

Beyond Binaries: Gender Performativity in Indian and Western Cultural Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Gender, often perceived as a rigid binary, is increasingly being challenged through cultural performances in cinema, mythology, and media. While Western societies have historically adhered to more fixed gender roles, Indian cultural and religious traditions have long embraced fluidity, as seen in figures like Ardhanarishvara, Mohini, and Shikhandi. This paper examines the evolving nature of gender performance in India and the West, using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as a critical framework.

Focusing on contemporary popular culture, the paper explores Allu Arjun's gender-fluid performance in *Pushpa 2* as a subversion of hegemonic masculinity, drawing from India's folk traditions like *Theyyam* and *Yakshagana*, where cross-dressing is normalized. In contrast, Western gender performances—from *RuPaul's Drag Race* to David Bowie's gender fluid performance art—exist within a countercultural framework, challenging rigid gender norms but often remaining outside the mainstream.

By analysing mythological and cinematic representations of androgyny, this paper compares how gender transformation in Indian and Western traditions have historically been perceived—whether as divine power (*Ardhanarishvara*, *Mohini*) or liminality (*Hermaphroditus*, *Tiresias*). Additionally, it investigates how audiences in India and the West react differently to gender-fluid performances in cinema, questioning the borders of acceptance and the cultural politics of gender representation.

This study situates gender as a site of cultural negotiation, demonstrating how gender performativity transcends geographical and ideological boundaries, thereby contributing to global conversations on identity and representation.

KEYWORDS: Gender performativity, gender in popular culture, gender in mythology, gender fluidity, Judith Butler, Gender Trouble

INTRODUCTION

In the discourse of gender studies, the distinction between biological sex and gender emerges as fundamental. Biological sex refers to the physiological and anatomical characteristics that categorize individuals as male, female, or intersex, encompassing chromosomes, hormones, gonads, and reproductive systems. These traits are largely determined at birth and remain relatively fixed, though variations such as intersex conditions challenge binary classifications. In contrast, gender constitutes a social construct, shaped by cultural, historical, and societal influences rather than innate biology. It encompasses the roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities ascribed to individuals based on perceived sex, often manifesting as masculine or feminine norms. This underscores that while sex is rooted in biology, gender is fluid, learned, and performative, subject to variation across cultures and eras.

The notion of gender as a social construct posits that it is not an inherent essence but a product of societal forces. From infancy, individuals are socialized into gender roles through family, education, media, and institutions which reinforce expectations of how one should act, dress, and interact. For instance, in many societies, traits like assertiveness and rationality are coded as masculine, while nurturing and emotional expressiveness are deemed feminine. These constructs are not neutral; they perpetuate hierarchies, often privileging masculinity and marginalizing those who deviate, or considered as 'other'. As a result, gender becomes a mechanism of power, influencing access to resources, opportunities, and recognition. Deviations from these norms—such as women in leadership or men in caregiving roles—can invite social sanctions, ranging from subtle disapproval to overt discrimination or violence. The constructed nature of gender reveals its malleability, allowing for resistance and reconfiguration, yet it also highlights how deeply entrenched norms can internalize oppression, making conformity seem natural.

Central to understanding gender's constructed quality is its performative dimension, as articulated by feminist theorists. Gender is not a static identity but a series of repeated acts that create the illusion of coherence. Judith Butler conceptualizes this in *Gender Trouble*, arguing that gender is "the stylized repetition of acts through time" (33). These acts—encompassing gestures, speech, attire, and comportment—congeal over time to produce what appears as a stable core, yet they are compelled by regulatory frameworks that enforce binary norms. Butler emphasizes that "gender is not something that one is, it is something one does", performed in response to social expectations rather than emerging from an inner essence (25). This performativity exposes gender's fragility: it requires constant reenactment to sustain itself, and disruptions—such as drag or non-conforming expressions—reveal its artifice. Performing gender 'correctly' grants societal legibility, positioning individuals as viable subjects with assigned roles, privileges, and obligations. Conversely, failures to conform can lead to exclusion, pathologization, or erasure, underscoring the punitive stakes of deviation.

