



Myths, Memory and Identity: A Literary Study of Transgender Representation in India
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***Abstract:** The representation of transgender identities in Indian cultural narratives has undergone significant transformation, reflecting broader socio-cultural shifts within the country. This paper examines how transgender figures have been portrayed across Indian myths and literary traditions, and how these portrayals mirror evolving cultural perceptions of gender plurality. Drawing on select mythological texts such as the Mahabharata and regional folklore, alongside contemporary literary works, the study traces the movement from reverence and symbolic recognition to marginalization, and finally toward renewed visibility in modern discourse. Employing a qualitative textual analysis grounded in gender studies and cultural theory, the research highlights how literary narratives not only document but also shape societal attitudes toward transgender communities. The paper argues that literature serves as a dynamic cultural archive—one that captures India's shifting engagement with gender fluidity, social inclusion, and identity politics. By juxtaposing ancient narratives with modern retellings and transgender-authored works, the study reveals how literature becomes a powerful medium for contesting stereotypes, reclaiming identity, and advocating social change. Ultimately, this research underscores the role of literary expression in fostering empathy, challenging normative binaries, and contributing to the broader movement for transgender rights and representation in contemporary India.*

***Keywords:** Myth, memory, identity, transgender*

1. Introduction

The relationship between literature and society is profoundly symbiotic, with literary texts functioning as cultural sites where ideological, social, and emotional forces intersect. Literature not only reflects the dominant values and anxieties of a community but also actively shapes collective consciousness by challenging, reinforcing, or reimagining existing norms. As societies evolve, their narratives necessarily shift—testifying to transformations in identity, belief systems, and social organization. One of the most dynamic areas of such transformation in contemporary discourse concerns gender, particularly the visibility and representation of

transgender identities. In India, this conversation acquires particular complexity because of the subcontinent's rich mythological traditions, pre-colonial social systems, and long-standing ritual practices that have simultaneously recognized, revered, marginalized, and politicized transgender communities across centuries (Nanda 22; Reddy 41).

Indian mythology offers an especially fertile ground for exploring gender plurality. Stories such as Shikhandi's gender transition in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna's manifestation as Mohini, and the ritual narratives associated with Aravan and the Aravani community reveal a cultural imagination that accepts gender fluidity as spiritually potent and socially embedded. Scholars argue that these narratives illustrate a pre-modern epistemology in which gender could be symbolic, transformative, and divinely sanctioned (Kapur 109; Sarma 47). Yet this symbolic recognition of gender diversity existed alongside lived social contradictions. Historically, transgender communities—most notably the Hijras—occupied complex socio-cultural positions: revered for their ritual authority in blessing ceremonies and life-cycle events, yet excluded from everyday social mobility and economic stability (Nanda 75; Agnes 14). This duality reflects a broader pattern in Indian society where mythic reverence and social marginalization coexist uneasily.

The colonial encounter introduced profound ruptures to these indigenous understandings of gender. Victorian morality, with its rigid binary conception of sex and gender, redefined non-normative identities as deviant. The British criminalization of the Hijra community under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 institutionalized stigma and reshaped the social meanings attached to transgender lives (Reddy 102; Narrain 56). This historical shift significantly influenced later literary portrayals, which increasingly depicted transgender individuals as victims of structural exclusion rather than bearers of sacred power.

Literature, in this context, becomes a critical archive documenting both continuity and disruption. While mythological narratives preserve cultural memory and frame transgender identities within divine and symbolic registers, modern literary works foreground the lived struggles of transgender persons navigating social discrimination, identity politics, and legal precarity. Contemporary autobiographies and novels by transgender authors mark a significant shift from representation *about* transgender individuals to self-representation, enabling a reclamation of agency and narrative authority (Revathi 3; Vidya 12).

