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The Indian Mythology and Androgyny

Abstract: *Human beings have often been perceived to have two clear categories male and female. Though now other categories such as LGBTQ++ too have been recognised and are gradually being accepted. There have been several gender expressions which have been in existence for a long time, but haven't been explored enough. One of them is androgyny. Britannica defines androgyny as a "condition in which characteristics of both sexes are clearly expressed in a single individual." This concept has never been taken into consideration by the society which is often believed and known to be a patriarchal one. As the patriarchal society often has a common notion that men can embrace anything but not femininity. But Indian mythology seems to speak otherwise. As Indian mythology specifically the Hindu mythology highlights multiple instances where the gods have embraced femininity. Also the patriarchal society doesn't believe in women embracing masculinity. Hindu mythology in this case too brings out multiple instances where goddesses have embraced masculinity. This paper examines how Indian mythology, specifically through Hinduism in the form of Hindu deities and some instances of Mahabharata, reflected the androgynous ideals even before the concept of androgyny was formally defined.*

Keywords: Mythology, Androgyny, Feminine, Masculine, Body.

The Indian Mythology and Androgyny

Battula Sneha

Introduction

The existence of human beings depends on several aspects that form our being. Religion is one such aspect, as it has always been believed to have played a major role in shaping the masses. The mythologies constitute an important part of religion. The world has witnessed several mythologies, ranging from Greek mythology and Roman mythology to Hindu mythology. The way myth is perceived in the current age is very different from how myths were understood and interpreted in ancient times. Douglas opines that myth in a modern sense could be understood “as a surrogate term for the fact that the characters and the actions of literary works have qualities that make them representative of types or classes or ideas” (Douglas 232). Thus, myth in modern times is more of a vehicle to understand the world in an even better sense. This idea becomes even clearer when understood from the perspective of T.S. Eliot who in his essay “*ULYSSES, ORDER AND MYTH*” writes that “instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art” (Eliot 483). Thus, Eliot too stresses how the study of the myths could be seen as a new way to understand the modern world in a better manner. In a similar way by applying the ideals of androgyny to the Indian myths, a lot is revealed and understood regarding the twenty-first-century modern-day world.

One of the major components of the world is human beings. Thus, to understand the world we need to understand human beings in the first place. And to know human beings better, we need to delve into the unexplored depths of the human body to understand the notions that we have been neglecting for a long time, which are now on the surface. One such truth associated with the human body is that of androgyny. Woolf describes androgyny as the “man-womanly mind” (ch. 6). Thus, Woolf stresses how a human mind is not a “single-sexed mind” (ch. 6) but possesses both the masculine and feminine qualities irrespective of the biological organ that an individual possesses since birth. A deep analysis of Indian mythology highlights how androgyny has always been a part of Indian mythology. As various Indian myths directly or indirectly seem to promote it.

Lord Shiva Embracing the Feminine

The word Ardhanarishwara is made up of three words, namely “Ardha,” “nari,” and “ishwara,” which mean “half,” “woman,” and “lord” respectively. Here, “lord” refers to lord Shiva or the masculine. “Shiva, depicted as Ardhanarishwara, embodies a fusion of feminine and masculine aspects” (“The

Story of Ardhanarishwara,” paragraph 1). A body which consists of both masculine and feminine energies. In this form of Ardhanarishwara, it is believed that Shiva and Parvati came together and merged into a single body. They did this to break the ego of Rishi Brighu who decided to worship only lord Shiva and totally avoid goddess Parvati, watching them as two separate entities. Thus, this could be seen as a message to the entire humanity that husband and wife are not two separate entities but they together are a perfect whole. But along with that, there could be one more probable message that both masculine and feminine forces are part of a human body; all of us are in possession of both these traits. But it is the society which we nourish only one trait, totally forgetting or neglecting the other. As Carl Jung in his work *The Portable Jung*, makes it very clear that

Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, a hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of the man, an imprint or "archetype" of all 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 women existed, it would still be possible, at any given time, to deduce from this unconscious image exactly how a woman would have to be constituted psychically. The same is true of the woman: she too has her inborn image of man. (Jung 173)

Thus, the Ardhanarishwara myth from Indian mythology highlights how intrinsically both man and woman carry both the masculine and feminine traits. Jung elaborates the entire idea in a more in-depth manner when he says that our “archetypes” contain both the feminine and masculine experiences, which is the main reason why we as an individual, irrespective of the biological organ, could be seen to have both these traits.

Lord Vishnu Embracing the Feminine

The myth of the Mohini avatar, too, could be seen as one of the applied versions of androgyny. Lord Vishnu took the Mohini avatar in order to ensure that the divine nectar remains with the Devas, so that the Asuras do not have access to it. As Balakrishnan writes:

In the beginning, Mohini was usually depicted as a beautiful woman who held the powers of captivation through her charm. Alas, the true story was changed, expanded, and re-interpreted in several different scriptures.