Building on earlier existentialist insights, Simone de Beauvoir laid foundational groundwork for this constructivist view. In *The Second Sex*, she asserts that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (283). This process of 'becoming' involves internalizing norms that dictate behaviour, aspirations, and self-perception, often at the expense of autonomy. Beauvoir critiques how society transforms biological differences into justifications for inequality, reducing women to the 'Other' in relation to men. Gender emerges from existential choices within oppressive structures, where women are conditioned to embody passivity and dependence. Her analysis highlights the learned nature of gender, acquired through repetitive exposure to societal scripts that differentiate roles for men and women, such as breadwinning versus homemaking.

These theoretical frameworks illuminate the performative and constructed essence of gender, distinct from biological sex, and invite scrutiny of how such dynamics operate across cultural narratives. In Western contexts, gender often rigidifies into binaries that naturalize inequality, while Indian traditions, with figures like Ardhanarishvara (the half-male, half-female deity), suggest more fluid interpretations, though colonial and modern influences have imposed stricter norms. Exploring these narratives reveal the role of gender in shaping identity and power, urging a move beyond binaries toward inclusive understandings. Ultimately, recognizing gender's performativity can lead to agency, allowing individuals to challenge and redefine norms, fostering societies where recognition as an individual transcends rigid performances of identities.

Gender Fluidity in Indian Cultural Narratives

Indian cultural traditions have long portrayed gender as fluid and multifaceted, challenging rigid binaries

through mythological figures, linguistic diversity, performative arts, and artistic representations. In Hindu mythology, deities embody gender transformations and androgyny, illustrating a nuanced understanding of identity. Ardhanarishvara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati, symbolizes the inseparability of male and female principles, representing a divine totality that transcends duality. As Pattanaik notes, the "Ardhanarishvara form is an androgynous composite of Shiva and goddess Parvati... symboliz[ing] that the male and female principles are inseparable" (Pattanaik). Similarly, Mohini, Vishnu's female avatar, embodies enchantment and gender fluidity, appearing in narratives like the churning of the ocean to aid the devas and merging with Shiva to birth Ayyappa (Pattanaik). These figures demonstrate how divine beings shift genders to fulfil cosmic purposes, unsettling essentialist notions of identity.

Mythological narratives like that of Shikhandi also exemplify gender transformation. Born as the female Shikhandini to King Drupada, she was raised as a boy and later exchanged her sex with a yaksha spirit to become male, embodying qualities of *tritiya prakriti* (third nature). This transformation enabled Shikhandi to confront Bhishma in the *Mahabharata*, where Bhishma's refusal to fight a 'woman' led to his defeat by Arjuna hiding behind Shikhandi (Mitra). Such stories underscore gender as mutable, tied to karma and rebirth, where the soul remains genderless.

Ancient Indian languages further reflect this fluidity, offering over fifty terms for non-binary and non-heterosexual genders and sexualities in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tamil. Words like *napunsaka* (not male), *kliba* (impotent or sterile), *kinnara* (not quite male), *pedi* (cross-dresser), and *pandaka* appear in texts such as the Vedas, Puranas, and Kama Shastra (Kalra and Bhatt 235). These terms indicate a sophisticated recognition of gender diversity, often framed physiologically rather than pathologically. For instance, the *Sushruta Samhita* attributes queer identities to the balance of male and female seeds during conception, integrating them into a cosmological framework (Kalra and Bhatt 235).

Indian folk traditions and performative arts also normalize gender fluidity through cross-dressing and expressive practices. In Kathakali, male actors portray female characters, epitomizing grace and beauty while blurring distinctions between theatre, dance, and religion. Yakshagana employs elaborate costumes and makeup, allowing performers to transcend biological sex and explore identity fluidity. In Theyyam, deities manifest in cross-gendered forms during rituals, fostering social interaction beyond binaries (Joseph 92). As Joseph observes, "cross-dressing remains one of the political statements and elements of expression to the world" (92). These art forms subtly challenge norms, contributing to a broader understanding of gender fluidity.

Sculptural evidence from Khajuraho and Konark temples provides further testimony, with erotic carvings depicting same-sex intimacy indicating that heteronormativity was not the societal default (Priya). The Hijra community, recognized as a third gender for centuries, embodies gender fluidity through rituals associated with fertility and auspicious occasions, such as blessings at births and weddings. In the *Ramayana*, Hijras' loyalty to Rama grants them this role, deeply ingraining them in India's cultural landscape (Pattanaik).