The objective of this study is to examine how Indian myths and modern literature reflect evolving perceptions of transgender identity and, in turn, illuminate broader cultural and social transformations. Literature, as Butler argues, plays a crucial role in shaping gender as an ongoing performance mediated through discourse and cultural repetition (Butler 33). By analyzing these textual traditions, this paper argues that literature operates not merely as a passive mirror of societal change but as an active force capable of challenging normative binaries, interrogating historical marginalization, and envisioning more inclusive futures for transgender communities in India.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transgender Studies in India

Academic research on transgender identities in India has grown substantially in the last decade, particularly after the landmark *NALSA v. Union of India* judgment (2014), which affirmed the

right to self-identification and recognized transgender persons as a distinct legal category. This legal recognition catalyzed new scholarly attention within sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and law. Foundational works such as Serena Nanda's *Neither Man nor Woman* document the social structures, ritual significance, and community practices of the Hijras, highlighting their historical presence across court cultures, temple traditions, and life-cycle ceremonies (Nanda 24–26). Gayatri Reddy's ethnographic research further illustrates how Hijra identity is produced through negotiations of kinship, sexuality, and cultural belonging (Reddy 58). While these studies enrich our understanding of lived experiences, they also reveal gaps in the literary representation of transgender figures, as earlier scholarship tended to prioritize anthropology over textual analysis. With the rise of queer studies in India, however, literary scholarship has begun to examine how texts both reflect and challenge the socio-political positioning of transgender communities (Narain 17; Boyce 92).

2.2 Mythology as a Cultural Archive

Indian mythology serves as a vast and continuously evolving cultural archive that preserves shifting societal attitudes across centuries. Unlike Western frameworks that often conceive of myth as fixed, Indian mythological traditions remain dynamic—changing across regions, retellings, and oral performances. Scholars maintain that mythic narratives containing gender transformation and non-binary identities demonstrate a pre-colonial cultural imagination that accepted gender variance as spiritually significant rather than deviant (Sarma 49; Pattanaik 112). Characters such as Shikhandi in the *Mahabharata*, who transitions from female to male to fulfill a cosmic and moral purpose, or Mohini, the female avatar of Vishnu, reveal a fluid understanding of gender embedded within divine and heroic narratives (Kapur 109). Similarly, the Aravanis' ritual practices connected to the Koovagam festival root transgender identity in sacred mythic memory. These stories have been interpreted by scholars as cultural validation for transgender identities, illustrating the permeability of gender categories within Hindu cosmology (Pattanaik 121). Thus, mythology provides not only historical instances of gender plurality but also frameworks through which contemporary transgender communities articulate belonging and spiritual legitimacy.

2.3 Contemporary Literature and Transgender Voices

The emergence of transgender narratives in modern Indian literature marks a significant shift from symbolic or myth-based representations to depictions grounded in lived reality. After the 1990s—coinciding with globalization, queer activism, and increasing public discourse surrounding gender rights—Indian literature began engaging more explicitly with LGBTQ+ themes (Menon 203). A crucial development in this phase is the rise of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writing by transgender authors themselves. A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* and Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* represent watershed moments in Indian literary history, offering first-person accounts of marginalization, resilience, and identity formation (Revathi 7; Vidya 12). These works challenge dominant stereotypes by foregrounding agency, emotional depth, and socio-political critique. Additionally, novels by writers such as Arundhati Roy, Vaasanthi, and Perumal Murugan integrate transgender characters in ways that reflect contemporary anxieties around caste, class, and gender injustice (Roy 147). Scholars argue that

such literature not only documents oppression but also participates in advocacy by humanizing transgender experiences and contesting institutional and cultural norms (Dave 56).

Together, these strands of scholarship—mythological analysis, social anthropology, and contemporary literary studies—form a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving representation of transgender identities in India.

3. Transgender Figures in Indian Mythology

Mythological narratives function as enduring repositories of cultural memory, encoding social values, cosmological beliefs, and collective anxieties. Within the vast landscape of Indian mythology, transgender and gender-fluid figures appear not as marginal anomalies but as integral characters whose presence signals a pre-modern openness to non-binary embodiments. Scholars argue that these narratives reveal an indigenous epistemology of gender fluidity—one that predates colonial constructs of sexual and gender normativity (Pattanaik 87; Sarma 103). By examining key mythological figures such as Shikhandi, the Aravanis, and Mohini, it becomes evident that Indian myth offers a complex and affirmative archive of gender diversity.

