

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2
March 2026

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Citation: Sandhiya, S. "Beyond Binaries: Queer Narratives of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 897-907.



A Literariness.org Project

Beyond Binaries: Queer Narratives of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara

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Abstract: In Indian mythological traditions, gender is neither static nor uniformly defined; rather, it emerges as fluid, relational, and often divinely transformative. Figures such as Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara occupy liminal spaces that unsettle binary constructions of gender and challenge the normative scripts embedded within patriarchal cultural memory. This paper examines how their narratives depict as sites of queering, offering critical discussions of fluid identity, intersectionality, and the reclamation of marginalized subjectivities.

Shikhandi, born as a woman and later assume a male identity to fulfil a karma and narrative purpose in *The Mahabharata*, destabilizes the coherence of conventional gender roles and provides a mythic precedent to understand transgender and non-binary identities within an Indian mythological framework. Ardhanarishvara, the composite embodiment of Shiva and Parvati, articulates a theological vision in which gender coexistence, hybridity, and complementarity are rendered sacred. Together, these figures reveal how ancient narratives encode gender fluidity as both spiritual symbolism and socio-cultural existence.

This paper examines classical texts, temple iconography, regional folklore, and contemporary reinterpretations—including the works of Devdutt Pattanaik—to show how mythological figures are reimagined in modern literature, digital media, and popular culture. Using queer theory and intersectional feminism, it argues that mythology functions as a dynamic archive that not only acknowledges but also valorises fluid identities. The study concludes by re-reading Indian mythology as an evolving narrative tradition that enables resistance, multiplicity, and the empowerment of gender-diverse identities, highlighting Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara as enduring frameworks for understanding identities beyond the gender binary.

Keywords: *Queer Mythology, Gender Fluidity, Shikhandi, Ardhanarishvara, Intersectional Feminism, Gender Identity, Indian Mythology*

Introduction

Indian mythology presents a complex narrative and a cultural atmosphere where gender is neither linear nor uniform but operates as a fluid landscape which shaped by divinity, destiny, and socio-religious imagination. In this mythological archive, figures like Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara represents the rigid gender binaries that dominate contemporary social discourse. Their presence across Puranic literature, temple iconography, and regional folklore suggests an understanding of gender that challenges the constructions of normative masculinity and femininity. Rather than representing gender as a fixed biological category, the narratives of these figures illustrate a spectrum of identity that is mutable, relational, and deeply intertwined with dharma, cosmic balance, and individual agency. This ancient cultural attachment with gender diversity makes Indian mythology a fertile site for queer readings that foreground non-conforming identities.

The re-examining of mythological figures through queer framework has gained academic and cultural relevance, especially in modern India, as the conversations revolve around LGBTQIA+ rights, recognition, and historical belonging. Shikhandi, whose narrative includes themes of reincarnation, revenge, gender transition, and social exclusion, is one of the earliest mythical articulations of transgender identity in Indian literature. Her journey from Amba to Shikhandi, ultimately fulfilling a destiny embedded in cosmic justice, demonstrates how gender can operate beyond biology and is shaped by one's existential and ethical purpose. Through Shikhandi, *The Mahabharata* not only legitimizes gender transformation but also provides a vital narrative tool that collapses patriarchal power structures of the society. The narrative also complicates the conventional ideals of Kshatriya masculinity and suggests recognition of transgender subjectivity through the gender-fluid warrior who plays a decisive role in the fall of Bhishma.

Ardhanarishvara, on the other hand, represents gender fluidity in a theological and artistic realm. As a composite form of Shiva and Parvati, Ardhanarishvara symbolizes the indivisibility of masculine and feminine energies and challenges the binary logic that often depicts social and cultural norms. The figure embodies coexistence, complementarity rather than division, representing gender hybridity as a sacred and cosmological principle. In temple sculpture and Shaivite philosophy, Ardhanarishvara expresses the idea that wholeness is achieved not through separation but through the integration of diverse identities. The half-male, half-female form thus becomes a divine articulation of queerness that embedded in the very foundation of creation and spiritual equilibrium.

