

THE DIVINE AS NON-BINARY: THE AMBIGUOUS TRANSPOETICS OF THREE  
TRANS, GENDERFLUID AND GENDERQUEER FIGURES FROM HINDU  
MYTHOLOGY

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## The Divine as Non-Binary: The Ambiguous Transpoetics of Three Trans, Genderfluid and Genderqueer Figures from Hindu Mythology

### Abstract

This trilogy of poems presents a trans-positive perspective on the characters of Shiva, Vishnu and Shikhandi, all figures of import in Hinduism. The first poem focuses on the half-male, half-female form of Shiva, Ardhanarishwara; the second focuses on Vishnu's female incarnation, Mohini; and the third focuses on Shikhandi, the warrior princess-turned-prince who was a key figure in the defeat of the Kuravas in the Mahabharata. Accompanying these poems is an exegetical essay offering an analysis of the divine as non-binary in Hinduism in general, as well as providing a critical framework for the poems themselves. In summation, this *Perspective* combines queer theory with applied transpoetics and Hindu mythology to offer a unique glimpse into gender alterity in Hinduism through a combination of critical and creative practice.

### **s/he**

around shiva's neck is a ring of moonflowers.

*ardhanarishwara*, part-man, part-woman,

shiva & parvati are fused in the same body.

a divine union. their third eye of liquid fire

opens like a crimson mouth, from which

    songs of wrath & serenity emerge. snakes

    garland their one-breasted torso

        just as the flowers do

but brighter, more luminous, scales a pearly silver

under the moon. the moon itself is mounted

    on shiva-parvati's head, the ganga crashing

down to earth from their long, black hair

in a shining rush of cacophonous water

    that thunders like

    the sky does before lightning. the river

of life, the river that gives life. relentless.

but shiva-parvati sit undisturbed, lost in the ecstasy

of meditation, of *dhyan*, the mirror-clear contemplation

of the universe. a constellation of thoughts as

distant & irrelevant to us as the galaxies  
spinning outwards from their joint mind. their loins  
are half-phallus & half-vulva, half-*shisna* &  
half-*yoni*, simultaneously conceiving & birthing  
the world as we know it:  
matter & energy  
particle & wave.

when I was a child, I felt  
small in comparison, dwarfed by the enormity  
of this unified being, the masculine & the feminine  
rendered pointless by a beauty so immense  
that under its weight, cracks of *want*  
appeared in my psyche — I wanted this.  
I wanted to be neither, to be both. I wanted  
to be garlanded by snakes, tied to this mortal realm  
only by a bond as insubstantial as that necklace of flowers,  
held here only by love & not by  
any duty beyond that, any duty to shape or form,  
logic or illogic. I wanted to contemplate  
& become the universe as they did. I wanted to sing  
& for my songs to become fire, for my dancing  
to become destruction, for my flesh to glow  
like a blood-red kiln & for sparks to glance off my skin  
as it melted away, leaving only the bronze gleam  
of my spirit within:  
becoming *nataraja*  
as I danced away the limitations of body  
& mind. let the humans keep me now. let them  
try.

**translations**

*ardhanarishwara*: half-woman and half-man

*dhyana*: concentration, particularly in the context of meditation

*shisna*: penis

*yoni*: vagina

*nataraja*: another name for Shiva, generally used to refer to his dancing form

### **mohini**

shaped as if from white sand

her body escapes the clutches

of all who seek to contain her:

she is vishnu; she is mohini; she is a god;

she is a goddess; she is a man; she is a woman;

she is a dancer; she is a mother; she is *maya*;

she is *satya*; she is the lie;

she is the truth.

her *sari* is as sheer as dawn itself

and her limbs sinuous as the twining roots

of the banyan tree, and when she bathes

the stars themselves curtain her form

in a sparkling waterfall. shiva forgets

his meditations, and demons forget

that in the soft pink lotus of her palm

is the *sudarshan chakra*, the weapon

of their own execution. her smile curves

like a death-scythe, tender

and red as the petals of the hibiscus,

drenched in honey, in *amrita*, in poison.

once she has kissed you, a question

resounds in your mind like the striking

of a golden bell: *is what you touch*

*made beautiful by your touch?*

### **translations**

*maya*: illusion

*satya*: truth

*sari*: a dress made of a single long piece of cloth draped over the body

*sudarshan chakra*: a spinning bladed weapon wielded by Vishnu and his incarnation, Krishna

*amrita*: ambrosia, said to be the food of the gods

**garlands**

a garland of yellow marigolds  
    is a leash for the gods  
to tether them to the mortal plane, to  
force them to care about what humans do.

