



Beyond Borders: Global Perspectives in Mythical Queer Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores variant queer themes and different characters in mythology from diverse cultural backgrounds, transcending geographical boundaries. The study implies an examination of myths and legends from various regions and cultures, highlighting the universal presence of queer narratives across different societies and time periods. The inclusion of "Global Perspectives" emphasizes the wide-ranging scope of the analysis, indicating an exploration of queer representations in mythology from around the world. By focusing on "Mythical Queer Literature," the title underscores the mythic and legendary dimensions of these narratives, suggesting an investigation into the symbolic, archetypal, and cultural significance of queer themes in mythology. Overall, the paper sets the stage for an interdisciplinary exploration of mythical queer literature that traverses geographical, temporal, and cultural boundaries. This study primarily focuses on the comparison and contrast of the representations of queer identities specifically gay, in literature across different cultures and geographical regions, considering how cultural contexts shape these portrayals. In this paper, two different yet similar mythologies such as the Indian mythology and the the Greek mythology were being scrutinized, further leading to the exploration of the queer as well as the gay themes through its characters. This study sheds light on the concept of homosexuality which has been existing in different cultural settings since the ancient times.

INTRODUCTION

In the extensive tapestry of human narrative, myths and legends have functioned as mirrors reflecting the beliefs, values, and experiences of various societies around the global. These ancient tales contain stories of gods and heroes, love and treachery, triumph and tragedy, and other concealed narratives. The history of gay identities and experiences, however, is whispered amid the strands of mythological lore, a tale that cuts across time, space, and conventional comprehension. The study aims at revealing the hidden stories of LGBTQ+ people and communities by examining the diverse collection of legendary narratives. In literature, there are stories that subvert social standards, characters that defy gender and sexuality stereotypes, and symbols that have universal meaning throughout the settings of ancient mythology. The queer voices that have long been marginalised or ignored in the annals of myth and folklore are uncovered in this study. There are narratives of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, whose lives and loves have been entwined with the fabric of mythological awareness, from the coasts of ancient Greece to the heartlands of India. The cultural background of these stories might vary yet they all at some point discuss about the concept of homosexuality in a very subtle way. The narrative and the storyline of these tales and folklores strive to express not only about the gender identity but also focuses on the social class structure and how that plays a significant role alongside the gender identity of an individual.

All these mythical stories are sharing the central theme of homosexuality inspite of their different cultural setting and over the time period they have started evolving as per the modernization of the society we live in. In terms of contemporary literature, the writers are being very supportive of these gender identities and started to retell the mythical stories of homosexuality by decoding its hidden notions. The term 'l'écriture feminine' introduced by Helene Cixous concentrates on the way women write and the style they use to define things in a less aggressive yet affirmative tone. Over the period of time we can find how the writings of women have become more broad-minded. The scrutiny explored in this study focuses on the similarities between two culturally different mythologies in terms of expressing the connection between the concept of homosexuality and social class structure, and also explores the modern exploration of these concepts through the writings of women like Madeline Miller and Casey McQuiston.

OBJECTIVES

The notion of homosexuality has been in existence from the beginning of the civilizations. Though in the modern times the genre of queer studies explore these concepts in detail, there was always a trace of it left behind in the history of human existence. These traces can be seen through the folklores and folktales of diverse cultures from different regions. The major objectives this study aims on covering include

- (i) To study the depiction of homosexuality in the mythological stories from both the Indian as well as the Greek literature and to understand the similarities between the mythologies of two divergent cultural background.
- (ii) To analyse the evolution of the portrayal of the homosexual concepts in literary works.
- (iii) To assess the representation of the interconnectivity of social class structure and gender.
- (iv) To examine the mentality of women in understanding and accepting the concept of homosexuality through their writings and how they are being very embracing towards gender identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the method of quantitative analysis of various mythological stories of both Indian and Greek cultures. It focuses primarily on the folklores and folktales of these cultures and delves deeper into the theme of homosexuality. This study also takes into account the contemporary novels like ‘The Song of Achilles’ by Madeline Miller and ‘Red, White and Royal Blue’ by Casey McQuiston. It briefly explores how the contemporary society is looking at the idea of homosexuality. This study in whole is done using quantitative analysis on the selected texts.