These narratives and performances collectively portray gender as performative and fluid, inviting resistance to binaries and fostering inclusive identities across Indian cultural contexts.

Gender Fluidity in Western Cultural Narratives

In contrast to the fluid and integrative gender portrayals in Indian traditions, Western cultural narratives often frame gender as more rigid and binary, with instances of gender fluidity frequently depicted as liminal, exceptional, or punitive. This rigidity is rooted in Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, and Norse frameworks that emphasize fixed roles; yet mythological and literary figures such as Loki,

Hermaphroditus, and Tiresias reveal moments of gender transgression, often tied to transformation or divine intervention. These instances, while present, are typically portrayed as deviations from the norm, reinforcing a binary framework rather than embracing fluidity as inherent.

In Norse mythology, Loki, the trickster god, embodies shape-shifting and gender fluidity, notably transforming into a mare to birth Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse (Crawford 63). This act, however, is often framed as a strategic or disruptive manoeuvre rather than a celebration of fluid identity, reflecting the liminal status of gender transgression in Norse tales. Loki's fluidity serves narrative purposes such as deception, rather than affirming a stable non-binary identity. Similarly, in Greek mythology, Hermaphroditus, born of Hermes and Aphrodite, becomes androgynous after merging with the nymph Salmacis. As Ovid describes in *Metamorphoses*, "their two bodies, joined together as they were, became one" (Ovid 4.373-374). This fusion, however, is involuntary, resulting from Salmacis's desire, and positions Hermaphroditus as a liminal figure—neither fully male nor female—existing outside societal norms (Brisson 42). The narrative underscores the anomaly of such a state in a culture that prioritizes binary gender distinctions.

Tiresias, another pivotal figure in Greek and Roman mythology, experiences gender transformation as a divine punishment. Struck by Hera for killing mating snakes, Tiresias lives as a woman for seven years before reverting to male (Brisson 45). His dual experience grants him unique insight, as seen in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where he arbitrates a dispute between Zeus and Hera about sexual pleasure (Ovid 3.316-338). Yet, his transformation is temporary and imposed, reinforcing the notion that gender fluidity is an aberration, not a normative state. As Brisson notes, "Tiresias's transformation is a narrative device to highlight divine power rather than an endorsement of gender fluidity" (45).

Western literature, particularly Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, further explores gender transformation through characters like Iphis and Caeneus. Iphis, born as female but raised as male, is transformed into a man by Isis to marry Ianthe, resolving a societal conflict within a heteronormative framework (Ovid 9.666-797). Caeneus, originally Caenis, transitions from female to male after Poseidon's assault, gaining invulnerability as compensation (Ovid 12.189-209). Both transformations, however, serve to restore characters to binary roles, aligning with societal expectations rather than challenging them. As Wheeler observes, "Ovid's transformations often reinforce gender norms by resolving ambiguity into binary categories" (137). These narratives suggest that gender fluidity, while acknowledged, is often a temporary state resolved to uphold patriarchal structures.

This punitive or liminal framing contrasts sharply with Indian traditions, where figures like Ardhanarishvara integrate gender fluidity as divine and normative. Western mythology's emphasis on binary restoration reflects cultural anxieties about ambiguity, with fluidity often cast as a disruption requiring resolution. Even in literary contexts, gender transformations are less about celebrating diversity and more about navigating or correcting social tensions. This rigidity underscores a broader Western tendency to enforce binary norms, limiting the recognition of fluid identities as legitimate and enduring.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section analyses existing scholarship on gender fluidity in popular culture, focusing on Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) and Sukumar's *Pushpa 2: The Rule* (2024). Grounded in gender performativity theories, it explores how these films challenge binary norms through Barbie's subversion of idealized femininity and Pushpa Raj's androgynous portrayal, reflecting evolving societal perceptions. This analysis provides a foundation for this study, to compare gender representation in these cinematic works.