With the passage of time, Mohini was depicted as an illusion or a manifestation of Lord Vishnu and his divine powers. (Balakrishnan)

The Mohini avatar was nothing but lord Vishnu embracing femininity present inside him to keep the nectar safe. Thus, the fact that in the modern reading we are considering lord Vishnu's feminine avatar as a "manifestation of lord Vishnu and his divine powers" speaks for itself. This transition from the masculine to feminine by lord Vishnu could no longer be degraded or disregarded with words like effeminate; rather, it could be seen as the embracing of femininity, which is present in the male body. This instance once again proves how an individual is blessed with both the masculine and the feminine sides and that both can be realised by the individual whenever necessary. Even our mythology seems to prove this through the various myths. But it is important to note that the presence of something can only be realised when its existence has been understood. Society nurtures us in a way that we almost forget about the existence of the other side. And are unaware of the fact that we have an equal right and opportunity to embrace any of these sides according to the situation and its demands. The message that the story of lord Vishnu transitioning into the Mohini avatar brings to us is that there should be nothing like shame or hesitation hindering us.

Goddess Kali Embracing the Masculine

When the combined strength of the gods failed to overpower the demon named Raktabija, goddess Kali came alive. Every drop of blood falling from Raktabija on the ground created a new Raktabija out of it. Goddess Kali thus decided to drink each and every drop of the blood before it fell on the ground, avoiding the regeneration of Raktabija any further. Thus, finally destroying him. In doing so, Kali became so violent that she could no longer distinguish between her friends and enemies. Eventually killing everyone who came in her path.

This fierce anger and ability to carry on so much violence is often associated with men as mostly seen in the case of wars. In the *Mahabharata*, we come across an instance where it is said that Bhima decided to drink the blood of Dussasana after killing him to avenge the disrobing of Draupadi. Historically, whenever the idea of blood is added to men, it has brought them valour. Whereas blood, being associated with women, has often been perceived as a symbol of weakness. Thus, blood could be seen as a masculine symbol. But the myth of goddess Kali totally rejects this idea.

Goddess Kali coming out in such a valour could be seen as an example of a feminine embracing the masculine side present in her. The rage of Kali almost becomes unstoppable. This is when Shiva lies at her feet and she steps on him, which makes her realise that she stepped on her beloved and suddenly the fierceness in her changes into compassion. Later, Shiva takes the form of baby Shiva to further soothe her.

As Kali cradled the infant Shiva, the world saw a different side of the fierce goddess. It was a reminder that even the most destructive forces have a nurturing, compassionate

side. The balance between destruction and creation was restored, symbolised by Kali's tender care for the baby Shiva. ("Goddess Kali" Paragraph 7)

Thus, the tale of goddess Kali is not only about how the masculine is manifested in a feminine body. But it is also about how both fierce and compassionate forces could be a part of a single human body, irrespective of the biological organ that the particular individual possesses. Making this myth an instance of androgyny.

Krishna Embracing the Feminine

Krishna and his description as the perfect masculine in the battlefield of the *Mahabharata* is something which cannot be neglected. But Krishna embraced the feminine side too, which cannot be neglected. The descriptions of Krishna consist of several feminine elements. As seen in the lines by the Hindi poet Dev, who in his poem "Saviyya" written in the Indian language Braj Bhasha writes:

Payani nupur manju baje, kati kikini ke dhuni ki madhurai.
Savare ang lase pat peet, hiye hulse banmaal suhayira.
Maathe kirit bade dhrung chanchal, mand hasi mukhchand junhai.
Je jag-mandir-deepak sundar, sribraj dulhe "dev" sahaay. (Dev)

Pleasant-sounding anklets on legs, sweet tinklings of ornaments around the waist.
Brown body covered with lustrous yellow cloth, bosom adorned with a garland.
Playful eyes and a crowned head, with a captivating giggle and a moon-like face.
Like a beautiful oil lamp in the temple of the universe, the poet "Dev" praises Krishna.
(my trans.)

The above-mentioned poem, originally written in Braj which is an Indian language, describes lord Krishna when he was a little boy. The poem describes lord Krishna in a very feminine way. Thus, the descriptions carried out in the poem are enough to make us realise that Krishna embraced femininity as a child without any shame of being judged. In fact, these descriptions are highly accepted by the masses all over the world and each Indian mother dreams to adorn their child at least once based on these popular descriptions. Thus, this once again brings to us the androgynous description of gods in the Hindu mythology.

