

ISSN:0976-8165



# The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**VOL. 15 ISSUE-2 APRIL 2024**

**15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Interpretation of the Character of Shikhandi as a Trans-Man

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11103623>

**Article History:** Submitted-31/03/2024, Revised-14/04/2024, Accepted-17/04/2024, Published-30/04/2024.

### **Abstract:**

Transgender people have an identity which is different from their birth sex. There are both Trans-women and Trans-men; trans-women are those men who break the boundaries of masculinity and live lives as women while trans-men are those women who break the chains of femininity and challenge the patriarchy by identifying themselves as ‘men’. Trans-women are visible, especially in India, due to the prominent socio-cultural Hijra community while trans-men are invisible and more marginalized. Indian mythology accepted masculinity in a female and gave space to trans-men. Shikhandi, a character of Mahabharata, was a trans-man who was born as a female but led a life of a male. However, most retellers either portrayed Shikhandi as a eunuch, hermaphrodite or a trans-woman which was very clearly explained by Devdutt Pattanaik, in his book, *“Shikhandi and other queer tales they don’t tell you”*. This paper tries to interpret the character of Shikhandi as a trans-man with a close analysis of the work of Pattanaik.

**Keywords:** Trans-man, Trans-woman, Transgender, mythology, masculinity, femininity, patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

In this patriarchal world, it is not easy for women to leave their roles as wives and daughters in order to live a life that of a man as it directly challenges patriarchy. The society has fixed roles for each sex, and anyone who breaks the boundary is considered ‘anti-social’ or ‘deviant’ and in modern times, they are referred to as ‘Queer’. The word ‘Queer’ which originally translates to ‘strange’, ‘weird’ or, ‘odd’, later got disparagingly associated with

homosexuality. (Merriam-Webster, 2024) The Oxford dictionary finds out that the noun 'queer' for homosexuals (mainly a man loving another man) came to be used in the late nineteenth century as a derogatory and offensive word. The word was found in the infamous letter by John Douglas, the ninth Marquess of Queensberry wherein he condemned the Fifth earl of Roseberry to whom his son, Viscount Drumlanrig was a private secretary. Douglas accused him of having an affair with his son, of being one of the 'Snob Queers' who corrupted his son. (Hoare 106) Later, homosexuals not only started embracing the word 'queer' with pride but also began to take pride in their 'queerness'. "The idea of two male Gods creating a child does not cause embarrassment to devotees until the Western gaze points out its queer nature." (Pattanaik 62) Indian mythology accepted queerness without naming it as 'queer' and always treated those people as 'normal' human beings, it is only the modern theory that has queerized these individuals. Gender fluidity was quite common and non-queer in Hindu Mythology and culture. "Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness." (Pattanaik 12) Pattanaik challenged the very existence of patriarchy through the portrayal of the mythical characters like Shikhandi and Chudala, who were born as males but later transformed themselves into women. Although some supernatural or religious discourse was used to explain the transformation, it still existed. Shikhandi was born as a female, and later borrowed manhood from a yaksha by undergoing the sex exchange which can be seen as analogous to the modern sex reassignment surgery. Likewise, Chudala, a yogini in the *Yoga Vasistha*, turned herself into a 'man' to enlighten her husband because "he refused to see wisdom in his wife simply because she was a woman." (Pattanaik 56) These stories subtly dissolve the boundaries between men and women. Indians do recognize trans-women because they are pretty visible and most of them become a part of the Hijra community where they find their space of acceptance and security. While Trans-men have no such space to claim, and people are ignorant about their existence. The character of Shikhandi is often misinterpreted as that of a eunuch or a hermaphrodite.

### **Gender as a social term**

Gender identity refers to the way one identifies oneself which may or may not be identical to the sex assigned at birth. Gender identity and personal choice are two different things. There can be a man who identifies himself as a woman, feels trapped in a man's body yet loves to keep his hair short. Keeping long hair does not make one a woman nor keeping short hair makes one a man. Likewise, wearing a saree does not make one a woman and wearing jeans does not make one a man. It is profoundly a socio-cultural thing; Hijras of India wear

sarees because women in India prefer wearing sarees. Whereas, in the western world, women prefer wearing jeans, and so do trans-women. As a trans-woman feels like a woman, 'she' wants to behave in a way other women she sees around do. In the same manner, a trans-man tries to imitate the other men. It does not mean that there is any set thumb rule of how to dress, act or behave. Feelings and choices are different; choices are predominantly influenced by the culture.