In her Master's dissertation, Manel Nadji examines the 2023 Barbie film's portrayal of Western gender constructions, analysing how characters like Stereotypical Barbie, Ken, Midge the pregnant doll, and the transgender Doctor Barbie challenge traditional roles and influence audience perceptions. Employing an eclectic approach integrating Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, Stuart Hall's reception theory, and radical feminism, Nadji argues that media reshapes cultural norms by disrupting binary gender dynamics, often marginalizing masculinity and motherhood while promoting inclusivity. The study reviews Western critics' polarized responses, highlighting the film's potential to erode societal values through subversive narratives. Ultimately, Nadji posits that such representations foster ideological shifts, urging nuanced interpretations of gender fluidity in contemporary cinema (Nadji).

In her scholarly article, Anna Temel critiques *Barbie* through Judith Butler's lens of gender performativity, arguing that the doll historically reinforces stereotypical femininity, compulsory heterosexuality, and unattainable ideals of womanhood, often masked as empowerment. Temel examines Barbieland's feminist utopia, highlighting how diverse Barbies perpetuate innate feminine traits like emotional caretaking, while Weird Barbie's ostracism exposes punitive norms for nonconformity. The narrative's shift to Ken satirizes choice feminism and heteronormativity, yet Temel contends the film superficially deconstructs these constructs, inadvertently reinstating patriarchal binaries through Stereotypical Barbie's journey and reliance on Ken. Ultimately, Temel posits that Barbie offers partial subversion of gender norms but risks reinforcing the status quo, urging re-evaluation of femininity beyond performative constraints (Temel).

In her scholarly article, Shuhua Zheng analyses *Barbie* through gender theory, exploring women's identity construction and representation amid patriarchal norms. Zheng traces Barbie's cultural history as a dual symbol of empowerment and stereotypical femininity, critiquing its reinforcement of beauty standards and roles. The film subverts these by depicting Barbie's transition from idealized sophistication to real-world vulnerabilities like cellulite and anxiety, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's ideas to highlight socio-cultural shaping of gender. Zheng examines dialogues between genders, inverting patriarchy in Barbieland to foster equality, and intra-female conversations echoing Betty Friedan's critiques of media brainwashing. While praising the film's innovative discourse on self-realization, Zheng notes limitations in depth, such as binary reversals and underexplored diversity, urging nuanced gender portrayals for true equity (Zheng).

In her research article, Nelly K. Abdelwahed critiques *Barbie* through Judith Butler's gender performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality frameworks, using interviews with Egyptian university students. Abdelwahed argues that the film challenges traditional gender norms by reimagining Barbie's role, sparking global discourse on identity and societal expectations. However, its Western-centric narrative limits its relevance for Middle Eastern audiences, revealing a gap in addressing intersectional and diverse experiences. While the film empowers women and critiques systemic inequalities, Abdelwahed highlights its failure to fully engage non-Western perspectives, advocating for more inclusive feminist media to bridge cultural divides and enhance global representation (Abdelwahed).

In their article, Michael Burke and Natalie Kon-Yu analyse *Barbie* through a feminist lens, arguing that it delivers a radical message despite its apparent alignment with stereotypical femininity and corporate backing by Mattel. They contend that the film critiques Gender Critical Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism by emphasizing gender performativity in Barbieland, distinct from biological determinism, and challenges neoliberal 'leaning in' feminism by depicting a coalition of Barbies, Kens, and Allan overthrowing patriarchy systemically. Positioned between critiques of being "not feminist enough" and "feminist propaganda," the film engages a broad audience while dismantling mainstream feminist paradigms, advocating for collective action over individual empowerment (Burke and Kon-Yu).

In her article, Dikmen Yakalı examines *Barbie* through a postfeminist lens, focusing on the deconstruction of hegemonic and toxic masculinity via Ken's portrayal. Yakalı argues that the film shifts attention from Barbie to Ken, using satire to challenge traditional masculine ideals within patriarchal structures, marking a novel exploration in children's media. Positioned as a postfeminist icon, Ken reflects ongoing gender role debates, critiquing commodified feminism and neoliberal empowerment narratives. The study highlights how the film's popularity fosters discourse on masculinity crises and gender wars, suggesting its role in reshaping gender identity discussions within mainstream media culture (Yakalı).

