

Crossdressers & Tricksters: Representation in Popular Culture

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Abstract:

In the sacred Hindu texts, instances of cross-dressing tricksters, gender impersonation, and long-term masquerades of the opposite sex foster contrasting interpretations on the spiritual and cultural level. Gender, a social construct, is connected to attire that can be used to explain and characterize creative processes that go far beyond human bodies, such as the interaction of life forces, nature, and politics, all of which are well-represented in popular culture these days.

The concerned paper will address the instances of defying the traditional roles of gender through metanarratives in the traditional Indian myths. The representation of transvestites in the mass culture has significantly opened up the contemporary literary and cultural interpretations. It will attempt to analyse the sacred myths with queer identities through the critical examination of cross-dressers with a comprehensive exploration of the works of the prominent queer theorists whose works have been enormously influential within gender and transgender studies. There is also an attempt made to open up for the contemporary readers the complex antiquity of the queer narratives veiled in the primordial Indian myths consequently paving way to a new possibilities pluralities of gender patterns as portrayed in today's mass media.

Key words: Cross-dressing, Queer Theory, Queer Identities, Mass Culture etc.

I. Introduction

“VikrutiEvamPrakriti”

The Rigveda says what seems un-natural is also natural [1]

From the pre-historic times, in any culture, the perception of heteronormative gender code does not depend on the biology of the person. The understanding of sex and gender has greatly broadened, thanks to important research in related fields such as lesbian, gay, and queer studies, which have critically examined numerous assumptions in cross-cultural studies. The Indian narratives on cross-dressing tricksters are particularly interesting to the scholars of psychology and sexuality that provide an overview of the phenomenon of cross-dressing. One can correlate it with the liberal views of the critical theories of the west that have a lot to offer precisely on the fluidic impression on gender in context to its impact on mass media and culture.

In many ancient cultures including Indian, the gender-bending/blending performance occurs due to reasons for eroticism and sometimes as per the religious requirements. One such prominent similarity in the Indian traditional society is provided by the sacred Indian myths that portray the immortals whose sex and gender essence are frequently vacillated. The popularity of transvestites is well captured by the mass media that present cross-dressing tricksters and other "queer" activities presented with intricate illustrations and exhaustive analysis to deconstruct the stereotypical gender codes determined by the mass culture.

There are many storylines which exemplify the act of cross-dressing of the Hindu deities that was a part of the ancient culture but was meted out with stigmatization as it was considered a source of moral vice. The idea of liberation of the sexual inhibitions and its subtle expressiveness could be found in the traditional

Indian myths with numerous narratives centring on the theme of cross-dressing tricksters that include the most popular Gods and Goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. In Indian mythology, one such story takes place on the fifth day of Brahmotsavam celebrations at Tirumala in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The principal deity, Vishnu (locally called Venkateshwara Balaji), is carried out in a stately procession dressed as the celestial enchantress Mohini in the wealthiest temple in India. Another comparable instance may be found in the northern Indian state of Nathdvara, in the desert state of Rajasthan. In the temple of Shrinathji, the ruling deity, Krishna, is covered in female clothing (sakhi-vesta) in a covert ritual, out of sight of onlookers. [2]. Cross-dressing, metamorphosed divinities conveniently transgress gender boundaries in the sacred Indian mystical context. Queer theorists hold a similar view, believing that anyone who conceals another meaning—like the homosexual body—disturbs the ostensibly natural relationship between body and sex, thereby upending the gender ideology [3].

A striking example of queer sexuality is Lord Shiva as Ardhnariswhar. Lord Shiva as Ardhnariswhar is a powerful illustration of queer sexuality. The dancing Shiva can represent a more aggressive masculine form in the well-known Tandava form, setting it apart from Lasya, the more alluring feminine form. In a similar vein, Shiva's Ardhanari form indicates that the material world is on the left and the spiritual realm is on the right. [4].