Homosexuality in mythology

Mythological stories may be infused with religious symbolism and theological interpretations of gender and sexuality in societies where religion is a major cultural force. The way that gender roles, sexual behaviours, and interpersonal relationships are portrayed in mythical narratives is influenced by the social norms and values that are common in that particular culture. Myths that embrace divergence and variety may exist in societies where gender and sexuality are seen less rigidly. A Culture with rich literary, poetic, and visual arts traditions like that of the Greek culture which was represented by Homer’s Iliad, can create myths that are extremely symbolic, allegorical, and amenable to many interpretations—including gay readings. Similar to this, myths in societies where mostly storytelling is

done orally such as Indian mythology may change over time as a result of audiences' and storytellers' imaginative reinterpretations. In the book, "Ethical issues in six religious traditions", Clive Lawton and Peggy Morgan state that while there are numerous allusions and descriptions in ancient Hindu literary texts and artworks that imply LGBTQ characteristics, there aren't many actual statements on homosexuality in Hindu traditional literary sources. In classical writings, conformity to rigid gender norms frequently hides homoeroticism.

Hindu mythology frequently features intersex or third gender characters, homoerotic encounters, and changes in sex, as well as morphed heroes and incidents that demonstrate aspects of gender variance and non-heterosexual sexuality. These themes are conveyed more subtly than overtly in the epics, Puranas, and local folklore. Gay and LGBT themes have been documented in ancient writings, folktales, art, and the performing arts, even if the physiological bond between a man and a woman has always been acknowledged. The concept of gender as a spectrum may seem like a contemporary discovery to some, yet Hindu mythology and literature have long taught about characters who repudiated the binary. Explicit representations of homosexual relationships, such to those in modern literature, are uncommon in Indian mythology. On the other hand, stories or characters have occasionally been read as having LGBT undertones. There are stories in Indian mythology that expresses homosexuality such as the stories of Vishnu and Aravan, Varuna and Mithra. According to the Mahabharata, the well-known divinity Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, also acquired the persona of Mohini in order to marry Aravan, the son of Arjuna who offers himself as a sacrifice to ensure the victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra War. Before sacrificing himself, Aravan expresses a desire to marry and experience marital bliss. Krishna, in his form as Mohini, marries Aravan, fulfilling his final aspirations. Krishna remained in the persona of the hero's widow for an extensive period of time after Aravan's death as a gesture of mourning for his significant half. In accordance with the Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association, the descendants of Aditi are often portrayed in Vedic literature as symbols of fraternal love and close companionship. In reality, the two are portrayed in ancient Brahmana writings as alternating phases of the moon who mate. To begin the lunar cycle, Mitra injects Varuna with his semen on new moon nights. On full moons, Mitra repays Varuna's favour. In terms of Indian mythology, the explicit representations of gay deities are not as common as in some other mythologies, there are instances where divine beings blur traditional gender roles or engage in same-sex interactions.

In case of Greek mythology, there are various homosexual themes which can be identified. In those narratives, the characters were depicted as close acquaintance or best friends. A well known as

homosexual characters stretching from deities to heroes include Achilles and Patroclus, Zeus and Ganymede, Apollo and Hyacinthus. In contrast to Indian mythology, the stories of Greek mythology expresses more of the homosexual theme. Homer's epic poem, the "Iliad," portrays Achilles and Patroclus as warriors who fought side by side during the Trojan War; although the precise nature of their relationship is debatable, many ancient and contemporary interpretations imply that they were lovers. Achilles' unwavering grief over Patroclus' death and his subsequent actions, such as his retaliation against Hector, are frequently taken as signs of how deeply they were bonded. In Greek mythology, Zeus, the king of the gods, had multiple relationships with both mortal women and men. Among his most well-known male lovers was Ganymede, a Trojan prince with extraordinary beauty. According to legend, Zeus became so enamoured of Ganymede's beauty that he shifted into an eagle and captured Ganymede to be his cupbearer and companion on Mount Olympus. The kidnapping of Ganymede by Zeus is frequently examined as a symbol of homoerotic desire and the pursuit of male elegance. Another such story is that of Apollo, the god of the sun and music, who was said to have been in love with Hyacinthus, a mortal youth known for his exceptional beauty. According to myth, Apollo accidentally killed Hyacinthus during a discus-throwing contest. In his grief, Apollo transformed Hyacinthus' blood into a flower, which became known as the hyacinth. The story of Apollo and Hyacinthus is often interpreted as a tragic tale of homoerotic love and the fleeting nature of beauty.