3.1 Shikhandi in the *Mahabharata*

Shikhandi stands as one of the most significant transgender figures in classical Sanskrit literature. Born as Amba, whose grievances against Bhishma remain unresolved, Shikhandi undergoes a transformative journey—first living as a woman, then becoming male through divine intervention and the exchange of sex with a yaksha. This transformation is not portrayed as aberrant but as a legitimate and necessary act within the epic's moral universe (Kapur 144). Importantly, the *Mahabharata* accords Shikhandi narrative authority by positioning him as the catalyst for Bhishma's defeat. As scholars point out, this literary centrality underscores the epic's nuanced understanding of gender as dynamic rather than fixed (Hiltebeitel 211). Thus, Shikhandi's story challenges contemporary interpretations that frame non-binary identities as modern or Western phenomena.

3.2 Aravanis and the Koovagam Festival

The narrative of Aravan (also known as Iravan) in the *Mahabharata* has profoundly shaped the cultural identity of the Aravani or Hijra community in South India. According to the myth, Aravan must be married before his sacrificial death, prompting Krishna to assume the female avatar Mohini and wed him (Sridhar 62). The subsequent mourning of Mohini after Aravan's death forms the ritual basis of the Koovagam festival in Tamil Nadu, where Aravanis ceremonially marry Aravan and lament his death the next day. Scholars interpret this festival as a rare instance where myth directly structures social identity and ritual belonging (Reddy 188). Through this myth-ritual complex, transgender communities not only articulate spiritual legitimacy but also participate in a cultural lineage that predates modern gender politics.

3.3 Mohini and Divine Androgyny

Vishnu's manifestation as Mohini, the enchantress, further illustrates the fluidity of divine gender in Hindu ontology. Mohini appears in several myths—including the churning of the ocean (*samudra manthan*) and the slaying of Bhasmasura—where gender transformation is portrayed as a divine strategy necessary for cosmic balance (Pattanaik 132). These narratives subvert rigid binaries by presenting the divine as simultaneously masculine, feminine, and

beyond categorical fixity. Scholars argue that Mohini embodies a sacred androgyny that affirms gender fluidity as inherent to the divine rather than peripheral to it (Sarma 115).

3.4 Symbolism and Social Function

Transgender figures in Indian mythology often operate as mediators—bridging the realms of human and divine, male and female, mortal and cosmic. Their liminality grants them unique ritual authority, explaining their continued presence in South Asian ceremonies such as childbirth blessings and marriage rites (Nanda 56). By occupying this intermediary space, transgender mythic figures underscore the cultural logic that views fluidity not as instability but as a necessary component of social and cosmological equilibrium.

4. Representation in Regional Folklore

While classical Sanskrit epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* offer prominent transgender and gender-fluid figures, it is within India's regional folklore that these identities acquire their deepest social embeddedness. Folk traditions—dynamic, orally transmitted, and locally rooted—serve as cultural sites where communities construct meaning, negotiate identity, and articulate alternative epistemologies of gender. As scholars argue, folklore not only preserves ancient worldviews but also reflects evolving social interactions and lived experiences that formal texts often overlook (Blackburn 52; Ramanujan 34). Within these traditions, transgender identities appear not merely as symbolic motifs but as integral participants in ritual, performance, and cultural memory.

One of the most significant folk representations is the Tamil concept of Ardhanarishvara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati merged into a single androgynous body. This figure, widely depicted in South Indian temple sculptures, devotional poetry, and ritual narratives, symbolizes the metaphysical unity of masculine and feminine energies. Scholars argue that Ardhanarishvara challenges Western dualistic gender binaries by presenting fluidity and complementarity as sacred principles (Pattanaik 174). Its presence in folk retellings, particularly in Tamil Shaivite traditions, reinforces cultural notions of balance, interdependence, and non-binary embodiment.

