



GENDER TRANSFORMATION OF VISHṆU: AN ICONOGRAPHICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Purāṇas and other Hindu texts contain descriptions of how the Supreme and powerful gods transcend the gender norms and manifest in several combinations of sex and gender that include male, female hermaphrodite and all other possibilities. This kind of gender transformation of the Hindu gods was justified through construing the mythological tales that highlight the greatness of the god over the other sectarian deities or with a specific purpose of attaining the goal in the process of putting down the pride of the sages or devotees or to kill the evil beings (demons) or to fulfil the desires of the devotees. An attempt is made here to focus briefly on the mythological legends of Mōhinī, a minor and temporary incarnation of Vishṇu and to discuss its iconography based on the sculptures in the temples and paintings of South India covering both the rare composite forms as well as the independent sculptures of Mōhinī. It throws a welcome light on the growing popularity of the episode of Mōhinī and Bhasmāsura in the narrative art of the temples of South India during the medieval times.

Keywords: Mōhinī, Ardha-Lakshmī-Hari, Vāsudeva-Kamalajā, Jaganmōhinī Kēśava, Bhasmāsura, Sāgaramathana, Bhikshāṭanamūrti

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Introduction

In Hindu mythology, we find legends referring to the change of sex by the principal male deities such as Śiva and Vishṇu at their own will and again

transforming themselves into their original forms. The *Purāṇas* and other Hindu texts contain the descriptions of how the Supreme and powerful gods transcend the gender norms and manifest in several

combinations of sex and gender that includes male, female hermaphrodite and all other possibilities. As these myths were composed by the humans generally they reflect the human attitudes, perceptions and sexual acts. This kind of gender transformation of the Hindu gods was justified by construing the tales that highlight the greatness of the god over the other sectarian deities or with a specific purpose of attaining the goal in the process of putting down the pride of the sages or devotees or to kill the evil beings (demons) or fulfilling the desires of the devotees. Śiva took up the hermaphrodite form as Ardhanārīśvara by being half male and half female to satisfy his consort Pārvaṭī and also to enable the worshippers of Sakti or the female energy to offer their veneration to Śiva in his androgynous form. Parallel to this iconic form the Vaishnavite devotees worshipped the hermaphrodite forms of Viṣṇu which are known Vāsudēva-Kamalajā, Ardhanārī-Hari and Ardhanārī-Vēṇugōpāla. Although Śiva was never mentioned in purely feminine form, Viṣṇu transcends his gender and assumes the form of a beautiful and enchanting woman by the name of Mōhinī (illusory form) in different periods as it is known through the textual references found in the epic tales and Pauranic legends as well as by the narrative sculptures and paintings. Raju Kalidoss has analysed earlier the mythological, iconographical and sexological aspects of Mōhinī based mainly on the wooden sculptures of the temple rathas of Tamil Nadu (Kalidoss 1986: 183-204). Therefore, in the present paper, it is intended to focus briefly on the mythological legends of Mōhinī which is a minor incarnation or form of Viṣṇu and to discuss the iconography based on the stone sculptures in the temples and paintings in South India with a different perspective covering composite forms and the independent sculptures of Mōhinī. Further, the study attempts to deal with the purpose of the transformation of the gender by the male gods into females, particularly by Lord Viṣṇu based on the art forms of the medieval period.

The composite iconic forms described in the texts are characterized and referred to as *miśramūrti*, *yugmamūrti* or *saṁghātamūrti* etc., as they represent the concept of the unification of different Gods in a combined form. Besides the composite forms