Contemporary writers such as Ruth Vanita, Devdutt Pattanaik, Giti Thadani, and Wendy Doniger have illustrated how these mythological figures offer frameworks for understanding queer identities. Similarly, intersectional feminist perspectives reveal how gender fluidity in these narratives

cannot be divorced from the social, political, and religious structures within which they emerge. This research paper argues that the narratives of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara, when analyzed under the combined frameworks of queer theory and intersectionality, reveal a tradition of gender fluidity in Indian cultural imagination, challenge binary thinking, offer identity formation, and reconfigure the boundaries of gendered existence. By exploring textual resources, iconographic evidence, and contemporary reinterpretations in literature and digital media, this study brings out that mythology as an evolving archive which validates and empowers gender-diverse identities. As a result, it highlights how queering the mythological landscape enables a more inclusive understanding of selfhood, belonging, and cultural continuum.

Queer Theory and Intersectionality

Queer theory provides a critical lens through which gender and sexuality can be understood as complex, fluid, and socially constructed identity rather than as a fixed category dictated by biology or tradition. Emerging in the early 1990s, the writings of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michael Warner, disrupt heteronormative assumptions and interrogate the power structures that challenge sexuality and gender identities. The central notion of the theory is that identity is performative, contingent, and capable of transformation. In Butler's formulation of gender performativity, identity is constituted through repeated social acts rather than innate biological truth (Butler 25). This directly related with mythological figures Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara, as it allows Shikhandi's transition from Amba to a male warrior, and Ardhanarishvara's simultaneous embodiment of masculinity and femininity, to be read as early narratives of gender fluidity and resistance to fix identity categories.

Queer theory's critique of binary thinking also aligns with the Hindu philosophy, particularly in Advaita and Shaiva traditions. These philosophical systems conceptualize existence as interconnected and fluid, challenging the rigid dichotomies such as male/female, sacred/profane, body/spirit that structure Western metaphysical frameworks (Thadani 14). In this sense, queering Indian mythology is an act of reclaiming indigenous epistemologies that already allow multiplicity and fluidity. In this context, Ardhanarishvara symbolizes inherent non-dualism by representing the union of Purusha and Prakriti, suggesting that identity arises not through separation but through synthesis (Doniger 203). Queer theory thus becomes a method for illuminating latent possibilities within mythological texts rather than rewriting them.

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced a framework to analyze how overlapping social identities such as gender, caste, sexuality, and class, mould the lived experiences and access to power. Intersectionality acknowledges that oppression does not operate through a single axis but through interconnected structures (Crenshaw 56). Applying intersectionality to Indian mythology narratives

reveals how gender-fluid characters like Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara are situated within socio-cultural hierarchies. Shikhandi's story, for example, is inseparable from the patriarchal expectations of Kshatriya identity, the power structures of monarchy, and the complex moral landscape of the Mahabharata (Pattanaik 178). Their gender transition is not merely personal but emerges through the intersecting pressures of dharma, revenge, and societal existence.

Moreover, an intersectional lens reveals how Shikhandi's identity is shaped by social marginalization. Born as a woman in a patriarchal kingdom, raised as a son to fulfill political prophecies, and later navigating life as a transmasculine warrior, Shikhandi embodies multiple axes of exclusion and agency. Her experience reflects the tensions between gender, duty, caste privilege, and societal legitimacy (Vanita 62). Intersectionality also highlights how Shikhandi's acceptance as a warrior capable of enabling Bhishma's downfall occurs only when her gender aligns with the narrative of war and cosmic justice. Such insights expose the conditional nature of social acceptance for gender-nonconforming individuals, both in myth and contemporary society.