I, Shikhandi, Shikhandini, Amba,  
princess of Kashi, prince of Panchala, refuse  
    to be bound thus. or to be bound  
at all.

& what of men? shall I bind them?  
    as a girl-child, I was told  
that the garland I would one day put around  
my husband's neck would be my *swayamvara*,  
    the choosing of my spouse  
by my divine right, my divine will.

yet the husband I chose forsook me. cowardly,  
he cringed before Bhishma, & when I, with my  
knife-bright grief, approached Bhishma instead,  
he claimed to be beyond mortal desires, & said  
    he would not wed me  
                    despite it being  
his *dharma*, his debt. I turned my knife upon him.  
upon them all, these men  
    who shrank from me  
unworthy, quivering  
    wearing the masks of kings but  
    devoid of kingly spirit.  
they were meant to be ruled, then. meant  
to be bound. & so I bound them.

with a garland of blue lotuses, I cursed Bhishma

to death by my hand. I prayed. I sacrificed. I waited.

I killed myself a thousand times

until I gained the body

I wanted. my soul carried me forth

into my next birth, into a man's body, a body

that none would dare bar from war.

& in that body I took up arms

& a wife, & though the world called

me eunuch, called me half-man,

I proved myself more a man

than any of them. I faced

armies & did not flinch.

at last,

Bhishma, king of kings, lay dead by my will.

I spat on his corpse. pitiful, how he had

hidden behind his honor

& refused to fight me because I was part-woman,

half-woman, once-woman. such a coward he was.

coward. coward. coward.

later, his soldiers delighted in murdering

my wife in front of me — my lover, my queen,

whose body was

as sweet & smooth as a flute of sandalwood

& made the most heavenly music, whose eyes

were the sparks that leapt from embers,

whose night-dark skin shone brighter

than any weapon, deadlier than any arrow,

sharper than any blade.

a warrior's bride. my bride. mine.

I took my sword to my throat

& followed her fiercely into the beyond,



## Perspective

Both the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were originally written in Sanskrit, and, as linguist Heinrich Zimmer observes, “in Sanskrit grammatical gender is not always a sign of physical sex. Gender infers function, sex infers form; so that an individual may be masculine from one point of view and feminine from another.”<sup>1</sup> This notion of gender as relative rather than absolute is at the core of the sequence of poems accompanied by this exegesis as well as at the core of the Hindu mythological figures of Shiva, Vishnu and Shikhandi, around which the poems are constructed. The aim of these poems is to highlight the non-essentialist, non-binary, ambiguous view of gender espoused by Hinduism.

Indeed, the divine itself is often depicted as non-binary in Hinduism, wherein the male and the female are not seen as opposite, binary gender-states that can only be occupied one at a time and only once by each individual, but as aspects of internal self-identification and external presentation that are in constant flux and can be occupied at the same time, or at different times and to different degrees, by an entity. If the ambiguous is “unfixed”<sup>2</sup> and can “free us from the crippling rigidity of the defensive before-and-after, and ‘I always was the man or woman I have become’ tropes that we find in many memoirs and other public explications of transgender,”<sup>3</sup> then this is what makes the non-binary poetics of gender in many Hindu myths and legends an ambiguous transpoetics — ambiguous because there are no fixed, inviolable binary distinctions, but simultaneous and sometimes multiple categories of gender and sex which the characters can occupy synchronously or asynchronously, and which the characters traverse.