of gods combining two or more male or female divinities, the forms of deities in transgender and the transformation of male deities to completely female deities with special reference to the iconic forms of Viṣṇu is considered here because of the uniqueness of the Mōhinī images. In the Saiva iconography, Ardhanārīśvara or Gaurīśvara form of Śiva is very popular in which Śiva and Pārvaṭī are combined in a single image in which the male form of Śiva forms the right half while Pārvaṭī comprises the left half in the vertical division either as standing or in the seated position. In comparison to the standing figures of Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara the extant images of the deity in the seated form are limited in number. Parallel to this type of Saiva icons is the images of Viṣṇu combined with his consort, Lakshmī and Krishṇa with Rādhā in Vaishṇava iconography. Although such type of images is rarely noticed we find some epigraphical (*Epigraphica Indica* XXVI: 92), as well as textual references (*Śaradātilaka Tantra* 1933:619; *Śilparatna* 23: *Brihat Tantrasāra*:191-192) to the transgender or composite iconic forms of Viṣṇu. The iconography and iconology of both seated and standing forms of Ardha-Lakshmī-Hari, carved in stone and bronze, studied earlier by Pratapaditya Pal (1963:73ff), S.B. Deo (1966-68:125-133), D.C. Bhattacharya (1966:261ff) and others are reported mostly from Nepal, Kashmir and Odisha. Besides these, a few more sculptures of the composite form of Viṣṇu with the goddess sharing the same body are reported from Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. A relief sculpture in stone of Ardhanārī-Vēṇugōpāla is noticed in the museum collections of Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh State (Krishna Kumari 2012: 409-415) while the combined form of Viṣṇu and Mōhinī in one iconic form in stone is noticed as the main icon of the temple at Ryali in East Godavari District of the same State (Vighnesvara Sastri 1982:84-88). The uniqueness of this image lies in the feature that unlike the other icons wherein we find the male and female parts in the vertical division in the image of Jagan-Mōhinī-Kēśava at Ryali the male part is represented in the front portion as Kēśava while the female body of Mōhinī is demonstrated at the back of the complete relief sculpture. By depicting the male and female parts

of the icon on the front and back it would enable the devotees to visualize complete form if only they circumambulate the deity, which is not permissible for the devotees in the Vaishnava temple. The masculine form of Vishṇu is shown as standing with all Vaishnavite attributes and ornaments on his body in the front part associated with ten seated figures of sages in the act of venerating and praising the god and the graceful feminine body with curves and hair arranged neatly at the back in the form of a round bun. Although we are not very sure of the identification of the female form combined with Vishṇu as Mōhinī instead of goddess Lakshmi in this case, it is widely known locally as Mōhinī-Kēśava form of Vishṇu. In this connection it may be noted that one of the twelve names mentioned in the figure label inscriptions of Nārāyaṇa temple in Lalit Patan in Nepal is Hṛishikēśa-Mōhinī (Bhattacharya 1980:30; Deo 1966-68:125-133). The other names of the composite forms of Vishṇu as mentioned in the figure label inscription includes the different names of the goddess as Lakshmī, Sarasvatī, Dāntī, Kāntī, Dāntī Dhṛitī, Vidhṛitī, Atīchā, Atipātī, Dhṛitī, Mōhinī, Matimāand and Dharmadā in combination with Kesava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, Gōvinda, Vishṇu, Madhusūdana, Trivikrama, Vāmana, Śrīdhara, Hṛishikēśa, Dāmōdara and Padmanābha, respectively (Deo,1966-68:125-133). But the name of the composite form of Vishṇu mentioned in the inscription does not tally with the names of the Śaktis of Vishṇu mentioned in *Nārada Pañcharātrāgama*. It thus shows that there is no unanimity between the textual reference and the epigraphical evidence concerning the combination of the Saktis associated with Vishṇu. However, the iconography of the composite forms of Vishṇu discussed so far by the art historians reveal that the female Śaktis are demonstrated in a similar pattern like those of Śiva-Ardhanārīśvara involving the vertical division of the body of the image into two halves on the front of the relief. This image is in complete agreement with the iconographical description given for Ardhalakshmī-Hari mentioned in *Śāradātilaka Tantra* and *Brihat Tantrasāra* (Pratapaditya Pal 1970:135). Another unique ten-handed bronze image of Krishna (12 cms height) combined with Rādhā on his left has been reported from Maharashtra State (Srikant Pradhan

