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Transcending Gender Boundaries: A Mapping of the Alternative Masculinities of Lord Krishna

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Myths provide opportunity for a fundamental enquiry into the human condition being collective psyche of the Indian society which sustains its belief system and governs its way of life. Lord Krishna, the dark enigmatic mythical god who is closely associated with romance, love and eroticism remains a paradox in Indian ethics, politics, dharma and sexuality. An incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna exhibits the female traits of the former and is not a strictly masculine figure in the socio-religious and cultural space of the nation. This paper attempts to investigate the non-hesitative gender-fluid nature enshrined in Krishna and aims to study how the epic resists the hegemonic notion of masculinity, opening up an arena of alternative masculinities, especially redemptive masculinity. It also inspects the reconceptualization of the image of Krishna and its changing iconography in popular culture, with special focus on identity politics.

Keywords: myth, iconography, alternative masculinity, divine masculinity, redemptive masculinity

Myths are universal patterns of behaviour engraved in the collective unconscious of human beings, capable of exploring the inner workings of the mind. It offers insight into human experience and is often used to explore the complexities of sexuality and may reinforce

or challenge the sexual norms of the society. The normative image of the maleness of God, with the so-called ideal qualities of strength, power, supremacy and authority, finds a contradiction in Lord Krishna, the most beloved pan-Indian deity. Krishna transcends the binaries of normalized sexuality in several ways - cross-dressing, interaction with *gopikas*, transformation into Mohini, his choice of weapon, war tactics, etc.

Cross-dressing, the act of wearing clothes or accessories of the opposite sex, has been mostly used for fun, disguise and self-expression. Mythological fables involving cross-dressing can be frequently found in ancient Indian texts. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhima cross-dresses as Draupadi to kill Kichaka during their incognito in the Kingdom of Matsya, ruled by King Virata. Unlike Bhima who cross-dresses for the purpose of Kichaka-*vadha*, Krishna, a transvestite, derives pure pleasure from wearing the female attire.

There are many stories of Krishna's *Stri-vesha*, one being of Krishna dressed up in female attire as a punishment given by the Gopis for stealing their clothes. He insisted that they dress him up in the finest attire, give him the finest jewellery and apply make-up, much to the dismay of the gopis. The lyrics of a popular Thumri song begins with the lines, "Nar ko Nari Banao" (Make a Man into a Woman). Thus, the punishment intended for Krishna turns out to be a *leela*. In Sanjhi Khel, a traditional folk art form that reflects the cultural heritage of the Braj region, usually performed during Radha Ashtami, the artists depict certain scenes where Krishna voluntarily dresses as a female to pacify the angry Radha. In his poem "Shyama Shyam," the legendary fifteenth-century poet Surdas narrates the cross-dressing of *sakhis* to *sakhas* and vice-versa. They all arrive at Yashoda's house in this cross-dressed fashion, playing various musical instruments and dancing to their beats. Yashoda is stunned and tranced when she sees a fair Krishna and a dark Radha. "Gore Gavala ki Leela" (The Game of a Fair Cowherd), is a folk song from Utter Pradesh, wherein one day, on Radha's urging, Krishna and Radha switch each other's garments, when Radha wanted to experience how it feels to dress up like her beloved (Pattanaik, 2018, para. 3-4).

During the festival of Navaratri, which occurs in the month of Asoj, Braj devotees honour the feminine aspect of creation, by cross-dressing. They recount the story of Krishna who dresses as a woman in order to quench his curiosity, to find the secret of the Braj maidens' practice of collecting flowers from the forest, for Goddess Katyayani, and his attempt at maintaining anonymity by choosing to express himself in a gender-fluid identity.

The Jagannath temple in Puri, Odisha, has an anthropomorphic representation of Jagannath (as Krishna is worshipped here) with a round face, large eyes, and broad smile, decked in silk clothes and ornaments, which is placed along with the idols of his siblings, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Though the idol is adorned with a nose-ring on the right side (women wear it on the left), there is kajal in his eyes, red alta painted on the feet and in a ritual called *sadhi-badhna*, the deity is dressed in a sari (six-yard, uncut and unstitched cloth), popularly a woman's garment. The unusual form of Jagannath has been subject to controversy, as it is seen as a distortion of traditional religious iconography but the image represents the idea of the divine as formless and incomprehensible by the human mind. "As soon as the divine is analogized to the human realm, gender emerges as a problem of both difference and power" (Castelli, 2001, p. 4)

In the Banke Bihari temple, Vrindavan, there is a custom called Sakhi Sampradaya, in which men and women assume the role of *sakhi*. This is to commemorate the act of Krishna turning into a *sakhi*, shredding his divinity. On Radha Ashtami, the worshippers dress in saree. "Here the clothes stand as a metaphor to visually assert that males and females are not dichotomous but parts of a holistic whole" (Mishra, 2020, p. 12).