In their article, Pooja Jogendrasingh Arora and Dr. Milind B. Pandit analyse the film *Pushpa 2: The Rule* as a cultural artifact that amplifies subaltern voices through the protagonist Pushpa Raj. Rooted in postcolonial and subaltern theories, the study explores how the film critiques socio-economic hierarchies, caste oppression, and systemic exploitation in Telangana. Pushpa's journey from an illegitimate labourer to a defiant smuggler symbolizes resistance and identity reclamation, challenging class divides and economic injustice, as seen in his assertive stance against a mill manager. While implicitly addressing caste dynamics, the narrative underscores resilience, positioning the film as a bridge between mainstream entertainment and critical social commentary (Arora and Pandit).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

This study employs Judith Butler's gender theory as its methodological framework, to examine the performative nature of gender across cultural narratives. Butler's concept of gender performativity posits that gender is not an inherent essence but a series of repeated acts shaped by social norms, which create the illusion of a stable identity (Butler 25). Her theory, articulated in *Gender Trouble*, emphasizes that these acts are regulated by cultural and historical contexts, rendering gender a dynamic construct subject to subversion and reconfiguration (Butler 33). By applying this lens, the study interrogates how gender performances in cultural narratives—whether mythological, literary, or artistic—reinforce or challenge binary norms. Butler's framework is particularly suited for analysing how repeated behaviours, gestures, and representations in cultural texts construct and destabilize gender identities, offering a critical tool to explore fluidity across diverse contexts.

The research method adopted is comparative analysis, which facilitates a systematic examination of gender representations across different cultural traditions. This method involves juxtaposing specific cultural artifacts—such as myths, literature, and performative practices—to identify patterns, divergences, and convergences in how gender fluidity is constructed and perceived. Comparative analysis, as defined by Walk, allows for the “systematic comparison of two or more entities to identify similarities and differences” (Walk 42). By comparing gendered performances, the study highlights how cultural and historical contexts shape the enactment and reception of gender fluidity. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how societal norms influence gender expressions, revealing the extent to which fluidity is embraced or constrained.

Through this dual framework of Butler's theory and comparative analysis, the research elucidates the performative dimensions of gender, contributing to broader discussions on identity and cultural narrative.

GENDER FLUID PERFORMANCES IN POPULAR CULTURE

Drag Culture in the West

The rise of drag culture represents one of the most enduring and influential manifestations of gender fluidity in Western popular culture, serving as a performative critique of rigid gender binaries. Rooted

historically in theatrical traditions dating back to ancient Greek drama and Shakespearean plays, where male actors frequently portrayed female characters due to societal prohibitions on women in performance, drag evolved into a distinct subcultural phenomenon in the 20th century. By the mid-1900s, it became deeply intertwined with LGBTQ+ communities, particularly among gay men in urban centres like New York and San Francisco. Drag performances, often featuring cross-dressing, exaggerated makeup, and hyperbolic enactments of femininity or masculinity, emerged as acts of resistance against heteronormative expectations. For instance, the Harlem drag balls of the 1920s and 1930s provided safe spaces for Black and Latinx queer individuals to express gender variance, foreshadowing the broader civil rights struggles within queer communities.

In contemporary contexts, drag culture has gained mainstream visibility through platforms like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which premiered in 2009 and has since become a global phenomenon, showcasing drag as both entertainment and social commentary. Drag queens, traditionally men performing as women but increasingly inclusive of cisgender women, trans individuals, and non-binary performers, utilize costumes and mannerisms to parody gender roles, highlighting their constructed nature. As noted in scholarly analyses, drag challenges heterosexism by encouraging audiences to interrogate gender norms in everyday life, fostering greater acceptance of fluidity. This performative aspect aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where gender is not an innate essence but a repeated act that can be subverted through exaggeration. However, drag has faced backlash, particularly from conservative factions viewing it as a threat to traditional values, as evidenced by recent legislative attempts in the United States to restrict drag shows in public spaces. Despite such opposition, drag's impact endures, promoting self-expression and inclusivity while underscoring gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed binary.

David Bowie's Gender Fluid Performances

Building on the subversive potential of drag, David Bowie's experiments with gender fluidity during the 1970s glam rock era stand as iconic exemplars of androgyny in Western music and cultural performances. Bowie, often hailed as a chameleon of pop culture, transcended conventional masculinity through his alter ego Ziggy Stardust, introduced in the 1972 album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. Ziggy, an extraterrestrial rock star with flamboyant makeup, glittering costumes, and ambiguous sexuality, blurred the boundaries between male and female, straight and queer. Bowie's onstage persona involved cross-dressing—such as wearing dresses and platform boots—and theatrical gestures borrowed from female icons like Marlene Dietrich, challenging the era's rigid gender norms amid the sexual revolution.