2008-2009: 207-213). This ten-armed image of the deity in standing pose is made of copper and brass and these metals are placed vertically to distinguish the right half from the left half and also the genders. The right half demonstrates the male part and the left half showcases the female part with a single bosom. The image is adequately adorned with all kinds of ornaments such as necklace, waistband and anklets besides the ear ornaments. While the same kind of ornaments is shown on the body of the deity the *kuṇḍalas* on the ears and the *kanḱanas* on the hands are executed to show the difference between the male and female gods. *Patrakuṇḍala* adorns the left ear representing Rādhā while *makarakuṇḍala* is shown for Krishna. The diaphanous lower garment with a design of small circles distinguishes Rādhā from the male deity. It is interesting to note that the body complexions of the male and female parts are different and the sculptor has thoughtfully used the two metals-copper and bronze to reflect the dark and golden yellow colours as prescribed in the texts. Of the ten arms of the composite image the front two hands are shown in the act of playing the flute and the other hands carry the attributes such as *śankha*, *chakra*, *gadā*, *pāśa*, bow etc. Besides all these iconographical features the dual nature of the deity is well represented by the two chin marks on the face of the image. The *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* (Prakṛitikhanda:53-55) a tenth century CE text mentions the *Ardhanārī* aspect of Krishna with Rādhā who resides in the *Gōlōka*. It also mentions explicitly in another context (*Prakṛiti Khaṇḁa*: 20-22) that the right half is Krishna and the left is Rādhikā. On the other hand, the *Śilparatna* of late seventeenth century CE refers to the *Ardhanārī* form of Vishṇu as Puṇḁarīkāksha. It is viewed that this image of the *Ardhanārī* aspect of Vishṇu/ Krishna can be dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth century CE since the sculptors of the medieval period are known to have initiated the depictions of the various aspects of Vishṇu in one icon (Shrikant Pradhan 2008-2009:210) This image symbolises the composite nature of the deities Krishna and Radha.

Apart from the androgynous Vishṇu in visual art forms discussed above, we can find the complete transformation of Vishṇu into feminine form temporarily to fulfil certain specific tasks.

The legendary tales contained in *Mahabharata* and few other texts refer to Mōhinī as the beautiful feminine form assumed by Vishṇu in the context of the distribution of nectar to the *dēvas* and *asuras* after churning of the milk ocean. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1,3,6-22) mentions Mōhinī as the female incarnation of Vishṇu after Dhanvantari and before Narasimha (Ramachandra Rao: 1991: 141). In the *Mahābhārata*, it is stated that Vishṇu seduces the demons in the illusory form of the female enchantress and gave ambrosia to the devas and not to the demons. Wendy Doniger (1999:261) observes that Vishṇu uses sex to destroy the demons and he masquerades as a woman instead of creating a woman. In the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, it is mentioned that Vishṇu resumes his Mōhinī form at the request of Śiva on a second occasion, again to kill a demon called Bhasmāsura. These legends go to show that on the two occasions Vishṇu has used sex intentionally to destroy the demons. It is of interest to note that there is no mention of the episode of Mōhinī and Bhasmāsura in the Puranic texts. However, it is noted from a Marāṭhi work called *Śiva Līlāmṛita* that the name of the demon destroyed by Mōhinī is Bhasmāsura who was born out of the *bhasma* (dust) on the body of Śiva (Vettam Mani 1975:122). According to the legend, the demon was invincible because of the boon given by Śiva which enables him to reduce anyone to ashes by placing his hand on the victim's head. When the demon tried to put his hand on the head of Śiva, the latter fled from the place and sought the protection of Vishṇu. Vishṇu appeared in the beautiful female form and attracted the attention of the demon. When she danced the demon also imitated her and finally when she put her hand upon her head, the demon also did the same, resulting in his destruction by fire. This theme became very popular in the Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara period and we find the relief sculptures of Mōhinī and the demon in the temples of South India particularly in Tamilnadu, besides a few other reliefs showing Mōhinī as the distributor of *amrita* and her association with the ascetics. Although Mōhinī is stated to be a minor incarnation of Vishṇu she was never treated as a cult deity and she was not depicted as an independent form. In the *Śilpaśāstras* also she was mentioned as associated with Śiva in

