

Gender Fluidity in Mythology: Non-conformity in Ancient Times with Special Reference to Select Indian Mythological Bibliotheca**Dr. S. Ramanathan**Assistant Professor of English, Virudhunagar Hindu Nadars' Senthikumara Nadar College,
Virudhunagar**Article Received:** 10/08/2026**Article Accepted:**12/09/2026**Published Online:**13/09/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.09.81**Abstract:**

Human beings are sexually categorized into male and female through their physiological features in the scientific field. This sexual demarcation yields into many gender variations which include man, woman and LGBTQIA+ which forms the gender identity of a person. Though there are no definitive numbers in the gender deviation, as it is identified in the general mainstream social spaces, UNO identifies more than 140 gender deviations. But in the mainstream society only the binary system which includes man and woman alone is accepted. The “others”—LGBTQIA+ community is not generally accepted and they are relegated to margins; sometimes even not treated as human beings. Indian mythology which is variegated in diverse themes often comprises of many queer tales in which gods have embraced the other gender identity like Lord Shiva's transformation as Ardhanareeswar and Thayumanavan, Vishnu's manifestation as Mohini and so on. To speak it very succinctly there are various other elements that are discussed in Hindu mythological paradigm, though the patriarchal society does not believe in man's transformation as woman and the vice-versa. We, in the academic arena identify this kind of transformation using the phrase, “gender fluidity.” This present paper is an attempt in relating the select Hindu mythological figures in the light of Kate Bornstein's theory, gender fluidity. This paper is an eye opener for the generally patriarchal mainstream society to accelerate the acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Keywords: Mythological bibliotheca, gender fluidity, Ardhanareeswar, conformity, Mohini**Introduction:**

A 2019 Tamil language film directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, *Super Deluxe* by name, silhouettes the fluidity of gender. Vijay Sethupathi, one of the leading actors in Tamil film industry, is the protagonist of the story. He acts out the role of Shilpa, a transgender. Born as Manickam, he transforms as a woman namely, Shilpa, and leads a capricious life in the society which never conforms with the transgenders and their way of existence. The

dialogue articulated by Rasukutty son of Manickam in the particular film which goes as, “be a woman or a man, as a you want to be, why can’t you stay with me as my father?” succinctly shows that the story becomes a conspicuous exemplification of gender fluidity.

Background and Rationale:

Gender fluidity is the non-fixed gender identity which transposes over a period of time mostly depending on situation. The fluctuations can occur at any level of gender identity. Gender fluid person is identified using various terminologies such as transgender, gender binary, cross-dressers, cisgender and so on in modern social space. In the literary arena, the concept of gender fluidity has been initially proposed by Kate Bornstein in her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* originally published in 1994. The modern literary theory and criticism schedules the phrase “gender fluidity” under queer theory and transgender studies. Bornstein is regarded as a proponent who has brought the concept of gender fluidity into the mainstream discussion. Prompted by the Butlerian concept of gender performativity, which Judith Butler has demystified in her 1990 book entitled as *Gender Trouble*, Kate Bornstein has coined the terminology “gender fluidity.” “Bornstein explains, “Gender fluidity is the ability to freely and unknowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change... A fluid identity incidentally, is one way to solve the problems with boundaries. A person’s identity keeps shifting, so do individual borders.” Gender fluidity is the discovery of equivocation of a person’s dispositions; Gender fluidity recognises no borders or no rules of gender. It is the incontrovertible locus classicus of a person’s character.

Review of Literature

Throughout the human chronicles, it is undeniably evident to notice such kind of gender fluidity in the persona of an individual. Mythology is not an exception. Mythology is basically considered as the reservoir of human knowledge which often instructs the people for their happy and amicable existence in the society. Myths are deciphered and interpreted in various periods of time distinctly and indiscriminately. In the modern days also, where human beings are caught up in the nexus of difficulty, myths can guide by causing a reverberation in the intellectual capabilities of the psyche of the individual. In these times myths are treated “as a surrogate term for the fact that the characters and actions of literary works have qualities that make them representative of types or classes or ideas” (Douglas 232). The study of myths revitalize our life in understanding the modern days’ dilemma in a better manner. To decipher mysteries of life, “we may now use the mythical method,” (Eliot 178) which, in my perspective, makes the “modern world possible for art” (Eliot 178). Myths are studied and interpreted based on their contemporary relevance to human existence in the society, since myths enthrall people during their period of difficulty in life and acts as an outlet to relieve themselves from the hard and sordid realities of their routine.