In the case of Ardhanarishvara, intersectionality helps to illuminate how divinity operates at the convergence of gender, spirituality, and social order. As a deity worshipped across caste, region, and sect, Ardhanarishvara represents a transcendence of earthly categories, yet its interpretation and rituals vary across local cultures and hierarchies (Kinsley121). The figure simultaneously carries and challenges patriarchal structures, while symbolizing perfect balance and unity. Ardhanarishvara is often interpreted through male-centered theological perspectives that privilege Shiva's identity over Parvati's (Bose 89). Feminist writers argue that the feminine component is frequently subsumed under the masculine in classical commentaries, revealing how divine androgyny becomes a site of negotiation between patriarchal and liberatory readings (Thadani 52). To sum up, queer theory and intersectionality provide a cohesive methodological framework for analyzing Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara. These concepts illuminate how gender fluidity in Indian mythology operates not merely as a symbolic representation but as a challenge to hegemonic norms, creating space for identities that defy categorization. They enable a reading of mythology as a dynamic cultural archive that speaks to contemporary struggles for visibility, recognition, and self-definition among gender-diverse communities.

Shikhandi: Textual, Cultural & Queer Interpretations

Shikhandi occupies one of the most complex and compelling positions within the framework of *The Mahabharata*, embodying themes of gender transition, vengeance, dharma, and cosmic justice. Her narrative begins in a previous birth as Amba, the princess of Kashi, whose life is shattered when Bhishma forcefully abducts her and her sisters to marry his half-brother. When Amba declares her love for King Salva, she is rejected by both Salva, who fears Bhishma's power, and by Bhishma, who vows

lifelong celibacy and refuses marriage. Her humiliation and abandonment become the catalyst for her transformation. Consumed by rage, Amba performs rigorous penance to Shiva, who grants her the boon of being reborn as the person destined to cause Bhishma's death. This foundational moment foregrounds the idea that gender transformation is intertwined with spiritual agency, destiny, and ethical purpose (Pattanaik 184).

Amba is reborn as Shikhandini, daughter of King Drupada. Yet Drupada, fearing the prophecy that his daughter would one day fulfill a warrior's destiny, raises Shikhandini as a son. This societal norm of gender rooted in political ambition and patriarchal anxiety illustrates that gender roles in the epic are shaped by social expectations rather than biological markers. As Wendy Doniger argues, this narrative demonstrates an ancient awareness of gender as performative and situational, a concept aligned with Judith Butler's theory that gender is constituted through repeated social acts (Doniger 210; Butler 34). Shikhandi's upbringing as a male child underscores how identity is constructed through social recognition, representations, and expectations.

The critical moment in Shikhandi's life occurs when she encounters a yaksha, who agrees to exchange gender with her, enabling her to live as a man named, Shikhandi. This supernatural intervention can be read symbolically as Ruth Vanita notes, the exchange reflects cultural understandings of gender fluidity that predate Western frameworks of transgender identity (Vanita 71). Rather than depicting gender exchange as unnatural, the epic portrays it as both valid and necessary for the fulfillment of dharma. The yaksha's transformation also suggests that gender is relational rather than fixed; it is something that can shift according to context, purpose, or cosmic balance (Kinsley 104). This portrayal challenges heteronormative assumptions and provides a powerful mythological precedent for transgender identities within an indigenous Indian context.

Shikhandi's role in the Kurukshetra war further illuminates her luminal identity. When Bhishma refuses to fight with a former woman, Shikhandi becomes the strategic key to his downfall. Arjuna shoots Bhishma while shielding himself behind Shikhandi, exploiting Bhishma's vow and societal norms around gender (Pattanaik 189). This moment exposes the contradictions of patriarchal ethics that Bhishma, despite being a formidable warrior, is bound by an internalized belief about femininity and masculinity that renders him vulnerable. Shikhandi thus disrupts and disarms patriarchal ideals from within, queering the battlefield by transforming gender into a site of resistance and victory.