Portrayal of homosexuality in modern literature

In the modern novels like 'A Song of Achilles'(2011) and 'Red,White and Royal blue'(2019) the description and the representation of the queer community was very unbiased as well as transparent. 'Red, White, and Royal Blue' is the love story of Alex Claremont-Diaz, the half-Mexican son of the first female US President, and England's Prince Henry, heir to the throne. Henry's extreme closeted homosexuality and Alex's latent bisexuality complicate this classic tale of foes to lovers. In spite of the demands of their public personalities and societal expectations, two young men from radically different origins find themselves drawn to one another in this love story. The two main characters, Alex and Henry, struggle with their fondness for one another while juggling the demands of their distinct public personas. By expertly capturing the inner conflicts and outside influences LGBTQ+ people encounter, McQuiston gives readers a moving and relevant account of what it's like to come out. The book also looks at issues of transparency and portrayal within the LGBTQ+ community, emphasising the influence of queer allies and role models on public perceptions of sexual orientation. 'A Song of Achilles' is a retelling of Homer's Iliad by Miller, but it also emphasises Achilles' life prior to the war and his relationship with Patroclus. Patroclus is a traditionally marginal character, but he and Achilles have a

very passionate relationship, as evidenced by the fact that Achilles' greatest pain came from his death. The relationship is explored from Patroclus' point of view, as he turns into the narrator of the story and is able to reveal some of Achilles' most vulnerable and sensible characteristics. By employing this deftly, Miller is able to delve deeper into the homoerotic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.

Numerous literary works explore themes of acceptance, rejection, and reconciliation while illustrating how homosexuality affects family dynamics and relationships. In the midst of sexism and prejudice, the protagonists may have to negotiate difficult relationships with parents, siblings, and other family members in their quest for unconditional acceptance and affection. The intersections between sexuality and other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, class, and ability, are recognised in many contemporary literary works that embrace cross-cultural perspectives. These literary works may additionally emphasise the particular struggles as well as challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals from marginalised communities, providing readers with a deeper and more complex awareness of queer identity. LGBTQ+ voices and experiences are vitally represented and made visible through contemporary writing. Authors may assist readers develop compassion, awareness, and solidarity by normalising a range of sexual orientations and gender identities through the representation of LGBTQ+ characters and tales.

Feminine consciousness in writing

In the 1970s, feminine writing was considered to be a very controversial thing. This notion emerged out as the result of the feminist movement in France. Various women writers have contributed for this especially the well-known female writers like Hélène Cixous, Béatrice Didier and Christine Planté. Identifying an individual's linguistic 'signature' is easier than doing the same for a complete social group, particularly a group as broad and structurally diverse as 'women' or 'men'. In their depictions of gay romance, male and female writers may both address sexuality-related issues, although the approaches they use may vary. While male writers might include more overt or explicitly physical depictions of sexuality, female writers might concentrate more on the psychological and emotional components of sexual attraction and desire. The representation of homosexual romance by female authors may benefit from their unique viewpoint and sensitivity, as they frequently concentrate on character development, relationships, and feelings. With a stronger focus on empathy and understanding, their work may explore the subtleties of LGBT identity and the intricacies of human relationships. Their writing may delve into themes of intimacy, vulnerability, and self-discovery, giving readers a glimpse into the challenges and victories LGBT characters face on the inside. This aspect can be seen evidently

in terms of McQuiston's novel 'Red, white and royal blue' through the character of the Prince Henry and his anxiety over people finding out about his sexual identity. Women writers may focus a great deal on diversity and representation when depicting gay romance; they may aim to write inclusive stories that capture a broad spectrum of queer experiences; their works may include a wide range of characters, including those from underrepresented groups, and they may sensitively and authentically examine intersectional identities in their writings.

