnight (during the night). She begged him to set her free. "He then asked me to take my clothes off –right there, while the prisoner was watching" (206). Then he began to abuse her physically abuse. Revathi further writes:

I begged him and cried, but he stripped me naked anyway. When I was standing there naked, he stuck his lathi in the spot where I'd had my surgery and told me to stand like a lady. He hit the part

over and over with his lathi and kept asking, “So can it go in there? (206)

Revathi remained naked, showing her boobs to the constables around. She was forced to turn back and bend, “When I did, he thrust his lathi in there and asked, ‘So you get it there?’ I straightened up, yelling with the pain of it” (206). This was really horrible. It was so strange to her that she rates the rowdies better than the policeman: They raped me harshly without my consent but never tortured me like this. (206). Gayatri Reddy passionately refutes this identity construct in her ground breaking work *With Respect to Sex*. She says:

Hijras are not solely a sexual or gendered category, as is frequently argued in the literature, she says. They are formed by a variety of different factors, including kinship, religion, class, and levels of deference. (Reddy, 326)

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