

The Mytho-Queer: How Indian Mythological Media Construct and Contain Third-Gender Identities

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Abstract

This paper introduces and defines the term “mytho-queer” as a recurring character archetype in contemporary Indian mythological visual cultures, including comics, animation, digital art, and televised retellings. The mytho-queer is theorised as a representational figure that simultaneously exalts, exoticises, and marginalises third-gender identities within India’s rapidly modernising urban centres. Drawing on close readings of visual texts, paratexts, and character designs across multiple media, such as BR Chopra’s *Mahabharata* (1987-90) and *Amar Chitra Katha*, the study examines how this archetype draws selectively from Hindu mythological traditions—particularly depictions of mythological characters like Brihannala, Ardhanarishvara, Shikhandi, and other gender-fluid divinities — while reframing them through heteronormative, commercial, and nationalist aesthetic logics.

The paper argues that the mytho-queer functions less as an authentic expression of queer or transgender subjectivity and more as a phantom heteronormative projection crafted by cisgender artists, writers, and producers. This projection offers symbolic visibility without corresponding social legibility, producing a paradox in which queer-coded divinity becomes culturally celebrated while real transgender and transsexual communities remain marginalised. By analysing the gap between mythic representation and lived queer realities, the study highlights how the mytho-queer archetype is mobilised as a safe, consumable, and spiritually sanctioned form of identification for cisgender audiences—one that displaces, rather than centres, transgender voices.

The paper ultimately positions mytho-queer as a critical analytic for understanding the tensions between mythology, visual culture, and queer politics in contemporary India, and calls for a re-examination of representational practices that conflate symbolic inclusion with social justice.

Keywords: Mytho-Queer; Indian Mythology; Transgender Representation; Visual Culture; Heteronormativity