Research Methodology

Indian mythological bibliotheca offers many story which enthrall people and guide them to live in a peaceful and amiable way. Indian myths specifically the Hindu myths are deciphered from various perspectives in various times. For this study we have adopted two

gender theories—Bornstein’s gender fluidity and Butler’s gender performativity. These theories are supported by the psychoanalytical theories of Carl Jung in the clear deciphering and interpretation of the Indian mythological repository. Here we have selected a few queer stories related to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu and analysed with the backdrop of gender fluidity and performativity. The close reading of the primary source—the Hindu myths and the analysis of those stories with literary theories are undertaken with keen observation and sensitivity

Lord Shiva as Ardhanarishwar:

Hinduism is principally bifurcated as *Shaivism* and *vaishnavism* and the followers are identified as [shaivites](#) and Vaishnavites. For the *shaivites*, Shiva is the principal deity. Lord Shiva is considered, in Hinduism as the destroyer and transformer who symbolizes the cyclical nature of creation, preservation and dissolution of the universe. Shiva is usually represented with the matted hair, a crescent moon, the sacred river Ganga flowing from his locks, a third eye and a blue throat. Essentially each of these symbols is connected with a mythical story and these symbols represent ascetic power, cosmic wisdom and sacrifice. He is believed to live in Mount Kailash with his consort, Parvati and their children Ganesh and Murugan. Though he is worshipped in different forms with different names, in many places Lord Shiva is presented in the form of Lingam which symbolizes divine energy and creation.

This complexity makes him as one of the most revered gods in the Hindu tradition. Morphological roots of the word “Ardhanarishwar” clearly exhibit that it is a compound word comprising three distinct words – “Ardha”, “Nari” and “Ishwar”. ‘*Ardha*’ is a Sanskrit term meaning the *Purushartha* in Hindu philosophy—‘half’, ‘*Nari*’ again is a Sanskrit word suggestive of woman, female or lady. This incarnation of Lord Shiva is identified with various names as Gaurishwara or Ammaiappan. To Nandi’s (the bull’s) question on the mystery of the incarnation of Ardhanarishwara, Lord Shiva responds with three different incidents. The narration of the first one involves Brahma. Brahma wanted to create people in order to drive away his monotony; he had created his sons, who refused to procreate. Brahma was in a fix and he saw an apparition of Ardhanarishwara, after which he procreated women from his left side of the body.

The second story involves the sage Bhagiratha. Bhagiratha invoked the gods and begged them that the celestial river Ganga to flow on the earth to wash away the sins of people and to make a smooth transition of life. Ganga boasted of her furiousness. Bhagiratha invoked Lord Shiva to break Ganga’s fall. Shiva trapped her in his mighty locks. On seeing Ganga on the locks of Lord Shiva, his wife Parvati infuriated out of sexual jealousy. So Lord Shiva embraced Parvati till she merged and became the left half of the body.

The third one involves Bhrungi, an ardent devotee of Shiva who wanted to worship Shiva alone and Parvati intercepted him and asks him to worship Shiva in totality, since she is the part and parcel of shiva’s personality, as she claims. On the Bhrungi’s denial, Parvati

tried to merge with shiva and occupying the left side of Shiva's body is one of the attempts she made. Bhrungi denied to worship Shiva and Parvati in all her attempts. Peeved at his insolence, Parvati crused him that he would lose the part of his body that had emerged from the female seed. Finally, after Bhrungi's remorse, Shiva and Parvati showed mercy and gave him a third leg to stand upright. Bhrungi was left in a skeletal form which reminds the mightiness and importance of the female goddess. The form Ardhanarishwara stands as a message to all human beings that in the world both men and women must be treated equally. Carl Jung discerningly enunciates a different aspect to say that all, irrespective of their gender, possess the qualities of both female and male species. In his work *The Portable Jung*, he makes it clear:

Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman.... This image is fundamentally unconscious, a hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of man, an imprint or "archetype" of the ancestral experiences of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions ever made by woman — in short, an inherited system of psychic adaptation. Even if no woman existed, it would still be possible at any given time to deduce from his unconscious image exactly how a woman would have to be constituted psychically. The same is true of a woman: She too has her inborn image of man. (Jung173)

Thus Arthanarishwar highlights how intrinsically both men and women carry both the masculine and feminine traits which occasionally exhibit dominating one over the other.