Jamison Green, a trans-man, a prominent Transgender rights activist, educator and author, writes in his autobiography, "*Becoming a Visible Man*":

"Another interesting thing about these gendered qualities is that the category they're assigned to can change between cultures, or change within a culture over time. What were decidedly masculine once, like the occupations of secretary, telephone operator, bank clerk, and tailor, went through a feminine phase and are now more gender-neutral. Another example of this kind of shift occurred in the 1960s and 1970s when some American men began to wear their hair long (again, after a few generations where short hair was the fashion), and people thought a man with long hair was trying to be a woman, or at least was expressing himself as a feminine man, whereas now men can have long or short hair and it's far less likely to be interpreted as a gender statement. Changing hairstyles often challenge gender norms. More than a few long-haired men in the 1960s were beaten up because they challenged gender norms." (Green 21)

Green cannot emphasize enough the fact that Gender is cultural and it has nothing to do with one's biological construct. Individuals are caged within the boundaries of 'female' and 'male' and it is very tough to imagine anyone beyond this fixed cage. One who exceeds the fixed compartment or the fixed societal norms is often identified and labeled as a 'deviant' or 'abnormal'. Androgyny exists everywhere; individuals have not been given any chance to be flexible and look beyond the imaginary social boundaries. "Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or a "natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts." (Butler 11)

### **Shikhandi as a Tans-Man**

Shikhandi is a character in the Hindu epic, "Mahabharata". Shikhandi was born as a daughter to king Draupada while he desired a son to take revenge from Guru Drona. Upon

realizing that he fathered a daughter, he raised his daughter as a son. Pattanaik retold the overlooked story of Shikhandi in his book, "*Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you*," and tried to explore the gender fluidity in Hindu mythology, which people do not consider now.

"The girl, named Shikhandi, was taught all the skills reserved for men. She grew up believing she was a warrior. She was even given a wife. But on the wedding night, when the bride discovered that her husband was a woman, Shikhandini not Shikhandi, she ran to her father in a state of shock." (Pattanaik 41)

"She confronted with her femininity for the first time in her life...." (Pattanaik 42)

"For the girl thought like a man and felt like a man and had always been treated as a man. But that body of hers was certainly not a man's." (Pattanaik 42)

It is a clear example of how Judith Butler talks of gender as a performance. Being brought up as a man, the repetition of the 'gendered role' made Shikhandi believe that 'he' was a 'man'. Once trained to act a certain way, women can act like men or vice versa. So, there is no fixed way to act, it is only what and how we are accustomed to act under given directions. Once Shikhandi got manhood from the Yaksha, she became what we say as 'trans-sexual' in modern terms. Pattanaik writes, "The queer stories are not sexual but they do challenge notions of gender." (Pattanaik 52) It is more about gender identity, androgyny, gender fluidity and inclusiveness, where there are no fixed compartments, and people are allowed to live the life they want. There is a hegemonic discourse in society where cisgender is the only prominent gender and any diversion from these fixed norms is considered 'abnormal'.

All the rules and norms are made by society and its people; there is no gender-specific rule book. There are no rules in the forest because man's rules do not apply there. The forest accepts no one and it rejects no one. In the forest, it does not matter if you are a man or a woman. You are either predator or prey. (Pattanaik, *The Pregnant King*, 328)

Revathi, a transgender writer and activist in her book, "*A Life in a Trans Activism*," writes "Shikhandi is the earliest example of a trans man or a female to male trans person" (127).

Although retellers avoid portraying Shikhandi as a trans-man; they either represent Shikhandi as a Hijra or hermaphrodite. This may be due to two reasons: either people are unaware of their existence or they intentionally do not want to accept them; they are being cornered and marginalized by the society. The story of Amba takes all the limelight; Shikhandi

was princess Amba in the earlier birth, whom Bhishma abducted along with her two other sisters and brought them to Hastinapur to get them married to his half-brother, Vichitravirya. Amba loved Shalva, so she begged Vichitravirya to let her go. Bhishma sent her to Shalva, but Shalva did not accept her and questioned her purity. Amba came back to Vichitravirya who did not accept her either. After being rejected by all, Amba begged Bhishma to marry her; however, as he had taken a vow of celibacy, he asked her to go back to her father. Shikhandi wanted to take revenge from Bhishma for her previous life. Shikhandi stormed into the battle of Kurukshetra, behind whom was Arjun who pinned Bhishma down with his arrows, knowing Bhishma would not use arms against a woman. People know this narrative but they ignore the fact that Shikhandi was born as a woman not only in the previous life but also in the present life. 'He' was neither a hermaphrodite nor a trans-woman but a trans-man and a great warrior who challenged the notion of masculinity. Shikhandi fought against the Kauravas when 'he' got a chance to take revenge on Bhishma. In spite of being born as a female, Shikhandi displayed bravery in the battle field as any other male warrior. The character of Shikhandi breaks all the patriarchal norms.

