

**Third Gender: Analysis of God, Texts and Theory from the works of Devdutt Patnaik's  
Shikandi**

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**Abstract**

Transgender connotes ancient customs, surviving festival, transgender studies implied irrationality belief in gods and disbelief in humans. Man's close contact with transgender considered the ultimate source of his myth. Devdutt Pattanaik and Laxmi Tripatti novels support the indigenous culture and life of transgender. These novels not only tell about the transgender community but also the voices of transgender in the society. It has historical and evolutionary aspects and discusses the tales of transgender and abundance human transgenders. The paper discusses about the ancient civilization and the moralistic about sex, and further analyses the queer theory and Hindu epics and mythology.

**Key words:** Transgender, indigenous, human, gods

**Role Played By God as Transgender**

Many societies have never accepted the relationship or love between same sex and never have accepted the Transgenders and have seen them as the Taboo. The courageous one should live in the society by facing the criticism and search the answers from the Mythology that the beings of their kind were worshipped whereas human beings are rather criticized. It's the duality they suffer between self and the other. The Self is the psychological feeling they consider that they are different from the gender they are born. The other is the physical appearance that out-rightly distinguishes the gender according to the society. Subjectivity and separateness immediately gives the conflict. Gender identity disorder is a conflict between a person's actual physical gender and the gender that person identifies himself or herself as. For example, a person identified as a boy may actually feel and act like a girl. The person

experiences significant discomfort with the biological sex they were born. People with gender identity disorder may act and present themselves as members of the opposite sex. The disorder may affect:

- Choice of sexual partners
- Display of feminine or masculine mannerisms, behavior, and dress
- Self-concept.

"Gender identity disorder is not the same as homosexuality. Identity conflicts can occur in many situations and appear in different ways. For example, some people with normal genitalia and sexual characteristics (such as breasts) of one gender privately identify more with the other gender. People diagnosed with gender identity disorder may not regard their own cross-gender feelings and behaviors as a disorder, and may question what constitutes a normal gender identity or gender role". [14]. The change in the

sex as the divine is accepted and worshipped by the people but the human beings are condemned to get approval from the society, yet they form their own group and follow the systems that has been followed for ages, though they identify that they are noticed indifferently in the society may be the observation made them to behave outrageously. One needs to justify the behavior of such people when they are not accepted by the society and they resisted the ravishers with the obsolete behavior.

Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik's book- Shikhandi: And other Queer tales gives the description of queer themes in Hindu mythology. It focused on alternate sexuality- the queerness, the fluidity of gender, the acceptance of "not normal", from eunuchs to same sex relationships suggestive of homosexuality to gender changing gods.

### **Role of God's in Texts and Vedas**

The title tale of Shikhandi is fairly well known to Hindus, but Devdutt takes us deeper into his readings and gives instances where God and Goddesses chose to shed their sex/gender. The famous mythologist Devdutt Pattnaik brings to the forefront the long concealed or long forgotten mentions of Queerness in this great religion of ours. The book consists of thirty odd chapters with each one of them dealing with a character or incident of Queerness finding mention either in any one of our ancient texts or surviving the wrath of time by making its way through the still prevailing ancient oral traditions; all of them pertaining to Hinduism. The most important character which also imparts the title to the book and with catches the fancy of the author in the very first chapter of the book is none other than

"Shikhandi", the woman who became a man to satisfy her wife. Other chapters are devoted to Lord Mahadeva, Lord Vishnu, the goddess Kali, Lord Krishna, Lord Rama, Bhima, Narada, Indra, Arjuna, Urvashi and the lesser known Rishyashringa, Pramila, Alli, Samba, Aruna, Ila, Vijaya, Skanda, Chudala and many others.

There are stories of women turning into men and men turning into women, such as Shikhandi in Mahabharatha, who was born a woman and raised as a son. Later, when she is married off, the wife discovers the truth and a Yaksha saves Shikhandini by letting him use his manhood for a night and perform his husbandly duties. Mohini, the female incarnation of Lord Vishnu is another example of this gender change. As per the Puranas, Vishnu becomes a woman to trick demons and tempt sages. Arjuna is deprived of his manhood after he rejects the advances of the nymph, Urvashi and he takes up his role as Brihannala, a eunuch dance teacher in the court of King Virata.

The first part of the book is a critical discussion on queer behaviour across the world. "The celebration of queer ideas in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals is in stark contrast to the ignorance and rigidity that we see in Indian society," (Patnaik 8). He talks about how much of the discomfort that surrounds sexual activity and homosexuality came up as a result of "valorisation of celibacy and the rise of monastic orders in all cultures."