the form of Bhikshāṭana or Kankālamūrti and not as an independent figure (*Silparatna* ch.22:123-126). Her beauty, dress, ornaments and the splendour of her body are mentioned in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Skanda Eight*: vv.1-3,6, 17). According to it, she is represented as youthful, blue in complexion like a blue lotus flower. She is three-eyed and four-armed. She is decorated with all types of ornaments and draped in yellow silk garments. She carries in her lower right hand a pot full of ambrosia and a blue lotus flower in the lower left hand. A noose and goad are the other attributes to be shown in her upper two hands. Although it is mentioned in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that she should be shown with four hands, in the visual art forms noticed so far she is shown merely in human form without the additional arms or eyes. Her beauty is emphasised by showing the graceful curves of her body and she is depicted always in the act of wooing the ascetics or the asura who follows her closely.

On a pillar in the *kalyāṇamaṇḍapa* of the Varadarāja Perumāl temple at Kāñchī, the figure of Mōhinī is carved along with the divine beings and the *asuras* who stand on either side of her (Fig.1.1). Mōhinī is depicted as a beautiful woman with long hair that is loosely fastened into a knot behind her left shoulder. She wears *chakra kuṇḍalas* studded with gems, necklaces and ornaments on her shoulders, arms, wrists, waist and ankles besides the *pādasaras* on her feet. The foldings of the saree she wears are shown as hanging beautifully between her two legs. Mōhinī is shown in the act of distributing the *amrita* to the two divine beings, who are kneeling on her left swallowing the nectar while she ignores the two demons that stand behind her with their hands uplifted. One demon is depicted with his two uplifted cupped hands in the act of requesting her to pour the nectar. She is shown with her left foot slightly raised and in the act of moving to her left holding two long jars containing the nectar. The small figures of the demons and the divine beings can be distinguished based on their costumes and coiffure. The hair of the demons raises high while the devas are shown with *kirītamakuṭas* on their heads and the act of uplifting the right hand by Mōhinī holding the long jar away from the demons strengthens this identification. The relief sculpture

of Mōhinī from the Varadarājasvāmi temple reveals the narrative of her role as the distributor of the nectar to the *devas* by cheating the demons, seducing them with her beauty by which the demons gave away the pot of nectar to Mōhinī.

According to mythology once Śiva requested Vishṇu to subdue the pride of the sages of Dārūka forest and this theme is well represented in the temples of South India. In many of the Saivite temples of Tamil Nadu built during Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period that corresponds to fourteenth to seventeenth centuries CE, we find the relief sculptures of large size figures of Mōhinī followed by the sages of small dimensions on the pillars of the large *maṇḍapa* halls.

In most of the sculptures, she is shown as wearing a very thin and transparent dress or sometimes as even nude exposing her genitalia and she is decorated with all kinds of ornaments. A relief sculpture in the Śivatemple at Tharamangalam (Fig.1.2). In this sculpture which is almost in the round, Mōhinī stands gracefully by slightly lifting her right leg bent at the knee as an ordinary female with two hands of which the right hand is in *abhaya hasta* while the left-hand rests on her thigh as *kaṭyāvalambitahasta*. She is adequately decorated with all kinds of ornaments and her hair is neatly arranged as a big bun to the left above her shoulder. She wears sandals on her feet and a sage holds her right leg and another ascetic raises his right hand high in the manner of appreciating her beauty. In a relief sculpture noticed in the Śiva temple at Kudumiyanmalai of Pudukkottai district, Mōhinī is carved on a pillar as a tall beautiful figure while five ascetics surround her in small sizes engaged in different acts. Three sages are depicted as moving forward to reach Mōhinī with their genital organ exposed and erect while one pulls the saree from behind. On the other side of Mōhinī stands two mendicants with their hair arranged above their heads in a bundle and one ascetic holds her leg below her knee while the other person is in the act of hailing the beauty of Mōhinī.