Lord Shiva's transformations as a woman

In another instance Lord Shiva has transformed as a woman in order to deliver his devotees' child. This peculiar story is an integral part of Tamil *Bhakti* tradition that dates back approximately to fifth century. There was an incessant rain. The river Kaveri was in spate. A mother had to cross the river to reach her daughter's home at the other bank of the river. The daughter was moaning in his labour pains. No boatman was ready to indulge in the risk of crossing the river at this strange occasion fearing up some catastrophe. The desperate mother hailed the name of Mahadeva, Lord Shiva and prayed to him to assist her in this pathetic situation and provide her with amodus operandi to relieve herself from desperation and frustration. Her prayer reached kailasa and Mahadeva wanted to help her. On the advice of his wife Gauri he embraced the image of the deceased daughter's mother and went to her home. "He comforted her with songs and held her hands and wiped her sweat until the baby slipped out. He then placed the baby on the mother's breast and cleaned the room and lit the lamps as a midwife is supposed to." (Pattanaik 50). On the arrival of the real mother the daughter confounded to see two persons in the same image. The imposter smiled and disappeared and at once the daughter realised that it is none other than Shiva. The shrine of Shiva- Mahadeva who served as midwife is found at the Rockfort temple, Trichy and the deity is known in the name Thayumanaswamy meaning the lord who took the form of a mother. The incarnation highlights Shiva not only as the cosmic god of destruction but also as a progenitor who shows tenderness, protection, and parental love.

Lord Vishnu's Transformation as Mohini:

Lord Vishnu is the most conspicuous and dominant deity in the *Vaishnava* tradition of Hindu philosophy and is regarded as the preserver and protector of the universe. He conserves the cosmic order. Vishnu is usually epitomized with blue skin embodying infinity and divine power. He, according to Hindu epistemology, holds four sacred articles: the conch (*sangu*) representing the cosmic sound; the wheel (*chakra*) which indicates protection and justice; the truncheon (*gada*), signifying strength; and the lotus portraying purity and spiritual awakening. He also reclines on the serpent, Shesha by name. One of Vishnu's significant roles is his manifestations through incarnations (avatars). The most famous among these are Rama, the protagonist of *Ramayana*, and Krishna the central character of *Mahabharatha* and the eternal preacher in *Bhagavadgita*. Vishnu, through these incarnations, demonstrates that he interferes in the human affairs and creates the triumph of virtue over evil. As the guardian of harmony and justice, Vishnu remains one of the most revered figures of Hinduism. Mohini is one of the incarnations of Vishnu.

Bashmasura, an *ashura*, loosely translated as monster or demon, pleased Lord Shiva with his devotion and obtained the power of burning to ashes anyone on whose head he placed his hand. Bashmasura wanted to try his magical powers on Shiva himself. The discombobulated Shiva fled in fear and sought the help of Lord Vishnu who transformed as Mohini to distract Bashmasura. They both dance together. Bhasma was intoxicated by the beauty of Mohini. The deluded Bhasma, blinded by desire, places his hands on his head, on seeing that Mohini places her hand on her head and was burnt to ashes, much to the delight of Shiva. Devdutt Pattanaik illustrates the rest of the story thus:

Shiva then notices how beautiful Vishnu was as Mohini. It was the form he had taken to trick the asuras before, distracting them as he poured amirtha, the nectar of immortality, down the throats of devas. Shiva was overwhelmed with desire that he abandoned his consort Parvati and ran after Mohini. Together he and Mohini created many warriors those who chose celibate and protect the world from demons. Amongst them were Ayyappa, Aiyanar and even Hanuman.” (60)

Mohini avatar is nothing but Lord Vishnu's transformation as a woman which again is a manifestation of femininity dwelling inside the mind of Vishnu. Mohini as word originally means a pulchritudinous woman who captivates men through her charm and is usually identified as a femme fatale.

The word Mohini is believed to have been derived from the Sanskrit word that is used to refer to personified delusion, which served as fitting considering the absurd beauty and allure that Mohini is believed to have possessed... In the beginning, Mohini was usually depicted as a beautiful woman who held the powers of captivation through her charm. (Balakrishnan)

In the villages every one may have the superstitious story of being captivated by Mohini and sometimes have prone to death.