Queer theorists interpret Shikhandi as a figure who destabilizes binary categories of gender through both narrative function and lived experience. Shikhandi, neither male nor female, instead, inhabits a transformation, performative identity, shaped by reincarnation, socialization, and divine intervention. This resonates with Butler's argument that identity exceeds biology and is enacted through repeated acts within social structures (Butler, 45). Shikhandi's existence challenges

contemporary claims that gender diversity is a modern phenomenon, suggesting that Indian mythological traditions have long acknowledged and legitimized non-binary identities. Her experience also intersects with caste privilege, political expectations, and patriarchal norms. As Vanita argues, the acceptance of Shikhandi's male identity occurs not from an ethical commitment to gender diversity but because their masculinity becomes politically useful in fulfilling divine prophecy (Vanita 78). This interpretation highlights the conditional nature of transgender acceptance within both ancient and modern societies. At the same time, Shikhandi's success in altering the course of the war, positions the mass as a figure of agency rather than marginal subjectivity.

Regional folklore and vernacular retellings further enrich Shikhandi's queer significance. In certain Tamil and Bengali traditions, Shikhandi is depicted with greater empathy, emphasizing themes of rebirth, endurance, and spiritual justice (Thadani 63). Popular retellings by Devdutt Pattanaik have brought Shikhandi into a contemporary queer discourse, framing her as an early example of gender fluidity in Hindu Mythology. These reinterpretations have contributed to broader cultural conversations about transgender identity in South Asia, making Shikhandi, a symbol of empowerment and historical belonging for queer communities.

Eventually, Shikhandi's narrative explores the intersection of myth, gender, and social justice. Her story critiques patriarchal rigidity, celebrates identity transformation, and positions queerness as central rather than peripheral. By examining Shikhandi through textual, cultural, and theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that her narrative offers a deeply rooted, indigenous articulation of gender fluidity that holds enduring relevance for contemporary discussions on identity and inclusivity.

Ardhanarishvara: Iconography, Theology & Gender Hybridity

Ardhanarishvara stands as one of the most profound representations of gender fluidity in Indian religious context, symbolizes the amalgamation of masculine and feminine in a single divine form. The deity, depicted as half Shiva and half Parvati, constitutes an androgynous figure that transcends binary notions of gender. This iconographic form appears in multiple Puranas, including the *Shiva Purana* and *Linga Purana*, where it is described as a cosmic union symbolizing the inseparability of Purusha (spirit) and Prakriti (matter). As Stella Kramrisch notes, Ardhanarishvara is not a composite being but "a vision of unity in duality," an embodiment of the metaphysical principle that creation emerges from harmonized opposites (Kramrisch78). This theological principle illustrates gender hybridity not as an anomaly but as the foundation of cosmic equilibrium. The visual depiction of Ardhanarishvara reinforces this conceptual merging. Sculptures from the Gupta period such as those in Mathura and Elephanta, depict the deity split vertically, with one side bearing the attributes of Shiva, including the matted locks and trident, while the other side reflects Parvati's elegance through ornate jewelry and flowing garments. These artistic details emphasize that neither masculine nor feminine

identity is superior or complete in isolation; instead, wholeness arises from the interplay of both (Kinsley 134). David Kinsley argues that Ardhanarishvara challenges rigid gender binaries by presenting a divine body that is explicitly hybrid, visually asserting that gender is relational and interdependent rather than oppositional.

From the theological perspective, Ardhanarishvara symbolizes the *samarasya*, or perfect harmony, between Shiva and Shakti. This harmony is essential for the act of creation. According to the *Linga Purana*, the universe remains inert until the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine merge, indicating that generative power lies not in gendered separation but in union (Doniger, 256). Shaivite traditions interpret this form as an illustration of the non-dualist philosophy of Advaita, where opposites are reconciled within a singular ontological reality. Queer theorists draw on this theology to argue that gender hybridity is embedded into the metaphysical structure of Hindu cosmology, offering an indigenous conceptual framework for thinking beyond the binary (Thadani 91).

Cultural interpretations of Ardhanarishvara further enrich its queer significance. Artistic variations across regions such as the Chola bronzes of Tamil Nadu or the Bengal Pattachitra paintings demonstrate diverse engagements with divine androgyny. In South India, temple rituals often celebrate the inseparable bond between Shiva and Shakti, emphasizing their equal and complementary roles. Yet at the same time, some patriarchal commentaries interpret Ardhanarishvara as subordinating the feminine aspect to the masculine, particularly through narratives that suggest Parvati emerges from Shiva's body rather than independent identity. Mandakranta Bose critiques these interpretations, arguing that they reflect socio-cultural hierarchies rather than the egalitarian potential inherent in the iconography (Bose 112). Thus, the figure represents gender, power, and religious symbolism intersect, inviting both emancipatory and restrictive readings.