Amba Reborn as Shikhandi Embracing the Masculine

According to the popular tales of the *Mahabharata*. Amba was reborn as Shikhandi to avenge the pains of her past life and give the deserved punishment to Bheeshma. Born as Drupad's daughter. In order to

avenge the pain of her past life, she needed to enter the battlefield, for which one of the primary requirements was that she had to be a man. Thus, she performs a penance in the forest:

One day, a Yaksha named Sthunakarna saw the princess and asked her the reason for her presence in the forest. The Panchala princess narrated her story to the Yaksha. Moved by her story, he agreed to help her. Sthunakarna asked her to exchange her sex with him as it would be easier for her to fulfill her revenge as a man. The princess turned into a man and came to be known as Shikhandi. (Murthy)

Thus, Shikhandi could enter the battlefield and kill Bheeshma, avenging her past insults. This could once again be understood as a manifestation of a masculine force in a feminine body, making it one of the pertinent examples of androgyny.

Arjuna as Brihannala embracing the Feminine

Arjun goes to the god Indra in order to acquire divine weapons for the great war of the *Mahabharata*. There, a celestial nymph, Urvashi, offers to become the wife of Arjuna. When he rejects the proposal, she curses him that he would lose his manhood and become an eunuch for a year. This curse turns into a blessing for Arjuna as it helps him with the one-year incognito exile in the court of King Virat, where he teaches the women dance and music. Thus, here Arjuna, who is seen as one of the prime examples of masculinity, could be seen embracing femininity being the victim of circumstances. Thus making this instance a perfect example of androgyny from the Indian epic of the *Mahabharata*.

Androgyny in the 21st Century World

All these mythological instances and arguments clarify that we as individuals have both the masculine and feminine sides in us since birth, but it is society which is the main reason for rendering one side in us and totally eradicating the other. As Beauvoir rightly points out the role of society when she writes about how a little boy is constantly reminded that “A man doesn’t ask for kisses ... A man doesn’t look at himself in the mirror ... A man doesn’t cry” (Beauvoir 333). On the other hand, a girl is prepared by society to become a girl. As Beauvoir has famously said, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 18). This line is proven again and again in countless English texts and multiple instances of everyday life. For instance, as we come across in Kincaid’s work *Girl*, where the mother is almost preparing her daughter how to become a *Girl* and her mother makes it very clear that “you are not a boy” (Kincaid 321). All these instances highlight how society plays a vital role in shaping us such that one trait in us is enhanced, whereas the other trait is suppressed as if it doesn’t exist at all.

Though, for years, people have seen it as a shame for men to embrace femininity. And equally, women embracing masculinity have been termed as shameless. The modern-day mentality of people has evolved. Today, people no longer limit themselves or others in any way when it comes to embracing

a particular gender. Men now feel free to cry or express their emotions which was once considered a feminine trait. As seen in the case of Virat Kohli who freely allowed his emotions to flow after the long-awaited win of RCB, or the teary-eyed Ronaldo who expressed himself freely after the victory in the UEFA Nations League. Women, too, today are strong and confident which were conventionally seen as masculine traits. As seen in the case of women like Mithali Raj, Smriti Mandhana, Priyanka Chopra, Deepika Padukone etc who fear none and express their views and opinions freely in front of the world.

Conclusion

Androgyny was a need which, as a society, we never realised. Androgyny brought the element of equality for both men and women. It won't be wrong if we say that we are the products of the society we live in. The ideals of society over a period of time become our ideals too. Society has always trained men to hide their emotions at an individual level without being very vocal about them. Men, for years, weren't aware that it is normal for men to weep, too. Crying is not a gendered thing; all human beings have an equal right to it. They never knew that it is not a matter of taboo or shame to express ourselves emotionally. This was an injustice that men had to face and we didn't see or realise it as a form of injustice done to men.

In the case of women, too, a lot of injustice in the form of inequality has been carried out, probably from the day the world was formed. They were never allowed to express themselves freely. As Virginia Woolf rightly says, "the history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself" (ch. 3). Because Woolf knew that the emancipation of the nation is something that is still possible, but the emancipation of women would need a lot of struggle. Women have always been surrounded by a set of rules, which they were expected to follow or else society ridiculed them in numerous ways. Thus, androgyny can be seen as a way to provide due respect to women. Though it is still a matter of doubt whether all the women across the world have been emancipated. But we can at least say that the process has begun. As women today can associate themselves with words like courage, valour, strength etc.

Thus, androgyny could be seen as a way for men to emotionally express themselves. Also, it is the very androgyny through which women can embrace the masculine in them, such that they can become fearless enough to face all the difficulties single-handedly without depending on any man in their life, as had been happening conventionally for years. In this way, androgyny emerges as a way of establishing neutrality and balance in society. And most importantly, it promotes the idea of human beings to be human enough by breaking social shackles and having the freedom to lead their life in their own way.

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