Bowie's influence extended beyond aesthetics; his public declarations of bisexuality in a 1972 interview with *Melody Maker* magazine sparked widespread discourse on sexual and gender fluidity, inspiring generations to embrace non-conformity. Scholars argue that Ziggy Stardust not only redefined masculinity in rock music but also paved the way for later artists like Prince and Lady Gaga to explore similar themes. By mimicking and transforming physical gestures associated with both genders, Bowie demonstrated gender as performative and mutable, aligning with emerging queer theories of the time. Although Bowie later retracted some statements on his sexuality, his legacy in counter-culture movements remains profound, illustrating how celebrity performances can shift societal perceptions of gender from binary to fluid. In essence, Bowie's work exemplified how artistic expression could disrupt patriarchal structures, encouraging audiences to view gender as a creative spectrum.

Changing Gender Perceptions Through Films Like *Barbie* (2023)

Shifting from historical icons to contemporary cinema, films like Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) illustrate

evolving perceptions of gender fluidity by deconstructing performative roles within a satirical framework. Set in the matriarchal utopia of Barbieland, where Barbies hold all positions of power—from presidents to Nobel laureates—the film inverts traditional patriarchal hierarchies, positioning Kens as accessories rather than agents. This reversal exposes the absurdity of gendered expectations, as Stereotypical Barbie embodies idealized femininity: perpetually cheerful, unquestioning, and conforming to beauty standards that echo patriarchal views of womanhood. In contrast, Weird Barbie disrupts these norms by embracing eccentricity and critical thinking, yet she is marginalized and feared, highlighting how even in a female-dominated society, deviations from prescribed roles invite ostracism.

The narrative further explores gender performativity through Ken's arc, who, upon discovering the real world's patriarchy, attempts to impose masculine dominance in Barbieland, complete with symbols like horses and brewski beers. This parody critiques toxic masculinity while revealing gender as a learned performance, susceptible to subversion. Drawing on Butler's framework, the film portrays relationships such as Barbie and Ken's superficial romance, as scripted enactments devoid of authentic emotion, underscoring the constructed nature of heteronormative love. *Barbie* also has intersectional shortcomings, adopting a Western-centric lens that overlooks diverse racial and cultural experiences of gender. Nonetheless, its commercial success signals a cultural shift, mainstreaming discussions on gender fluidity and empowering audiences to question binary norms in everyday life. Through such cinematic portrayals, gender perceptions are gradually transforming, moving from rigid stereotypes toward more inclusive understandings.

Allu Arjun's Gender Fluid Performance in *Pushpa 2* (2024)

In a parallel yet culturally distinct vein, Indian cinema has begun to incorporate gender fluid elements, as seen in Allu Arjun's transformative performance in *Pushpa 2: The Rule* (2024). Directed by Sukumar, the film features a pivotal scene during the Gangamma Jathara festival, where Arjun's character, Pushpa Raj—a hyper-masculine sandalwood smuggler—dons the attire of Goddess Gangamma to evade enemies and honour the deity. Clad in a blue saree, adorned with traditional jewellery, bangles, and blue body paint, Arjun embodies an androgynous figure, blending masculine aggression with feminine grace. This sequence, lasting several minutes and accompanied by energetic dance and music, challenges the film's overarching theme of overt masculinity as heroic, compelling viewers to reconsider the fluidity of gender boundaries.

The portrayal draws from the real-life Gangamma Jathara in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, where men traditionally cross-dress as women to seek the goddess's blessings, a ritual rooted in devotion and community folklore. This cultural practice echoes broader Indian traditions of gender fluidity in performative arts, such as Yakshagana, a folk dance-drama from Karnataka. In Yakshagana, male performers historically assume female roles (stree vesha), employing elaborate costumes, makeup, and stylized movements to portray characters from epics like the *Mahabharata*. This cross-dressing, often performed in religious contexts, serves not merely as entertainment but as a means to explore divine androgyny, where gods like Shiva embody both male and female aspects (ardhanarishvara). Arjun's scene in *Pushpa 2* thus bridges cinematic spectacle with these folk elements, using commercial appeal to normalize gender variance. Critically acclaimed for its boldness, the sequence has sparked discussions on masculinity in Telugu cinema, where heroes are typically portrayed as unyieldingly macho, marking a departure toward more nuanced representations.