North Indian folklore also contains rich portrayals of transgender communities, particularly the Hijras, who appear frequently in folk songs, proverbs, and wedding rituals. In regions such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar, Hijras are celebrated as givers of fertility blessings, believed to possess sacred power derived from mythic associations with figures such as Aravan and Bahuchara Mata (Nanda 61). Their ritual presence at childbirth and weddings embodies a culturally sanctioned liminality—situated between auspiciousness and marginality. Folklorists argue that these traditions reflect a cultural logic in which gender nonconformity is associated with both spiritual potency and social ambiguity (Reddy 207). Thus, folklore becomes a crucial space where transgender identities engage in community life despite systemic marginalization. Performance traditions—another vital layer of Indian folklore—offer further evidence of long-standing cultural engagement with gender diversity. Art forms such as Therukoothu in Tamil Nadu, Kathakali in Kerala, and Yakshagana in Karnataka have historically embraced gender crossing, with performers adopting roles that traverse rigid male-female boundaries. In Therukoothu, for instance, performers often embody female characters regardless of their gender, emphasizing performativity rather than biological determinism (Srinivasan 118).

Kathakali's stylized femininity and Yakshagana's fluid costuming similarly present gender as an artistic and socially sanctioned construct. Scholars assert that these performance traditions reflect indigenous understandings of gender as performative—centuries before Western theorists such as Judith Butler articulated similar frameworks (Butler 25; Venkatesan 93).

Together, these regional traditions demonstrate that gender nonconformity has long been woven into India's cultural imagination. Folklore not only **preserves** narratives of fluidity but **legitimizes** them through ritual participation, symbolic authority, and communal storytelling. In doing so, it challenges the misconception that transgender identities are modern disruptions or Western imports. Instead, Indian regional folklore reveals a rich, indigenous history of diverse gender expressions—affirmed, contested, and continually reinterpreted within the fabric of everyday cultural life.

5. Modern Indian Literature and Transgender Voices

Modern Indian literature provides a crucial lens through which the shifting perceptions of transgender identity can be understood. As Indian society moved through colonialism, nationalism, postcolonial reconstruction, and contemporary social justice movements, literary representations of transgender individuals evolved correspondingly. These narratives reveal how political regulation, cultural anxiety, and social activism intersect with literary imagination to shape public understanding of gender diversity (Narain 42; Dave 78).

5.1 The Colonial Disruption

The arrival of British colonial rule marked a significant rupture in indigenous gender systems. Victorian morality introduced rigid binaries of male and female, criminalizing identities that fell outside normative expectations. One of the most damaging legislative interventions was the **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871**, which labeled Hijras as “habitual offenders” and effectively erased their spiritual and cultural legitimacy (Reddy 121). This colonial stigma profoundly shaped literary representation, shifting portrayals from sacred intermediaries to figures coded as deviant, dangerous, or socially aberrant. Scholars argue that colonial literature and ethnographic writings constructed a moral panic around gender-nonconforming bodies, embedding suspicion and shame in public consciousness (Gupta 59). Thus, colonialism did not merely regulate transgender lives—it also fundamentally reshaped their cultural narratives.

5.2 Postcolonial Retellings

Post-independence Indian literature took on the task of re-examining these colonial constructs. In the decades following 1947, writers began revisiting transgender identity through the lens of social inequality, cultural memory, and human vulnerability. Salman Rushdie, in works like *Midnight's Children*, uses hybridity and fragmentation to explore bodies caught between multiple identities (Rushdie 198). Mahasweta Devi's narratives often foreground marginalized figures, using gender variance to expose the failures of modern institutions (Devi 214). Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers one of the most nuanced fictional portrayals of Hijra life, presenting Anjum not as spectacle but as a subject negotiating trauma, belonging, and resistance (Roy 37). These postcolonial texts destabilize colonial binaries and reanimate indigenous histories of gender plurality, arguing that transgender identity is inseparable from larger struggles for justice and human rights.

5.3 Autobiographical Writings

A major shift in transgender representation emerged with the publication of autobiographical works by transgender authors themselves. **A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*, Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya***, and narrative contributions by **Gauri Sawant** and **Manabi Bandopadhyay** mark a transition from representation *about* transgender individuals to representation *by* them. These texts disrupt historical silencing and reclaim narrative agency, offering first-person insights into violence, exclusion, and the pursuit of dignity (Revathi 11; Vidya 4). Their writing situates transgender identity not within symbolic, mythic, or pathological frameworks but within lived realities shaped by community, resilience, and aspirational politics. Scholars emphasize that these autobiographies function simultaneously as literature, testimony, and activism (Boyce 93).