In terms of modern novels, we can find a clear contrast in terms of the portrayal of the sexual identities of the characters, in comparison to the age old mythological stories. The book 'The Song of Achilles' published in 2011 can be taken as a modern retelling of the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, wherein the author deciphers and presents the bond they shared in a very elaborate and transparent way without any kind of inappropriate interpretations. Both the novels taken for this study were written by female writers - 'The Song of Achilles' by Madeline Miller and 'Red, White and Royal Blue' by Casey McQuiston. In the contemporary age, people are becoming more and more broad-minded towards their idea about sexuality, and this change of perspective is observed higher in women than men. Women are more acceptable towards the social identity of people of all the genders. This fact can be identified through the literary works of specific women writers who have brilliantly tried depicting the sexual identity of gay and queer people. Writing with respect to the interests and needs of LGBT readers, female authors are frequently aware of the standards and preferences of their readership. To connect with readers on an emotional level and give them a sense of validation, their writing may combine aspects of drama, intimacy, and realism.

Queer representations in myths may be marginalized or stigmatised in patriarchal communities that value heterosexual weddings and male power. On the other hand, gay identities might be more positively portrayed or even celebrated in myths in communities with more matriarchal traditions or egalitarian governmental structures. Moreover in terms of expressing homosexual themes in literature there is always the portrayal of one individual from the pair with feminine characteristics and described as little submissive to the other. In the story of Achilles and Patroclus, while Achilles goes for battles and fights valorously Patroclus spends his time in the camp awaiting Achilles's return. In the story of Zeus and Ganymede, Ganymede has taken the feminine role of serving Zeus and entertaining him on occasions. Through these roles divided among the male-male lovers, one can find that the masculine role among the gay couple was always taken by the person who is at a higher social rank like Achilles, Zeus and Apollo.

CONCLUSION

The strongest opposition to decriminalising homosexuality in India was on the grounds of it being against our Indian culture. In the 4th century, Kamasutra mentions about the physical pleasure in male-male unions in vivid detail. Bhakti saints in medieval India would effeminise themselves to worship Krishna and Shiva. Nawabs in the court of Awadh in the 18th century would dress up as women on certain holy days. Madhavi Menon in one of her interviews to the newspaper, The Wire stated that ‘There are all kinds of sexual practices that are illegal in India today that coexisted side by side centuries without necessarily being named as such and such.’ Till the early 1800s, Indian poets like Insha and Rangin were openly writing about male-male and female-female relations, in the same tone as the heterosexual relationships. Homosexuality began to be viewed as a crime against the order of nature in 1860, when Thomas Macaulay introduced Section 377 into the Indian Penal Code, modelled after the English Buggery Act of 1533, which made anal and oral sex, a punishable offence. India’s openness to sex and sexuality ironically became one of the reasons that the British classified it as a backward civilisation. In return, Indian nationalists asserted the respectability of Indian culture in turn adopting conservative Victorian attitudes towards our own non-heteronormative traditions. By 1967, Britain passed a law legalising same-sex relations, but the Victorian idea that homosexuality was ‘unnatural’ had become entrenched as an integral part of Indian values. LGBTQ+ activists’ legal and social work over the years that highlighted our rich history of queer traditions and uniquely Indian experiences of queerness. This activism combined with the courage of prominent LGBTQ individuals paved the way for the long legal battle that led to the supreme court finally decriminalising homosexuality in 2018.

A 2014 survey found that only 30% of people in India are broadly supportive of homosexuality. Yet queer activism is taking a range of different forms, speaking through cinema, literary works, politics, music, sports and many different mediums to challenge the heteronormative idea of what constitutes Indian culture. Queerness is not against Indian culture, it is at the very core of it. The concept of homosexuality was always a part of our culture and tradition as the mythical stories stand strong as an evidence for it. Though it was not very openly stated out back then, it is now being talked undisguisedly to enlighten the people about the queer community and to break the stereotyped notions of gender identity. In this process of accepting and normalising the gender norms women are being very open minded comparatively.

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