Comparative Perspectives and Emerging Trends

In synthesizing these examples, a clear dichotomy emerges in the historical localization of gender fluid

performances: in the West, such expressions have predominantly thrived within counter-culture movements, from drag's queer underground to Bowie's glam rock rebellion, often positioned against mainstream conservatism. Conversely, in India, gender fluidity has been embedded in religious rituals and folk performances, such as the devotional cross-dressing in Jathara or the male enactment of female roles in Yakshagana, where it serves spiritual rather than subversive purposes. These contexts reflect broader societal structures—Western individualism fostering oppositional art, while Indian collectivism integrating fluidity into sacred traditions. However, contemporary films like *Barbie* and *Pushpa 2* indicate a converging trend, mainstreaming gender fluidity through global entertainment. By infiltrating popular media, these works democratize discussions on performativity, signalling a gradual erosion of binary constraints and a more inclusive cultural landscape. As gender perceptions continue to evolve, such performances hold the potential to foster greater equity across diverse societies.

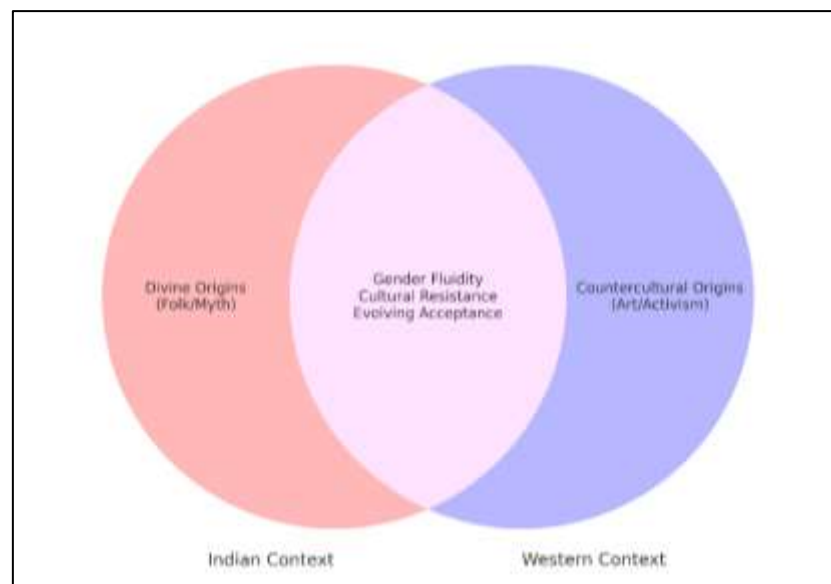


Fig. 1. Comparative perspectives on gender fluidity, India vs West

CONCLUSION

This study has delved into the intricate dynamics of gender fluidity by examining mythological narratives, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary cultural performances across Indian and Western traditions. It illuminates how gender operates as a performative construct shaped by diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts. It also highlights convergences and distinctions that enrich global understandings of gender as a fluid spectrum.

Gender performance manifests differently in Indian and Western cultural traditions, establishing a comparative lens for analysis. In Indian contexts, gender fluidity often emerges within spiritual and communal practices, serving as a conduit for divine connection rather than individual defiance. Performances in folk arts like Yakshagana or Theyyam incorporate cross-dressing as acts of devotion, reflecting a worldview where gender aligns with cosmic balance and collective identity. Conversely, Western traditions frame gender performance as a subversive act of personal expression, rooted in Enlightenment-era individualism and counter-cultural movements. Drag culture, for instance, arises from queer communities to challenge heteronormative binaries, prioritizing agency and critique over ritualistic

unity. This contrast reveals Indian traditions' emphasis on spiritual integration versus the West's focus on disrupting normative structures.