Ardhanarishvara also functions as a symbolic model for the integration of masculine and feminine qualities within the human psyche. Devdutt Pattanaik interprets the deity as the balance between assertive and nurturing traits, suggesting that gendered qualities exist along a continuum accessible to all individuals regardless of their assigned sex (Pattanaik 34). This psychological reading resonates with modern queer and non-binary identities, which reject rigid classifications in favour of fluid self-expression. Thus, the divine form offers a culturally grounded articulation of gender expansiveness, providing historical legitimacy to identities that transcend binary frameworks.

Contemporary interpretations in literature, visual art, classical dance, and digital media often emphasize the fluid, non-dual essence of the deity which in turn revitalized Ardhanarishvara's relevance, especially within queer and transgender communities who embrace the icon as a spiritual affirmation of non-binary identity. Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancers frequently portray Ardhanarishvara through performances that blend masculine and feminine movements, showcasing the

fluidity and harmony of gender expression (Vanita 94). Such performances embody a living re-enactment of divine hybridity, reinforcing the idea that gender fluidity is not a modern deviation but part of India's classical aesthetic and spiritual heritage.

Ardhanarishvara stands as one of the most profound articulations of gender fluidity in Indian Mythology. Its iconographic representations challenge the rigidity of binary gender norms, while its theology proposes a model of identity grounded in coexistence rather than division. By bringing together the masculine and feminine within a single sacred form, Ardhanarishvara affirms the possibility of multiple, hybrid, and fluid identities, offering a deeply rooted cultural and spiritual framework for understanding gender beyond the binary.

Comparative Analysis and Contemporary Reinterpretations

A comparative reading of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara reveals how Indian mythology accommodates multiple modes of gender fluidity, one rooted in human experience and socio-political structures, and the other grounded in divine embodiment and cosmological philosophy. Shikhandi's narrative emerges from personal turmoil, reincarnation, and social negotiation, whereas, Ardhanarishvara symbolizes an eternal metaphysical principle that transcends human constraints. Yet both figures converge in their challenge to normative gender binaries, offering insights into how ancient narratives destabilizing frameworks of identity. They also articulate a spectrum of gender expression that includes transformation, hybridity, coexistence, and transcendence (Pattanaik 212).

Shikhandi's story foregrounds gender as lived, embodied, and socially mediated. Her transformation from Amba to Shikhandi involves physical change, social recognition, and political implications. It reflects the human struggle to assert identity within restrictive social norms. As Wendy Doniger writes, Shikhandi's transition exposes the vulnerability of bodies governed by patriarchal structures (Doniger 218). Ardhanarishvara, in contrast, embodies gender unity at a cosmic level. The deity's form asserts that gender coexistence is intrinsic to creation itself. Stella Kramrisch interprets, Ardhanarishvara as "a metaphysical assertion beyond human constraint," suggesting that divine fluidity is not a deviation but a principle of universal balance (Kramrisch 81). Thus, Shikhandi illustrates gender fluidity as resistance and necessity, whereas Ardhanarishvara exemplifies it as spiritual harmony.

Both figures disrupt binary constructions, though in distinct ways. Shikhandi destabilizes binaries through disruption by challenging Bhishma's ideals of warrior masculinity and forcing the epic's moral landscape to reckon with gender diversity (Vanita 74), while, Ardhanarishvara destabilizes binaries through synthesis, depicting masculine and feminine energies as complementary and inseparable (Kinsley 142). Both figures participate in queering mythological space in different narratives: Shikhandi queers by defying, Ardhanarishvara by unifying.