Indian mythology is thus replete with stories of physical transformation. As Wendy Doniger notes, ". . . liminal figures include the eunuch, the transvestite, the figure who undergoes a sex change or exchanges his sex with that of a person of the opposite sex, the pregnant male, the alternating androgyne, and twins" (Doniger, 1980, p. 284). The virile hero Arjuna who loses his manhood and becomes a eunuch under the name Brihannala, during the Pandava's incognito stay at the court of King Virata; Samba who disguises himself as a

pregnant woman, ultimately leading to the destruction of the Yadava clan; the transsexuality of Amba/Shikandini; Bhima who kills Keechaka under the guise of a woman; Ila who becomes a man when the moon wanes; Aruna who becomes a woman when the sun passes; Narada who forgot he was a man and lived as a woman for years together, and so on and so forth are a few among the various gender-bending narratives of the *Mahabharata*.

Krishna becomes Mohini in order to marry Aravan, a mighty warrior who was the son of Arjun in the Naga princess Uloopi. Aravan was chosen to be sacrificed to Goddess Kali, for the victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. However, Aravan has one last wish; it is not to die unmarried. As per the legend, no woman comes forward to marry him. The story then unfolds, of Krishna taking the form of Mohini to marry Aravan, making love to him on their wedding night, mourning his death in the dawn, and then returning to his original masculine form. The tale is widely believed in India and Aravan is still considered a patron god of some transgender communities in the country. Aravan Koovagam, also known as Koothandavar, is an eighteen-day annual festival celebrated in the month of Chithirai, in the village of Koovagam in the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu, where the village trans-women dress up as Aravan's brides, and participate in the marriage procession of Aravan and then mourns his death. The patron god of GALVA (the Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association), is Lord Krishna, because Krishna is seen as a symbol of inclusiveness, acceptance, and love.

The Mohini episode in the *Mahabharata* can be read in parallel with Lord Vishnu's transformation into Mohini in other religious myths. After many trials and tribulations, when *amruth* is churned out of the ocean, Vishnu deceives the demons in the form of Mohini and retrieves the nectar of immortality from them. In mythology, despite the androgynous *ardhanarishwara* form of Shiva-Parvati, Shiva represents the ancient paradigm of masculinity, and Vishnu the feminized traits. According to a version of *Bhagavata Purana*, Siva becomes so enamoured by Mohini, and at his request, Vishnu takes the form of Mohini leading to Siva's ejaculation. After Vishnu assumes his male form again, Siva embraces him and becomes one with him.

There are also many iconographical representations of *Hara-Hari* (destroyer-protector), in which, Vishnu assumes the feminized left position and Shiva stays on the right (Sahgal, 2017, p. 154). Indian philosophy perceives the universe as a combination of *purusha* and *prakriti*, spirit and matter respectively. Just like the *Ardhanarishwara,* the *Hara-Hari* concept too symbolizes the human psyche beyond the constraints of masculinity and femininity.

According to a Bengal folklore, Krishna takes the form of Kali, for Radha. Among all the gopis, Krishna's favourite is Radha, the wife of Ayanagosha. As informed by Radha's sister-in-law, a suspicious Ayanagosha notices Radha bowing down, and worshipping Krishna, who then transforms himself into Kali. In the *Brhadyoni Tantra*, Krishna is referred to as the embodiment of goddess Kali. Kali implants her *yoni* in a peacock's tail feathers and is incarnated in the womb of Devaki, Krishna's mother. Krishna plucks one of the feathers and wears it on his head, as a symbol of his divine femininity. "The mood that Krishna evokes with this feminine adornment is one of love, affection, and play, a breakaway from the rigidity of those who control and comment on society today. Little wonder then that the poet-saint, Tukaram referred to Vithal, Krishna's form popular in Maharashtra, as Vithaai, Mother Vithal" (Pattnaik, 2018, para. 7).

Krishna was never a king but a king-maker. He "takes the form of nurturance, not control" (Mirsky, 1996, p. 204). His focal point is not physical strength but intellect. Krishna's manipulative strategies during the Kurukshetra war were many: he deceived Drona, by insinuating Yudhisthira to falsely claim that Ashwattama, the son of Drona (which was also the name of an elephant) was killed in the war; he used Shikhandi, a transgender to attack Bhishma; he tricked Karna to give away his armour and earrings that made him invincible, in charity; he orchestrated the murder of Jayadhrata by Arjuna by creating the illusion of sunset, etc. Krishna's strategies become crucial in tipping the scales of the war in favour of the Pandavas.

His use of the weapon Sudharshanachakra, the whirling divine disk, stands in stark contrast with the instruments used by the other heroes, like bow, mace, sword, etc, which are powered by sheer physical strength. The constantly moving divine weapon with a hundred

and eight serrated edges, is attributed to both Vishnu and Krishna in Indian mythology. Unlike other weapons, it is directed at the opponent with willpower and projected by the strength of the mind. In the *Mahabharata*, Krishna uses this weapon several times. He beheads Shisupala with the disk at the Rajasuya *yajna* done by Yudhishthira. He invokes the chakra on the fourteenth day of the Kurukshetra war to hide the sun so that Arjuna could avenge the death of his son Abhimanyu, by killing Jayadratha. In another instance, he uses the disk to kill Salva, a demon who caused havoc in Dwaraka.