This ability to travel across gender boundaries is central to transpoetics, a term coined by Quinn Eades in 2017 in response to the book, *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013). Eades said of the book: “[I]n this book they say trans poetics, but I have taken away the space, because trans wants to nestle up against poetics, to covet this particular linguistic place.”<sup>4</sup> The poetics of being trans — of living *across* gender(s) and/or sex(es) — is expressed vividly in the ficto-spiritual linguistics of Hindu myths and legends. In addition to transness, many Hindu stories also contain other queer elements, in that they feature gay, lesbian, bisexual, genderqueer, or otherwise non-heterosexual and non-cisgender characters and themes.

The term “queer” itself is inclusive and perpetually evolving; it is “not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.”<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity of the word “queer” defines and empowers it instead of diluting and weakening it, giving it the openness towards ever-unfolding gender and sexual alterities characteristic of so many Hindu mythological tales. This same openness is what lends itself to the transpoetics which I have explored in my poems, which feature trans, non-binary, genderqueer and genderfluid characters.

In this essay, “genderqueer” describes characters who do not identify as per only one half of the heteronormative gender binary (male or female), but instead ascribe to both, neither, or a combination of male and female characteristics/identities. Similarly, “genderfluid” describes characters whose identity is fluid, in that they do not always remain in one gender identity but may travel across gender identities or combine them; for example, a genderfluid person may identify and present mostly as male, sometimes as female, and at other times as genderqueer. It is important to note that, generally speaking, both genderqueer and genderfluid identities are seen as trans identities and are definitionally under the trans umbrella. As the American Psychological Association (not always a bastion of trans-positivity, alas, but it *is* changing) states in its journal, *Monitor on Psychology*, “[t]ransgender” is “[a]n umbrella term encompassing those whose gender identities or gender roles differ from those typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth,”<sup>6</sup> which, of course, includes those who are genderqueer or genderfluid. Other non-binary identities such as agender and pangender also fit under the trans umbrella.

Amongst the most important foundational beliefs of Hinduism is the belief in the Brahman (not to be confused with the god Brahma), who is the immense cosmic consciousness underlying all things and all gods, and the ultimate nature of reality itself. As such, it is agender or without gender:

The noun *brahman* is neuter:\* The Absolute is beyond the differentiating qualifications of sex, beyond all limiting, individualizing characteristics whatsoever. It is the all-containing transcendent source of every possible virtue and form. Out of Brahman, the Absolute, proceed the energies of Nature, to produce our world of individuated forms, the swarming world of our empirical experience, which is characterized by limitations, polarities, antagonisms and co-operation.<sup>7</sup>

Among these “limitations” and “polarities” is the limitation and polarity of binary gender, which creates “antagonisms” and “co-operations” of its own. This polarity is further called into question by the Hindu philosophy of rebirth. It can be argued that the cyclical, inherently non-linear and non-binary temporality of rebirth contributes to a trans-positive perspective on gender in which a person may be male in one lifetime and female in another; it is therefore less of a challenge to imagine an individual being both in a single lifetime, or even simultaneously, as so many Hindu gods and mythological figures are. This ambiguity — that one can be both male and female or can move between them — is liberating and agency-affirming, making of gender an open field of possibilities instead of a prescription of only one, lifelong identity that must always align/correspond with the sex one is assigned at birth.

Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz argues that “straight time” is “linear” and is “not just [...] a bias related to sexual object choice but [...] [a] dominant and overarching temporal and spatial organization of the world.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, as a temporal and spatial organization of the world that involves rebirth and gender alterity, Hindu mythology can sometimes “help us encounter a queer temporality... a thing that is not linearity.”<sup>9</sup> The trans, genderfluid, or otherwise genderqueer characters of the Hindu pantheon simultaneously embody *and* occupy a “queer time,” which is (understood as) “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge [...] once one leaves the temporal frames of [...] reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.”<sup>10</sup> The non-linear temporality of rebirth causes just such a departure from the “temporal frames” of “reproduction and family,” where self-perpetuation does not require biological reproduction, *and* from the frames of “longevity, risk/safety and inheritance,” in the sense that rebirth as a philosophy invalidates the risk of death by identifying it as an illusion; the soul’s longevity and inheritance far outweigh the temporary curtailments of mortal lives, including the curtailments of binary gender.