“Shikhandi, who became Shikhandi, is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. But retellers avoid details and tend to portray him/her either as eunuch (castrated male), a male to female transsexual (a man who rejects his male biology, a male to female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Amba) in his past life. It reveals a patriarchal bias even in a queer space.” (Pattanaik 46)

Trans-men are even not accepted in the Hijra community, they are treated with disgust and scorn. (Revathi 93) They are so marginalized that their existence is being questioned. One cannot envision a woman behaving like a man for it threatens the patriarchal structure. Trans-men in India have no jamaat or any hijra community to count on, so they are stigmatized more than the visible trans-women. Revathi in her book, “Life in a Trans Activism”, gives numerous examples of those trans-men (whom she calls as her 'sons') who face this stigma and problems in their daily lives. The character of Shikhandi is very rarely accepted or identified as a trans-man which reflects the reluctance of society towards them. Even Revathi accepts that the identity of a Trans-man is more questionable than that of a trans-woman. It is challenging for a woman to go against the vital institution of patriarchy and take the role of a man. It threatens the 'man-made' societal structure and the patriarchal space. They have no community to count

on, like the prominently visible Hijra community in India. Prof. S.K Sharma in his book, “*Hijra: The Labelled Deviants*,” described them as “a group of closely shaven persons in female attire, singing and dancing, making overtures on lookers, cracking sexually charged jokes at men and making loud clapping sounds with their hands.” (2) Revathi in her book, “*Life in a Trans Activism*,” writes about a trans-man, Christy who was raised by a trans-woman and that trans-woman did not accept Christy as a man till the end of her life. (132) It is paradoxical that the identity of a trans-man is not being accepted by some trans-women. Hegemony exists in the trans community as well.

### **Gender and Power**

Michel Foucault, the French Postmodernist philosopher and literary critic argued that ‘power is everywhere’ and it ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense it is neither an agency nor a structure. (Foucault 63). It influences the knowledge, discourse and the ‘regimes of truth’. (Rabinow 1991) Each society has its power structure which gives shape to its discourse and the consequent truth. In a patriarchal society, where power lies in the hands of men, they decide which ‘truth’ will prevail. Once the power comes in the hands of transgender people, they too will be able to generate knowledge and hence their voices will be heard. Foucault argues in his work, “*History of Sexuality*” that power has created the construct of sexuality and he analyses how discourse is a mechanism of social control and power. It is through discourse that cisgender is considered the norm, and any deviation from this norm is not accepted by the society. It is essential to read the narratives where transgender people have been given a space, personal narratives of Transgenders where they vent their feelings. It is important to give them space in the society and accept their truth as truth. Narratives can definitely play a vital role in empowering transgender people.

### **Conclusion**

Hindu mythology and culture always accepted Transgender people, be they trans-women or trans-men. Arjuna in Mahabharata, disguised himself as Brihannala and taught singing and dance to Princess Uttara during Pandav’s exile period. Krishna too many times transcended the gender norms. There are many stories where it is shown that in love Krishna often cross-dressed as Radha, and Radha as Krishna. Once Krishna transformed into Mohini and married Aravan because Aravan was being sacrificed in the war, and his last wish was to get a wife for a night. No woman would have married him knowing that he would die the next day. So, it was Krishna who turned into a woman, Mohini, and married Aravan. Krishna then

cried on Aravan's death like a widow and broke the bangles. Trans-women of Tamil Nadu celebrate this festival each year as 'Koovagam', dedicated to Koothandavar (Aravan), where trans-women gather, enact themselves as Lord Krishna (who transformed himself into Mohini to marry Aravan), marry Aravan for a night and then the next day they mourn the death of God Koothandavar, and also perform certain rituals like breaking the bangles. There are multiple such examples of gender fluidity, Even Lord Vishnu, in *Puranas*, transformed into Mohini and distracted Bhasma in order to save the life of Lord Shiva (Pattanaik 60). Shikhandi is a fine example of a trans-man. These examples show that Indian culture was open to gender fluidity, cross-dressing, androgyny. Pattanaik also tells us that these stories are not just restricted to Hindu mythology. He tells us the story of a North American tribal man who turned into a woman to marry his male lover. He had both male and female qualities. He gives numerous examples from different mythologies, including Aztec mythology, Cuban Santeria mythology, Viking mythology, the very fascinating Japanese Shinto mythology where Inari sometimes becomes a male and sometimes a female, Chinese Taoist mythology where eunuchs were not transgenders, they were men being castrated so that they become impotent(it is for the emperor's benefit) so was the case in India during Mughals' period where men were castrated so that they lose their procreative ability and can be used as 'slaves' to the Mughal queens. He tells us tales where 'queerness' was accepted without naming it as 'queer'. People overlook these tales and stereotype transgender people as being 'deviants' or 'sub-humans'. It is high time to read these stories and understand the nature of these characters which is so natural in their own way. One should look beyond the gender binaries and not just chain oneself in the fixed boundaries of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'.

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