Intersectionality helps illuminate how each figure negotiates power within their respective contexts. Shikhandi's identity intersects with caste, political duty, and familial expectations. Her acceptance is largely validated because her male identity serves a narrative purpose, the downfall of Bhishma. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of overlapping systems of oppression becomes relevant here, as Shikhandi's legitimacy is shaped by the confluence of gender, caste privilege, and utilitarian acceptance (Crenshaw 60). Ardhanarishvara's identity also intersects with religious practice and social hierarchy. Interpretations of the deity vary widely, while some regions celebrate Ardhanarishvara as a symbol of absolute equality, others privilege Shiva's masculine half. Mandakranta Bose argues that patriarchal interpretations often overshadow the feminine aspect, revealing how divine representations can be co-opted by social structures (Bose 116). Thus, both figures reveal how gender fluidity interacts with power and societal norms.

Contemporary Reinterpretations: Literature, Media, and Performance

Modern interpretations revisit the significance of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara, especially within LGBTQIA+ discourses in India. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* reclaims Shikhandi as an early transgender figure, arguing that Indian mythology has always acknowledged non-binary identities (Pattanaik 220). Ruth Vanita and Giti Thadani have expanded this narrative by representing Shikhandi within a broader history of queer representations in South Asian culture (Vanita 89; Thadani 58). Ardhanarishvara has similarly found renewed life in contemporary art, digital media, and classical dance. Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi performers often portray Ardhanarishvara through choreography that blends masculine and feminine movements, demonstrating the fluidity of physical expression (Vanita 94). Visual media and contemporary queer activists have adopted the deity as a symbol of gender inclusivity, reclaiming divine androgyny as a cultural anchor for non-binary rights and representation.

The continued relevance of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara underscores the importance of mythology as a living archive, capable of addressing present-day questions of gender, identity, and belonging. Queer readings of these figures disrupt the notion that gender diversity is foreign or modern, asserting instead that fluid identities are deeply rooted in India's cultural imagination. In a society still negotiating the politics of gender and sexuality, these narratives offer models of empowerment, resilience, and self-recognition. By bridging human experience and divine embodiment, these figures demonstrate the full spectrum of gendered possibilities, offering profound insights for contemporary conversations on identity and queer liberation.

Conclusion

The comparative exploration of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara demonstrates that gender fluidity in Indian Mythological narratives operates across a vast continuum from deeply human struggles to divine cosmological principles. These narratives reveal a worldview in which identity is dynamic, relational, and embedded within cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts. By placing Shikhandi's embodied, socially negotiated journey alongside Ardhanarishvara's metaphysical unity implies how mythology accommodates multiple ways of imagining gender beyond rigid classifications (Pattanaik 212).

Shikhandi's story foregrounds the lived complexities of gender identity within patriarchal social structures. Her transformation reflects both resistance and resilience, revealing how identity must often be asserted in the face of societal constraints. Ardhanarishvara, however, represents a cosmic vision of harmonious duality, challenging the assumption that masculinity and femininity must exist in opposition. Together, these figures illustrate how gender can both be contested and celebrated, fractured and fused—offering insights that remain relevant to contemporary queer discourses (Doniger 218; Kramrisch 81).

In modern reinterpretations, these mythological figures have become powerful cultural anchors for LGBTQIA+ communities. Retellings in literature, performance, and digital media reclaim fluid identities that colonial modernity attempted to erase. By situating Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara within today's conversations on gender, scholars and artists demonstrate that queerness is not an imported concept but a deeply rooted indigenous expression (Vanita 89; Thadani 58). Their stories empower individuals to relocate themselves within a lineage of fluidity, transformation, and divine balance.

To conclude, these narratives remind that mythology is not static; it evolves alongside society, reflecting its tensions and possibilities. The enduring relevance of Shikhandi and Ardhanarishvara reveals that gender fluidity has always been integral to India's cultural imagination. By acknowledging these narratives, contemporary discourse moves toward a more inclusive understanding of identity; one that embraces complexity rather than conformity, fluidity rather than fixity, and liberation rather than constraint. These myths, therefore, serve not merely as stories from the past but as frameworks for envisioning a more equitable future.

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