An important point that he makes is that the soul has no gender, and he uses this point to explain that feminism has its roots in Hinduism. He explains that gender comes from the flesh and it is the unenlightened who value flesh over the

soul. It is only an unenlightened who is capable of valuing “male flesh over the female flesh, the young flesh over the old flesh, flesh encased in fair skin rather than dark skin, the property owned by that flesh, the family to which that flesh belongs, the stature of that flesh in society.” The enlightened, on the other hand, see the body merely as a vessel for the soul and give equal importance to both.

The first story discusses the idea of gender ambiguity through the story of Princess Amba, who is reincarnated as Shikhandi. He also narrates the stories of Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna and Aruna, the gender-changing deities; Narada and Yuvanashva, the men who gave birth; the compassionate friendship between Ratnavali and Brahmini, who preferred death to being separated from each other after marriage, and that of Kopperuncholan and Pisiranthaiyar who never met each other, but yet loved each other. He even discusses the concept of cross-dressing through the lives of Bhima, Vijaya, and Samba.

He discusses these ideas in the next half of his book, which is a collection of thirty stories drawn from Hindu mythology that explicitly discusses gender fluidity, sexual identity and queerness. He has taken tales from the Mahabharata, the Yoga Vasishtha, various Puranas, Tamil literature and oral traditions, the Navanatha Charita and even the oral traditions of the Hijras.

The story of Shikhandi which opens the collection is well known. Born as a girl but raised as a son, Shikhandi was Amba in her/his previous life. Amba sought revenge against Bhishma who abducted her and her sisters from their swayamvara for his

brother. She was reborn as Dhruvada's daughter Shikhandi, who was used to defeat Bhishma in the battle of Mahabharata. Shikhandi's life was like a man trapped in a woman's body, Shikhandi was married off to a princess who ran away when she discovered that her husband was a woman. To bring her back and save his father's kingdom from being attacked by his father-in-law's army, he took the help of a yaksha named Sthuna who lent Shikhandi his manhood. Shikhandi, the author says, would be called a female to male transsexual whose body is genitally changed.

Arjuna was turned into a woman by an apsara for resisting her advances, spent a year disguised as a eunuch; Krishna turned into a woman married Arvan before he was sacrificed to the gods and after Arvan's death cried how a wife would cry for her husband; Samavan was transformed into Samavati overnight and later married his male friend. Queer are the people who are strange, weird, peculiar, or mismatched between genders. Sex and gender are often treated as the same.

In the Mahabharata, Drupada raises his daughter Shikhandini as a man and even gets 'him' a wife. When the wife discovers the truth on the wedding night, all hell breaks loose; her father threatens to destroy Drupada's kingdom. The timely intervention of a Yaksha saves the day: he lets Shikhandini use his manhood for a night and perform his husbandly duties. In the Skanda Purana, two Brahmins desperate for money disguise themselves as a newly married couple and try to dupe a pious queen in the hope of securing rich gifts. But such is the queen's piety that the gods decide to prevent her from being

made a fool; they turn the Brahmin dressed as a bride into a real woman. The two Brahmins thus end up marrying each other and all ends well. According to a folk narrative from Koovagam in Tamil Nadu, the Pandavas were told to sacrifice Arjuna's son Aravan if they wished to win the war at Kurukshetra. Aravan refused to die a virgin. As no woman was willing to marry a man doomed to die in a day, Krishna's help was sought. Krishna turned into a woman, married Aravan, spent a night with him and when he was finally beheaded, mourned for him like a widow. These stories allow women to have sex with women and men to have sex with men on heterosexual terms. Lord Shiva becomes a woman to deliver the child of a devotee, Arjun takes the form of a snake to enchant a difficult princess, and Lord Ram welcomes hijras to his kingdom, and so on. So readily do the gods change their sex that it is a wonder why transgenders are not more easily accepted in our society? Most of these stories represent the gods choosing to adorn a particular sex in order to achieve certain aims, such as producing a child or ending a drought. It is always fated so, and there is a remarkable capacity for forgiveness. Nature is concentrated more than the changes, the gender by birth distinguishes the identity than the changes that happened due to circumstances and that are why Bhisma in Mahabharata uttered "One who was once a woman and one whose name is like a woman's or one who resembles woman. For this reason I will not kill Shikhandini." (Vanitha 42). In the Hindu narrative tradition, stories of gods and mortals changing gender occur.[39] Sometimes they also engage in heterosexual activities as different reincarnated genders. Homosexual and transgender Hindus commonly identify