In Bangalore and several areas of Karnataka, the Goddess is called upon in a pot (karaga) in yet another instance of cross-crossing ceremony. The pot is then transported across the city by a young priest disguised in women's clothing. Given that the priest is a member of the warrior society and the Goddess is connected to Draupadi, it is possible that this rite is intended to placate and pardon the Goddess, who was mistreated by the Pandavas when they gambled her away to the Kauravas. The Goddess bestows blessings on the homes and streets she passes as she rides atop her transvestite priest [5].

The Goddesses are venerated only through auspicious rituals however, in actuality; women are treated with mediocre position. Even in media and mass culture, the depiction of women, performed by a drag-act portrays women with a bad taste. Traditionally, the creative men have relied on fat women and jokes about their weight or dark women and gags about their colour- all that represents the submissiveness of the weaker gender in an undignified manner.

Many critics have provided with numerous debates and ground-breaking findings over nature versus nurture with implications far beyond sex and gender studies. The matter-form distinction in ancient thinking, according to contemporary writers and gender theorists, was a means of characterizing gender as that which permits difference and distinction: one bodily matter is then gendered by assuming the form of maleness or femaleness. Thus, matter was generally genderless or formless [6].

The scores of folk narratives in our myths can approximate the drag- performance in the popular tales of Gods as cross-dressers. Vishnu's transformation into Mohini, the ambiguous gender of Shikhandi/ni, Shiva as Ardhanarishwara, Arjun disguised as Brihanalla and numerous plots that surely suggest the infinite possibilities of gender configurations. These tales could lead to the arguments and interpretations based on Judith Butler's conception of the drag-act. One of the main arguments of Butler's approach lies in her rigorous insistence is:

“— if sex is an effect of gender — how does the drag-queen perform or display a disjunction between the performed or signified gender and the preceding body? [7].”

The consequences of queer identities and cross-dressers could be traced back to the deeply ingrained forms. In one of the most well-known stories, "Mohini Tricks Bhasma," Vishnu effortlessly changes from male to female, naturally without the need for surgery.

Once, Bhasma, the Asura, gained the ability to burn to ashes anyone on whose head he placed his palm after pleasing Shiva with his devotion. The Asura made the decision to test his abilities against Shiva. Terrified, Shiva hurried to Vishnu for assistance, and Vishnu changed into Mohini to divert Bhasma. Bhasma, overcome

with lust, pleaded with Mohini to wed him. "Only if you dance like me," Mohini replied. Bhasma concurred. Mohini touched her head when she was dancing. To Shiva's satisfaction, the delusional, desire-driven Bhasma also performed this and was reduced to ashes [8].

In the Indian mythical context, well acknowledged masculine form of Vishnu as Mohini is desired by the demons and Gods alike and that makes him one of the queer Gods in Indian myths.

This view is elaborated by the queer theorists who base their arguments on sex versus gender with a far-reaching implications it has on the very concept of identity. This assessment could be found in the popular Indian myths in which the supreme godhead of Hindus, Vishnu can be cited as a relevant figure that can be reinterpreted with a reinforcing notion of gender/queer theory. It is possible to treat the themes of metamorphosis and cross-dressing as genuine examples of the drag pattern. Butler and other theorists view gendered behaviors like drag and cross-dressing as parodic imitations of gender norms that emphasize performativity, which is a fundamental component of all gendered behavior [9].

Many modern critics who contend that the cultural models of sex and gender should be dealt with a multiplicity of discourses rather than a single model mirror the gendered model of the worship of Mohini, an essential form of Vishnu. The consequences for Vishnu followers can transcend the labels of "male," "female," "masculine," and "feminine," opening up countless cosmological possibilities that transcend any binary structure.

The modern readers and transvestites are ever so often lured to find the veneer in such myths buried with many instances of non-stereotypical identities. Also, some scholars have documented the gender diaspora in the Puranas and Hindu texts among the universal diversities, also mentioning the *tritiya-prakriti* the third gender, people who are neither fully men nor women. Conversely, the sacred Hindu texts with its mention on plural existence of identities do not have clear specifications of it.