5.4 Themes in Contemporary Literature

Contemporary Indian literature—across English, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, and Hindi—reveals recurring thematic concerns including identity reconstruction, body politics, trauma, marginality, belonging, and self-definition. These works critique socio-political structures that police gender while foregrounding the emotional worlds of transgender characters. Thematically rich portrayals highlight how dignity, rights, and recognition remain central to transgender experiences in modern India. By humanizing struggles and celebrating resilience, contemporary literature challenges dominant cultural narratives and asserts transgender identity as a legitimate, complex dimension of Indian social life.

6. Comparative Analysis: Myth and Modernity

The juxtaposition of mythological narratives and modern transgender literature reveals a dynamic interplay of cultural continuity and historical rupture. While mythology embeds gender variance within sacred cosmologies, contemporary literature confronts the social realities of marginalization and rights-based struggles. This comparison illustrates how Indian society negotiates gender diversity across eras, illustrating both the persistence of cultural memory and the transformative force of socio-political change (Pattanaik 182; Reddy 141).

6.1 Continuity

A key continuity across myth and modernity is the affirmation of gender fluidity as a legitimate and meaningful identity. Mythological figures such as Shikhandi, Mohini, and Ardhanarishvara embody transformations that elevate gender variance to a divine and socially sanctioned plane. Scholars argue that these narratives reflect precolonial frameworks where gender was constructed as flexible and interdependent rather than rigidly bifurcated (Sarma 109; Nanda 52). Modern queer writers frequently reclaim these mythic figures, drawing upon them to counter colonial narratives that mark transgender identity as “unnatural” or foreign. Works by A. Revathi and Living Smile Vidya reference mythic precedents to validate their identities within a culturally rooted lineage (Revathi 13). Even structurally, both mythic and modern narratives trace parallel arcs—transformation, crisis, and eventual resolution—suggesting that Indian storytelling traditions consistently frame metamorphosis as a central element of identity formation (Boyce 101).

6.2 Rupture

Despite these continuities, profound ruptures emerge due to historical impositions—most notably British colonial rule. While mythic narratives acknowledge and sometimes revere

transgender identities, modern literature often foregrounds their stigmatization. Colonial morality introduced legal and social frameworks that criminalized Hijra communities under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871), imposing an enduring narrative of deviance and shame (Gupta 76). Modern literary portrayals reflect this rupture, depicting violence, exclusion, and systemic injustice—realities absent from traditional mythic roles. Unlike symbolic figures in ancient narratives, transgender characters in modern literature navigate the challenges of poverty, police harassment, family abandonment, and institutional discrimination (Dave 112). These works also emphasize activism, legal rights, and social justice, marking a shift from mythological symbolism to contemporary political urgency (Narrain 71).

6.3 Literature as a Site of Transformation

Literature acts as a transformative site where gender discourse is renegotiated. Through reinterpretations of myth, modern writers destabilize binary norms and reclaim indigenous histories of gender plurality. Contemporary narratives provide visibility for marginalized communities, replacing silence with testimony and erasure with representation (Venkatesan 131). By fostering empathy among readers and challenging inherited prejudices, literature actively participates in reshaping social attitudes. It becomes not just a passive reflection of reality but a medium that reimagines the possibilities of identity, community, and belonging.

7. Discussion

The evolving representation of transgender identities in Indian literature serves as a mirror to India's shifting socio-cultural history. From mythological acceptance to colonial suppression and contemporary empowerment, literature captures the complex trajectory of gender diversity in the Indian imagination (Reddy 203).