Thus, the normative portrayal of maleness in the divine mythical hero, with the so-called ideal qualities of strength, power, supremacy, and authority, finds a contradiction in Krishna. His masculinity cannot be reduced to social, cultural, or even political manifestations of maleness, thereby offering a scope for alternative masculinity, or rather, a more inclusive, healthier, and diverse view of masculinity. But this possibility of alternative masculinity is often marred by divine masculinity or hegemonic masculinity. The Hindu philosophies acknowledge the presence of the male principle in a woman and the female principle in a man, but people find it offensive when the alternative selves are publicly displayed. Devdutt Pattanaik in *JAYA: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* narrates the popular belief of Arjuna as having one nipple, as he was more of a man than others, and of Krishna, as having no nipples at all, as he was a *Purna-purusha*, a full man (Pattnaik, 2010, p. 126). Thus, an attempt is made to erase the feminine in Krishna by portraying him as a complete man and Arjuna, as a man of subordinate masculinity, as the vestigial nipples are marks of the feminine element present in every man.

It is interesting to analyze the iconographic shift in comic book series, from the earlier depictions of Krishna as soft, smooth-bodied, gentle and tranquil to his recent versions of the virile, muscular and aggressive. "The first artist for the Amar Chitra Katha mythological comic series, Ram Waeerkar, told me that one of the first obstacles he faced there was the publisher's insistence that the gods are not supposed to have muscles. This was frustrating for Waeerkar, who developed his early skills in figure drawing from copying the Tarzan comics, and it has been a similar story for all those 'calendar' or

'bazaar' artists who have studied anatomy, often at art school, but have not been able to use their grasp of proportion and musculature" (Jain, 2001, p. 202).

The difference in the book cover of Krishna stories of *Amar Chitra Katha* series, and the book covers of contemporary comic books helps in a physiognomic reading of the Krishna images. Grant Morrison, the author of the graphic novel titled *18 Days,* a re-telling of the *Mahabharata* says, "I'm very fond of Krishna, who is quite simply, supercool, like a rockstar of the ineffable" (Bhowmik, 2018, para. 3). Morrison's Krishna takes a visually stunning modern dynamic appearance that aligns with the contemporary super hero image, with powerful and athletic physiques. In the illustration on the book cover of *Krishna: A Journey Within* by Abhishek Singh, Krishna gets a superhero make-over, according to the notions of a hero in popular culture. "People today require a little bit more visual convincing of gods' extraordinary powers, says Sandeep Virdi, a 26-year-old graphic-novel fan from Delhi who applauds the new looks" (Anand, 2021, para. 8).

These contemporary illustrations of divine masculinity are oblivious to the presence of a more accommodative female principle in Krishna, hence reinforcing the gendered structures of masculinity, prevalent in our society. Instead of focusing on alternative masculinities or the plurality of masculinities or multiple masculinities, an attempt is made to fix it into the normative space of hegemonic masculinity. Even though the maleness of God is a figurative expression, it is widely taken literally, especially by the influence of Western Judeo-Christian traditions. "The gendered order of the human realm is easily reflected upon the divine and vice versa, leading to a strong association of maleness with God… The relation between human masculinities and the maleness of God is one of mutually productive influence—and with masculinity being plural, complex, ambiguous, intersectional, unstable, and subject to change, so is the image of the male God." (Klinken, 2017, p.19).

Zimbabwean religious studies scholars Ezra Chitando and Sophie Chirongoma have coined the term 'redemptive masculinities', a new form of masculinity that religious communities should engender.

It aims at cultivating "more peaceful and harmonious masculinities" (Chitando and Chirongoma 2012, p. 1), in which gender does not define worth, and masculinities and femininities are redemptive and life-giving. It seeks to redefine what it means to be a man by emphasizing the nurturing aspects of masculinity and creating a more inclusive society by dismantling negative behaviours and systems.

Krishna subverts and transforms the traditional view of masculinity by rejecting the harmful behaviours associated with it and offers us a vision of redemptive masculinity. His portrayal also challenges binary categorisation and reflects on the broader acceptance of gender expressions in mythology so that it can be mirrored in contemporary society as people attempt to live in harmony with their gods by the act of imitation. "In fact it won't be far fetched to say that religion, having the authority of the divine as well as of tradition, teaches what it means to be male and female" (Chitgopekar 2002, p. 23). The fluidity in Krishna, blurring the boundaries of genders and transcending the limited scope of divine masculinity reflects the concept of the Supreme as one complete self that encompasses all aspects of existence within itself. In a metaphorical sense, it reduces masculinity and femininity to transient states of the body and mind that reveal the genderless, sexless spirit.

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