In India, even today, one can witness the legendary tales of Male devotees dressing up as females to have better access to Lord Krishna. Some male devotees have rejected their masculinity as a result of their intense devotion for Krishna. These followers identify as Sakhis, friends of Radha, Krishna's cherished milkmaid, and dress and act like women. They think they will have more access to the Lord because of their respect for Radha and their identification as her handmaidens. Interestingly, the order of Sakhis insists on discarding the male identity in order to escape material reality and unite with the divine, in contrast to other religious orders where the male biology is deemed necessary for emancipation from the cycle of life [10].

Also it is substantial to mention the ambiguous gender of Shikhandi. Though born with female genital organs, Shikhandi was raised a son, taught warfare and statecraft. Even in the progressive times, Shikhandi embodies all queer people – from gays to lesbians to Hijras to transgendered people to hermaphrodites to bisexuals. Like their stories, sadly, his story remains invisible.

At times, the ascetic Shiva is treated as a feminine principle. In Braj the land around Mathura on the banks of the river Yamuna is associated with the life of Krishna. It relates to a small temple of Shiva on the banks of the Yamuna, where the sacred *linga* stone is dressed every night as a gopi, or milkmaid, in the privacy of the sanctum sanctorum [11].

These tales still serve as inspiration for contemporary transvestites, drag queens, and crossdressers since clothing is the controlling element of outward appearance that permits us to experiment with identity and self-image either temporarily or permanently. The sacred act of dressing the *Shivlinga* every night can be a deep seated yearning for the cross-dressers to experiment into the 'other' realm of the gendered space.

In a similar vein, the sakhi-bekhis are well-known in Bengal, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh. Members of this sect usually dress like women to affirm their identify as sakhis, or Krishna's girlfriends, and to experience the revered spiritual feeling known as sakhi-bhava [12]. The worship of these gender-variant deities is also associated with certain festivals, some of which are well-known in India for their homosexual overtones and cross-dressing adherents. Tamil Nadu's Aravan festival is one of these celebrations. The majority of Aravanis

are transgender, and thousands of people, including many transwomen and transmen, attend the well-known Koovagam or Aravan Festival, which is held in late April or early May. The Aravani do not follow any castration system and revere the Hindu deity Aravan [13].

Joseph Campbell, who held the view that mythological figures serve as archetypes of human potential, also makes this point. When faced with challenges, their actions provide us with a notion of how life may be managed [14]. Such themes provides with a comprehensive examination of cross dressing and one is forced with the attention on the complexity of the phenomenon and to emphasize that there are no simple explanations for it. In the Indian cultural context, cross dressing implies different things. According to Hindu teachings, it is impacted by the existence of the Supreme when viewed historically in a variety of ways. Having the traits associated with both genders and being a single, complete sex with both male and female principles.

Costume conventionally has been a global sign of sexual differences, underlining societal notions of the heteronormative gender codes. In the recent times, irrespective of the cultural reactions of individuals who want them to be identified as homosexuals or heterosexuals, the transvestites or the cross-dressers in India continue to associate their acts to the traditional phenomenon of deities undergoing gender variance. In Indian myths there are numerous stories and version where pluralities of genders exist perhaps more than in any other cultures.

For a modern reader, the above ritual echoes the discreet desire of the transvestites in the present times with repressed sexualities. These gender minorities, for the fear of ostracization look up to find some strength from the traditional myths and legends.

II. Conclusion

Due to its location at the nexus of two theoretical domains—material culture and gender—the study of transvestism or cross-dressers currently offers an illuminating link in this research [15]. The implications of sex and gender, which undoubtedly impact our lives in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly, have been of great interest to academic research and queer theory for many decades. Such episodes of masquerading acts break free from the rigid social dogmas will continue enthusing gender-variant folks to cross-dress and revel in the festivities. It is fast becoming a success mantra of popular shows on Indian television with a new hope that the transvestites may no longer keep their identity into the closet, perhaps gaining sanction in the conformist mass culture.

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