with and worship the various Hindu deities connected with gender diversity such as Ardhanarisvara (the androgynous form of Shiva and his consort Parvati), Aravan (a hero whom the god Krishna married after becoming a woman), Harihara (an incarnation of Shiva and Vishnu combined), Bahuchara Mata (a goddess connected with transsexuality and eunuchism), Gadadhara (an incarnation of Radha in male form), Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (an incarnation of Radha and Krishna combined), Chandi-Chamunda (twin warrior goddesses), Bhagavati-devi (a Hindu goddess associated with crossdressing), Gangamma (a goddess connected with crossdressing and disguises) and the goddess Yellamma.[40, 41] There are also specific festivals connected to the worship of these deities, some of which are famous in India for their crossdressing devotees. These festivals include the Aravan Festival of Koovagam, the Bahuchara Mata Festivals of Gujarat and the Yellamma Festivals of Karnataka, among others.[42] Deities displaying gender variance include Mohini, the female avatar of the god Vishnu and Vaikuntha Kamalaja, the androgynous form of Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi. LGBT interpretations are also drawn in the legends of birth of the deities Ayyappa (a god born from the union of Shiva and Mohini), Bhagiratha (an Indian king born of two female parents) and Kartikeya (where the fire-god Agni "swallows" the seed of Shiva after disturbing his coitus with his consorts Parvati). Some homosexual Hindus also worship the gods Mitra and Varuna, who are associated with two lunar phases and same-sex relations in ancient Brahmana texts.[43]. The god's role of changing man to woman and woman to man is always

considered divine as there is specific role to be played in the cosmic theory designed. The role is vividly explained to the homosapiens and the materialist scholars have claimed to posit the problem in a static way. It gives much interest of these changes that carefully established balance between brain and the development of intelligence. We categorically reject the idea of psycho-physiological parallelism: the bases of this doctrine have definitely ruled the minds. Mythology is the study of people's subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and ritual. Subjective truth is indifferent to rationality. Even Mahadeva overwhelmed with the beautiful Vishnu as he gave the power to Asura on whose head he place his hand will reduce to ashes and asura tried the boon on Lord Shiva. Shiva fled in terror and with the Vishnu who transformed as Mohini distracted Bhasma. Shiva then noticed beautiful Vishnu enthralled by his beauty and together they protected the world from Demons, Ayyappa, Aiyandar and Hanuman born out of their union. Arjuna, the great archer and friend of Krishna, joined the circle of Gopikas eager to join the rasa-mandala. In Hindu Mythology the male form represents the mind and the female form represents nature and thus Shiva gave half of his part to Shakti as the mind is dependent on nature. The image of the Shiva as half a woman is often seen as symbol of gender equality, as the image identified as Shiva not as the real goddess. Though Shakti is seen as riding into battle on lions she never becomes a man and thus the image need to be seen as symbolically not as sexually.

“Mohini in the female form worshipped in a few places mostly in South India enchantress of the world. Mohini Attam

traditional dance of Kerala that is performed. By women, is supposed to be derived from the seductive dance of the enchantress Mohini.” (Vanita 84)

“The Ghazal when it appeared in South India, followed the indigenous tradition of using a female voice and addressing a male as the beloved.”(Vanita 136) Rahman insists that the ghazal rests on the assumption that the lover is a man, whereas beloved is the boy. The Fetishizing of youth is common to most cultures and exaggeration of the beloved's beauty and celebration of youth is a feature of much heterosexual poetry. The image of god is respected and dignified as it is worshipped as the same form through the ages unquestionably. The status of god is accepted as the form he has taken to save the world from destruction. The change in any form is rather accepted, As the story of Kartikeya gives such description that the Agni swallows the semen of Shiva and suffers from the burning sensation which is relieved when he transmit into the wives of sages womb and thus Kartikeya born out of two males.

Shiva said; O immortals listen to what is of concern. What has happened has happened. Now let him who will accept the semen I discharge. So saying he let it fall on the ground. Urged by the ageless ones, Agni became a dove. He swallowed the semen of Shiva with his beak.” (Vanita: 2012:93)

### **Mythology and Theory related to the Gender**

Hindu mythology dates to the time of the Rig Veda, the oldest sacred religious text, which was probably composed between 1500 and 900 B.C. The Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Epics, Agamas,