A relief sculpture of Mōhinī in the Jalakanṭheśvara temple at Vellore depicts her as a beautiful woman in the act of moving forward while her body is twisted and looks back towards an

ascetic who stands behind her with left hand uplifted while he holds his phallus with his right hand (Fig.1.3). Mōhinī is shown with two hands and her hair is neatly combed and arranged in a large bundle behind her head. Diaphanous clothes are shown on the figure and she is beautifully decorated with different kinds of ornaments on her body. Although the sculpture is slightly damaged and the object held in her right hand is not clear it seems that she holds a small flower in her right hand and her left hand is in *kaṭyāvalambita* pose. While the ascetic on her right is shown in an erotic posture, another ascetic stands in front of her with his hands joined together high above his head. Another sculpture of Mōhinī noticed in the *kalyāṇamaṇḍapa* of the Varadarāja temple at Kāñchī is almost similar in terms of the gesture of the body, coiffure and ornamentation on the body to the sculpture of Mōhinī found in the Vellore temple except with some minor differences (Fig.1.4). While the body of the figure of Mōhinī of the Vellore temple is covered well with a saree an attempt has been made by the sculptor to display the nudity in the case of the image of Mōhinī of Varadarājasvāmi temple. The ascetic on the right side of Mōhinī is depicted as pressing the leg of Mōhinī with his hands and the sage on the left is shown as lifting both of his hands high above his head.

A picture of Mōhinī and Bhasmāsura painted with the use of gouache method on paper is found in the Album of 82 paintings of Hindu deities which is now preserved in the British Museum collections (Reg No. 1993: 0806, 0.51). This painting belongs to mid-to-late nineteenth century CE and is labelled in French language mentioning the name of the figures as Mōhinī and Bhasmāsura (Fig.1.5). The iconography of the figure of Mōhinī is somewhat similar to her representations in the stone sculptures of the Nāyaka period. She is depicted here as standing in *pādasvastika* pose by crossing her left leg across the straight right leg which is bent at the knee (Dallapiccola 2010:19-22). She wears sandals on her feet and holds a small flower in her right hand while the left hand is placed on the left thigh while she holds the long stalk of a flower on which a parrot is shown. She wears a long *hara* besides some necklaces and all other types of ornaments on

her body. She wears golden ornaments studded with jewels on her head including Sūrya and Chandra besides a tiara crowned with two parrots facing each other. Her long hair is plaited and decorated with flowers. A long cloth covers her lower body which is thrown over across her body and is held by her two arms. Mōhinī is portrayed as slightly bent towards her right and looking at the figure of the demon who is shown seated in *padmāsana* with long *jaṭas* amidst the flames that devours him as he puts two hands over his head.

Thus the study of the iconography of Mōhinī discussed above brings forth the evidence of her representation in art forms mainly in three different modes; first, as the distributor of the nectar to the *devas* and *asuras*; secondly, as the seducer of the ascetics with her physical beauty and thirdly as the destroyer of the demon Bhasmasura who keeps his hands over his head. In the case of the first model of her representation, generally she is shown in connection with the narrative scenes of *sāgaramathana* wherein finally Vishṇu assumes the female form of Mōhinī. As mentioned earlier Mōhinī was never shown as an independent cult deity and subjected to any kind of rituals in the temples. The carving of the independent figure of Mōhinī as the distributor of nectar disassociated with the scenes of *sāgaramathana* in the temple at Kāñchī of Vijayanagara period of 16th Century CE can be considered as the first stage of the development of the iconography of Mōhinī followed by her depiction in two other modes simultaneously. In some of the temples, she is shown completely nude or sparsely dressed emphasising her physical charms while a small group of ascetics followed her clinging to her feet or holding their phallus. This mode represents the episode of how Vishṇu at the request of Śiva has challenged and subdued the pride of the ascetics in the forest. In the third mode, Mōhinī is also represented as either wearing a transparent dress or as nude associated with only two sages standing on either side of her, of whom one keeps his two hands above his head suggesting the episode of Vishṇu in the form of Mōhinī burning the demon Bhasmāsura. In the episode of *Bhasmāsurasamhara* importance is attached to the placing of the hands on the head as it would kill any person according to the boon given to