Krishna's Cross Dressing:

In the oral tradition of Gangetic plains, which are of diverse regional folklores which include heterogeneous literary genres like ballads, riddles and lyrics, usually narrate the narratives which preserve historical, mythological and social values. There is a story revolving around the Krishna myth. That exceptional story is retold by Devdutt Pattanaik. The story revolves around Krishna's cross-dressing, which is termed as *stri-vesha* or *shyama Sakhi*, which is one of the most quintessential microcosms of Krishna's gender fluidity. These stories also find place in *Bhagavata Purana* and Holi celebrations. "Krishnas' lore is full of Krishna cross-dressing. Few devotees see this sexual term. But it does show Krishna's absolute comfort with feminine attire" (Pattanaik 139).

The narration enunciates that once Krishna confiscated all the clothes of the milkmaids who were taking bath in a pond. He refused to give them back until the milkmaids showed their naked bodies to him. The women decided to punish him by making him dress like a woman. Much to their surprise, Krishna was not offended but enjoyed. The women started loving him. "In order to acclaim their love, Krishna declared that in all images he would sport a nose ring and a braid, decorated with flowers and jewellery like a woman. He would even paint his palms and soles red with *alta*, just like his mother" (Pattanaik 138). Later, to pacify the anguish of Radha, his inamorata which had born out of her possessiveness, Krishna wore, in an exceptional night of their secret rendezvous, Radha's clothes; they exchanged their roles. Krishna wore Radha's clothes and Radha wore Krishna's clothes; she played the flute and Krishna danced around her. "She took the lead when they made love and occupied an active position. She dominated him" (Pattanaik 139). In the myth, not only Krishna but also Radha mollycoddled in the act of cross-dressing which shows Radha's desire to dress like a man. The exchange of dresses also succinctly testifies that they are not just lovers but one soul with multifarious semblance. Also, it emulates their intimacy. It is noteworthy that Krishna has also transformed as a woman in order to consummate the relationship with Aravan in the Mahabharata, which is Aravan's aspiration before his death.

Conclusion:

Gender fluidity in Hindu mythology is neither incidental nor marginal; rather, it inherits the foundational aspect of the Hindu heritage's commodious closets of metaphysical vision. Through the narratives of gods and their incarnations, it is signified that the deities transcend the binary classifications. The Hindu thought becomes vociferous in articulating the cognition of the binary classification and its rigidity. The Hindu philosophy materialises such fluidity and resistance to the callous categorization of gender through the accentuation of a metaphysical concept, *ātmaan*, the self; in conformity with the Hindu epistemology, the self (*ātmaan*) is ultimately understood as a transcending substance that is eclipsed in a body and is not subject to social hierarchization.

Scholars enunciate that such chronicles which have chronicalised through the vintage of time destabilise the rigidity of the gender binary and provide us with a culturally embedded edifice of concepts for understanding the multiplicity of identity formation in relation to gender identity. Doniger contends that Hindu mythology frequently “plays with gender in ways that challenge the fixed categories” (244). Pattanaik reinforces that these chronicles reflect a longstanding cultural acceptance of gender variance rather than its marginalisation. Ruth Vanitha strives to convince us that the ancient Indian texts, which are embedded in religion and religious practices, provide “multiple models of non-binary and fluid identities” (112), not to complicate the assumptions about the chronologicalised stereotypes of gender. The cult of all these incarnations emphasises that divine grace transcends gender roles: Shiva becomes mother and loyal husband in accommodating his wife in his left side of his body an avatar of transgender, Vishnu’s manifestation as Mohini, a woman, and Krishna’s cross dressing.

In the contemporary epoch, these mythological paradigms have conspicuously gained significance as sites of cultural and intellectual engagements after the advent of the western gaze, particularly with queer and postcolonial discourses. They challenge the imposition of criteria on gender by the social institution through rearticulating the indigenous epistemologies that recognize gender diversity as intrinsic rather than deviant. Thus this particular study on gender fluidity in Hindu mythology enriches the understanding of the past but also contributes to the concurrent conversations about identity, inclusivity and the fluidity of the human existence and psyche. Ultimately these religious chronicles affirm that gender is not fixed but continuously evolving to precisely make our living a more amicable one which is scientifically identified as the “survival of the fittest”.

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