Bhakti literature and Tantras with differing interpretations on mythology could trace the root of Hinduism. For over thousand years these scriptures have been the cosmic womb of creations of various literature and art forms. Truly speaking Hindu mythology visualized the more happening and modern concept, Queerness before 2000 years. Traditional Hinduism seems to proclaim to the world that queerness is as old as the mountains. The vast traditions of Hinduism would tell the tales of gender queerness. Ancient scriptures like Narada-Smriti and Kāmasutra discuss queerness in detail. Epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata has many queer tales to tell us. Yet one cannot completely brush them aside as mere imagination; can be seen as stimulated shift marked by fear of oppression, individual behavior and conflicts, in established norms or social order of given time and place. Queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. Queer can be used as a derogatory noun or adjective for homosexuality or effeminacy. It can also be used to describe something that is not ordinary. It is a 'contractedness of gender and sexual identities and categorizations.' As Foucault argued this queerness is not a simple extension of a biological process, but a cultural product. This physical arrangement attracts non normative forms of sexuality. For religiously conservatives this is an act of purpose (incarnation). However it is interesting to notice that this image deciphered as a form of God not Goddesses. Directed from their nature this unsexing becomes a fulcrum of argument, what constitutes male or

female? However he -in -she seems to decode the concealment of selfhood in 'celebrated queerness'. Shikhandi Shikhandini, Dhruvad's daughter was a born female, but Drupada who wanted a son and was promised one by Shiva. Drupada considering his daughter as son raises her as son. Shikhandini grew up believing herself as a man. She was married too. Later she becomes a man to satisfy his wife. Perhaps this story of sex change speaks about queer space experienced by the couple, Shikhandi and his wife. We can supposedly infer that gender was not regarded as "primary identification" here in this tale. In Judith Butler's words, "intelligible," ancillary traits and behaviors must divide and align themselves beneath a master division between male and female anatomy.

Devdutt Pattanaik, Indian Mythologist argues that 'Shikhandi is a female-to -male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally.' Hindu mythology has fascinating tales of queerness which were indeed reflections of individual impulses rather than norms of a society. Ancient sacred scripts like Manusmriti and Dharma Shastra speak about the third gender (Tritiya Prakriti). Ancient laws and the queer space provided to an individual in the society, everything speaks how the ancient Indian society had celebrated the queerness. In Foucault's observation, sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather biological origins. However, it is still challenging to enter and explore into the full complexity of a vast culture that dates back to different time and space. Having conceived Indian theology in Indian mind,

perhaps it should be the most significant challenge to explore queerness with those of Western modernity. Besides it would be a deception to reproduce the very substance of number of strands of this queer critique and argument only on the basis of constructed Queer theory. Hermit-warriors Nara and Narayana had grown all powerful. Stories about their valour had spread far and wide. Riding on a single chariot, the duo made for a fearsome couple; they vanquished asura with ease and conducted the most severe penance that had even the gods shaking with fear. The two were close friends - in some texts they are *guru* and *shishya* and in others, they share a more equal relationship - and had sworn to a lifetime of celibacy. The king of gods, Indra, was worried. He feared their growing strength and their asceticism as much as he abhorred their celibate status. So he sent an army of apsara to break their penance and seduce them. Nara saw the apsaras approaching and turned to Narayana who drew a beautiful woman on his thigh using the stalk of a mango leaf. An apsara emerged from the thigh (*uru* in Sanskrit) and thus Urvashi was born; without a mother and with two fathers. Urvashi went on to become one of Indra's favourite apsaras, while Arjuna and Krishna were believed to be avatar of Nara and Narayana. What the stories from ancient Indian literature show is that queer behavior did not invite stricture from the community. This is the premise on which author Devdutt Pattanaik bases his book. He says Indian society was comfortable with the idea of queerness. It was experimental and non-judgmental about sexual attitudes and society didn't shy away from engaging with the conflicts arising out of queer behavior. Hinduism

spread through stories. And stories propagated three ideas- Karma yoga, bhakti yoga, and gyan yoga. Karma yoga or the path of actions was different from the earlier Karma kanda. Earlier action was all about conducting rituals; but later, action was all about performing social duties and obligations. Stories basically celebrated the householder's life over the hermit's. Bhakti yoga or the path of devotion gave form to the ancient Vedic notion of Brahman, the impersonal divine force invoked during the Yagna.

### **Conclusion:**

This transformation from the ritual through the intellectual to the emotional ensured the survival of Vedic truths in India over 3000 years. There was a time when there was a wide gap between the ritual texts and the forest texts. A similar gap is emerging today. On one side are the stories are the philosophies gleaned out of Vedic texts. Not many are able to see the connection between the two. Reconnecting them is the need of the hour. The texts never prescribe violence against non-normative sexualities but stifle the spirituality of these people.

“Sex is what you are born with, gender is what you recognize and sexuality is what you discover.” (Vanita 89). Kimmel quotes sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman about their argument that “Gender was less a component of identity – fixed, static- that we take with us into our interactions, but rather the product of those interactions.” Emphasizing the social construct of gender they argued that “a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others.”

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