7.1 Literature as Reflection of Cultural Change

The progression from divine gender fluidity in ancient myths to the criminalization of transgender communities under colonial rule highlights dramatic shifts in cultural attitudes. Mythic figures such as Mohini or Ardhanarishvara reveal a worldview that normalizes fluidity and celebrates plurality (Pattanaik 174). However, with the imposition of Victorian binaries, transgender identities became stigmatized, policed, and marginalized—an erasure reflected in literature of the colonial era (Gupta 82). Modern autobiographical and fictional works chart the subsequent transition toward recognition, rights, and empowerment, paralleling landmark legal and social developments such as the NALSA judgment (Narrain 75). Literature reveals not only changing attitudes but also shifting power structures and the resilience of marginalized identities struggling for visibility and dignity (Revathi 19).

7.2 Literature as Social Intervention

Contemporary transgender literature moves beyond representation; it actively intervenes in public discourse. These narratives challenge oppressive norms by exposing discrimination, critiquing family structures, and questioning the failures of state institutions (Roy 42). Autobiographies and novels humanize transgender lives, countering sensationalized media portrayals with complex, dignified self-representations (Vidya 7). Literature thereby expands the moral imagination of society, fostering empathy and cultivating a more inclusive cultural environment. By positioning transgender identity within broader conversations about justice, citizenship, and human rights, modern texts become tools of advocacy and catalysts for social

transformation (Boyce 114). Literature, therefore, functions as a platform for negotiation—a space where cultural memory, political struggle, and personal testimony intersect to reshape the landscape of gender and identity in India.

8. Conclusion

The representation of transgender identities in Indian myths and modern literature reveals a rich and evolving cultural landscape in which gender fluidity has been variously sanctified, marginalized, and reclaimed. Ancient mythological narratives such as those of Shikhandi, Mohini, and Ardhanarishvara offer a worldview in which gender transformation is not only normalized but often imbued with divine purpose (Pattanaik 174; Sarma 109). These stories demonstrate that gender plurality has long existed within the Indian cultural imagination, serving symbolic, spiritual, and social functions. They reflect a precolonial epistemology where fluidity, hybridity, and liminality were essential to cosmological balance rather than deviations from normative identity.

However, the transition into colonial modernity disrupted these indigenous frameworks. Victorian morality imposed rigid binaries that criminalized and pathologized transgender communities, fundamentally altering social attitudes and literary portrayals (Gupta 82; Reddy 141). The stigmatization codified under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) erased the spiritual legitimacy once associated with gender-diverse individuals, replacing it with narratives of deviance and social threat. Modern literary representations thus become essential records of this rupture, foregrounding the violence, exclusion, and structural inequalities produced by colonial and postcolonial nation-building projects (Dave 112).

Yet the modern literary landscape also marks the beginning of a powerful counter-narrative. Writers such as A. Revathi, Living Smile Vidya, and contemporary fiction authors reposition transgender voices at the center of literary discourse, reclaiming narrative space long denied to them (Revathi 19; Vidya 7). Their works present transgender identity not as mythic metaphor but as lived experience shaped by aspiration, trauma, resilience, and political struggle. These narratives challenge the silence and distortion imposed by colonial and patriarchal structures, transforming literature into a site of activism, self-representation, and social critique.

When mythic and modern texts are read together, a complex cultural trajectory emerges—one that moves from spiritual recognition to colonial erasure and finally toward identity reclamation and socio-political advocacy. This continuum illustrates that while social attitudes toward gender diversity have been far from linear, the cultural memory of fluidity persists, resurfacing in contemporary movements for equality and dignity (Narain 75). Literature becomes the bridge that connects these temporal moments, enabling readers to understand not only how gender variance was historically conceptualized but also how it can be reimaged in the present.

In this sense, literature serves multiple functions: it preserves the cultural archive of gender-diverse traditions; interrogates the inequalities embedded within colonial and postcolonial frameworks; and envisions alternative futures grounded in justice, inclusion, and human dignity. As India continues to engage in debates around gender rights, legal recognition, and social belonging, literary representation plays an indispensable role in shaping public consciousness and expanding the possibilities of empathy and understanding. Ultimately, the

study affirms that literature—whether mythic or modern—is not merely a reflection of cultural values but a transformative force capable of challenging entrenched hierarchies and envisioning a more equitable society for transgender individuals and other marginalized communities.

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