If “transing” is “a practice that takes place within, as well as across, gendered spaces,”<sup>11</sup> including the gendered space of the body, then arguably, all the Hindu stories in which characters change sex and/or gender, or occupy multiple genders, can be seen as instances of “transing,” and as trans and genderqueer stories. This transpoetics of trans and non-binary selfhood(s) is embodied and expressed in unique ways by the characters of Shiva, Vishnu and Shikhandi, about whom I have written in the poems titled “s/he,” “mohini” and “garlands,” respectively.

The first poem in this sequence explores the half-female, half-male depiction of Shiva as “Ardhanarishwara,”<sup>12</sup> formed equally of Shiva (male) and Parvati (female) in a joint, non-binary form. Zimmer describes Shiva-Parvati thus:

[T]hey are imbued with the secret knowledge that, though seemingly two, they are fundamentally one. For the sake of the universe and its creatures, the Absolute has apparently unfolded into this duality, and out of them derive all the life polarities, antagonisms, distinctions of powers and elements, that characterize the phenomenal world.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, the gender binary itself is an illusion; arguably, *all* binaries are illusions, as there is only one consciousness beneath them all. The poem traces my own connection to Ardhanarishwara as a non-binary Hindu, and the sense of validation I found (and still find) in the united form of Shiva-Parvati.

The second poem is a commentary on Mohini, a female avatar of the god Vishnu. Mohini is often depicted as being sent forth on what would, in espionage terms, be called ‘honeypot’ missions; she is responsible for seducing to distraction and then duping or altogether destroying demons and other antagonists in Hindu mythology. She also acts, however, as an illustration of the power and seductiveness of *maya* in general, and sometimes plays a sympathetic role in which she is a means of salvation for the virtuous. In one instance, she recovers the immeasurably precious *amrita*, — or ambrosial nectar of immortality, which is the food of the gods and which keeps them immortal — from a demon who has acquired it.<sup>14</sup> In another, she proves the power of *maya*, or illusion, by seducing the great ascetic Shiva, who is supposedly above carnal desires.<sup>15</sup> Krishna, as Vishnu’s other avatar, takes on the form of Mohini so that she (as Mohini) can become the wife of a noble warrior destined for death the very next day; Mohini consummates the marriage with him on their wedding night, and mourns his passing the next day, even after technically returning to the ‘male’ form of Krishna.<sup>16</sup> Not any less deadly than Vishnu himself, she wields the *sudarshan chakra*, a sharp, spinning disc deployed both by Vishnu and by Krishna to behead enemies by slicing through their necks.

While the description of Mohini as invariably beautiful and seductive is problematic in that it is objectifying, it is to be noted that Vishnu’s primary male incarnation, Krishna, is also depicted as beautiful and irresistible, albeit to women; it seems that Vishnu’s *modus operandi* is often persuasion through beauty, regardless of what form it takes, even when it isn’t strictly heteronormative. (One such example is that Shiva

essentially copulated with Vishnu in Mohini's form, and another is that Krishna copulated with his husband of one night while in Mohini's form. Arjuna, too, took on a female form and fell in love with Krishna.<sup>17</sup>) That sexual and romantic intimacy is only ever sanctioned between differently sexed bodies is a hallmark of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, but a trace of transness remains active in the fact that those bodies were not always of those sexes, and that the ultimate owners of those transformed bodies were mentally cognizant of pursuing and enjoying sexual relations with partners who were, to begin with, of the same sex.

The final poem in my collection is about Shikhandi,<sup>18</sup> a character with multiple storylines, all of them queer; Shikhandi, Shikhandini or Amba is variously depicted either as a lesbian princess, a trans prince, a 'eunuch', or a genderqueer person. All of these storylines culminate in Shikhandi securing victory for the Pandavas against the Kauravas<sup>19</sup> in the epic battle of the Mahabharata, and all versions of Shikhandi are warriors to the last. The storyline I have chosen to depict is the one in which Amba, a princess, is abducted by Bhishma, who nonetheless refuses to marry her due to his lifelong vow of celibacy and renders her undesirable to the king she had initially intended to wed. Thus humiliated and dishonored, she vows revenge upon Bhishma, performs an impossibly difficult penance, and acquires a garland of blue flowers that will enable its wearer to kill Bhishma, the mightiest of all warriors and practically invincible. However, when no man proves brave enough to face Bhishma in battle, Amba prays to be reborn as a prince named Shikhandi so that society will permit her to do battle, and, once in that form, proceeds to find a wife, wear the garland and vanquish Bhishma with Krishna's and Arjuna's help. My retelling emphasizes Shikhandi's triumphant agency in both life and death; regardless of biological sex, gender identity or sexual identity, Shikhandi/Shikhandini remains a proud, unbending, trans-positive figure who refuses to bow to anyone and who insists on living and dying on hir<sup>20</sup> own terms and in the body of hir own choosing. As Gloria Anzaldúa says:

There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other... But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.<sup>21</sup>

It is this embodiment of the *hieros gamos* that I seek to explore in my poems, which rediscover and revisit trans-positive, gender-ambiguous Hindu stories through the contemporary lens of transpoetics. While some heteronormative and cisnormative tropes remain entrenched even in these more liberating stories — such as in the tale of Shikhandi, wherein the protagonist begins as the stereotypical scorned woman, and can only avenge herself after becoming a seemingly stereotypical warrior man — some elements of ambiguity always remain, such as the fact that even after becoming a warrior man, Shikhandi's trans identity and gender-crossing history is openly acknowledged by the other characters, and is credited as a key factor in the victory of good over evil in the Mahabharata. Mohini's seductiveness is not merely the result of her objectification by the male gaze but a deliberate parallel of Krishna's seductiveness, and therefore of Vishnu's, who contains them both. Shiva and Parvati exist not only independently as husband and wife but jointly as a gender-ambiguous, non-binary being, Ardhanarishwara. Transness persists in these stories despite the presence, and sometimes prevalence, of the traditional male/female gender binary. The trans survives as a bright vein of defiant ambiguity amidst the unambiguous dullness of fixed categories, troubling them and challenging them at every turn. This stubborn survival of the trans in the face of the broader social, linguistic and mythopoeic structures of cisnormativity and heteronormativity is a triumph similar to that of Shikhandi's, a triumph which I hope I have celebrated in my poems. The gender binary may be prevalent, but the non-binary is divine.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990 [1972]), 123.
- <sup>2</sup> Quinn Eades, "Transpoetics: Dialogically Writing the Queer and Trans Body in Fragments," *Axon: Creative Explorations* 7, no. 2 (2017): 1–10, here: 4. <<https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-13/transpoetics>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Joy Ladin, "'Split It Open and Count the Seeds': Trans Identity, Trans Poetics, and Oliver Ben-dorf's the Spectral Wilderness," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3–4 (2016): 637–48, here: 641. Doi: [10.1215/23289252-3545323](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3545323).
- <sup>4</sup> Eades, "Transpoetics," 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 1.
- <sup>6</sup> "A Glossary: Defining Transgender Terms," *Monitor on Psychology* 49, no. 8 (2018): 32, here: 32. <<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2018/09/ce-corner-glossary>>.

- 7 Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 123.
- 8 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 154.
- 9 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 186.
- 10 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Space* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6.
- 11 Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4 (2008): 11–22, here: 13.
- 12 Amit Roy, “Man into Woman Must Go,” in *Eastern Eye*, July 4, 2008, 4. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27649781>>.
- 13 Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 137–38.
- 14 “MOHINĪ,” in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, eds. Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson, and Michael York (London: Routledge, 2009), 503–04.
- 15 Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 332–33.
- 16 Wendy Doniger, “The Enchantress and the Goddess: Mohinī,” in *India & Beyond*, ed. Dick van der Meij (London: Routledge, 1997), 138.
- 17 Satya Chaitanya, “Arjuna Becomes a Woman: A Trans Tale from Padma Purana,” in *Boloji*, March 20, 2011. <<https://www.boloji.com/articles/10722/arjuna-becomes-a-woman>>.
- 18 Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 352–59.
- 19 The Mahabharata depicts the epic struggle between two mighty ruling families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, as they fight for power.
- 20 The word “hir” is a non-binary pronoun combining “him” and “her,” and is used by some non-binary people.
- 21 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 41.