Plate I: Mōhinī distributing nectar, Varadarāja Perumāl Temple, Kanchipuram



Plate II: Mōhinī, Tharamangalam



Plate III: Mōhinī with two sages, Jalakanṭheśvara temple, Vellore

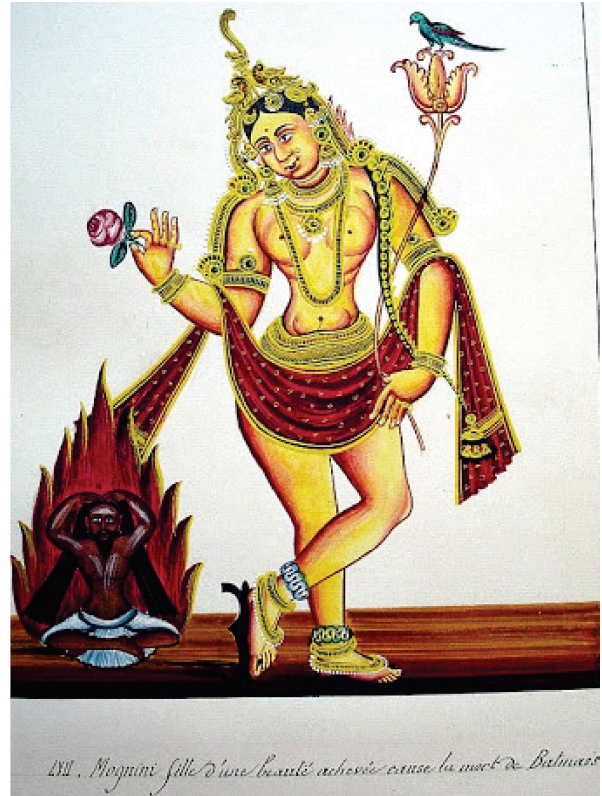


Plate V: Mōhinī and Bhasmāsura in flames



Plate IV: Mōhinī, Varadarāja Perumāl temple, Kanchi

the demon by Śiva. As the demon himself was born out of the ashes of Śiva, Śiva could not kill him and therefore on his request Vishṇu assumed the form of a woman called Mōhinī and she then plays the trick on the demon Bhasmāsura by creating an illusion through her beauty and dance and encourages the demon to place his hands over his head. Although the flames are nowhere shown in the stone sculptures causing the death of the demon, flames are shown in the painting of the nineteenth century CE. The demon is shown not as wearing any *kirītamakuṭa* in the art forms but as having long jaṭas which are usually arranged above his head like any other ascetics. The theme of Mōhinī turning Bhasmāsura to ashes became very popular in Tamil Nadu in the late medieval times and as a result, we find her representations both in stone sculptures as well as in the wood carvings of the temple chariots of South India. On the other hand, the demonstration of the figures of Mōhinī is confined to the *sāgaramathana* scenes only in the other parts of India. Thus both the mythology and the art forms of Mōhinī discussed above reveal that the transformation of gender by the male god Vishṇu completely into female form

is only a temporary delusion and absorbed back into Vishṇu after serving its purpose of killing the demon. For reasons not known the sculptors and the patrons of the temples of Vijayanagara and Nāyaka period have shown great interest in the carving of the figures of Mōhinī as we can find them in several temples of South India.

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