Mythological figures such as Ardhanarishvara, Mohini, and Hermaphroditus profoundly shape contemporary interpretations of androgyny and gender fluidity, linking ancient narratives to modern discourse. In Indian mythology, Ardhanarishvara—Shiva and Parvati's unified form—embodies a harmonious blend of male and female energies, framing androgyny as a state of equilibrium. Mohini, Vishnu's female avatar, exemplifies strategic gender shifts, influencing modern views of gender as adaptive and purposeful. In Western mythology, Hermaphroditus, the fused offspring of Hermes and Aphrodite, symbolizes gender synthesis, often cited in queer theory to contest binary frameworks. These archetypes provide enduring models for challenging rigid gender categories, fostering inclusive identities across both cultures.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a robust lens for analysing cultural performances in cinema and traditional arts across India and the West. Butler argues that gender is enacted through repeated, stylized acts, making it malleable and open to subversion. In Western contexts, this is evident in David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust persona, where androgynous aesthetics parody masculine norms, or in drag performances that exaggerate femininity to expose its constructive nature. In Indian cinema, Allu Arjun's cross-dressing in *Pushpa 2* disrupts hyper-masculine heroism by invoking ritualistic elements, revealing gender as a performative script. Traditional forms like Yakshagana, where male actors embody female roles through iterative gestures, further align with Butler's concept of gender as a repeated act, destabilizing fixed identities.

The cultural implications of Allu Arjun's gender-fluid performance in *Pushpa 2* are profound, drawing from indigenous traditions like Theyyam and Yakshagana to challenge dominant masculinity. During the Gangamma Jathara sequence, Arjun's character adopts feminine attire and mannerisms, blending aggression with grace in a devotional context. This act invokes Theyyam's ritualistic cross-dressing, where performers channel divine energies across gender lines, and Yakshagana's stree vesha, which explores emotional depth through gendered roles. By embedding fluidity in mainstream cinema, the performance redefines masculinity, leveraging cultural heritage to negotiate norms within a familiar framework.

Western gender-fluid performances, such as those by RuPaul and David Bowie, differ significantly in cultural positioning and audience reception compared to Indian examples, underscoring a mainstream/counterculture divide. RuPaul's drag empire blends entertainment with activism, often sparking polarized reactions—celebrated by progressives but contested by conservatives. Bowie's androgyny, a counter-cultural force in the 1970s, gradually permeated mainstream pop. In India, performances like those in *Pushpa 2* or ritual dances are rooted in religious contexts, enjoying broader acceptance as sacred rather than subversive. Western audiences often view fluidity through identity politics, while Indian audiences perceive it as spiritually significant, though cinema is narrowing this gap. Audience perceptions of gender-fluid performances diverge between Indian and Western societies, reflecting varied cultural lenses. In the West, interpretations are shaped by identity politics and rights, with drag or Bowie's work seen as empowering yet contentious, fuelling debates on normalization. In India, perceptions are tied to spirituality; cross-dressing in rituals like Theyyam is revered as auspicious, fostering cultural tolerance. However, in secular cinematic contexts, Indian audiences may grapple with ambivalence, balancing appreciation for tradition with unease toward non-ritual fluidity, unlike the West's increasingly normalized, though polarized, reception.

Cultural performances in cinema and mythology serve as powerful tools for negotiating and reshaping hegemonic gender norms, highlighting their transformative potential. Mythological figures provide enduring models for fluidity, while films like *Barbie* and *Pushpa 2* use satire and cultural resonance to challenge binaries. These performances create discursive spaces that facilitate incremental shifts toward gender equity, exposing gender as a performative construct and dismantling rigid norms.

Scope for Further Research

This study opens several avenues for deeper exploration of gender fluidity in cultural performances. One area involves examining how traditional cross-dressing practices in India differ in purpose and societal acceptance from Western drag culture. A comparative study could explore the devotional intent of rituals like Theyyam against the activist-entertainment ethos of drag, analysing how globalization shapes hybrid forms in diaspora communities.

Another direction is investigating how portrayals of androgynous characters reflect or resist dominant gender ideologies regionally. Research could focus on emerging media, such as web series or influencer content, to assess how digital platforms amplify mythological influences on gender norms, particularly in postcolonial settings where Western and indigenous ideologies converge. Empirical studies with audience surveys could also quantify shifts in perception following exposure to films like *Pushpa 2*, exploring intersections with class, caste, or urbanization in India versus socioeconomic factors in the West. Incorporating intersectional perspectives—considering race, disability, or economic status—could further enrich the discourse, moving beyond binary cultural comparisons.

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