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**‘ARDHANAREESHWARA’ – THE LORD WHO IS HALF WOMAN:
BREAKING THE GENDER BINARY THROUGH INDIAN PHILOSOPHY
AND CONTEMPORARY GENDER STUDIES**

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Abstract: *Ardhanareeshwara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati, embodies the inseparability of masculine and feminine principles, challenging fixed gender binaries. This paper examines the representation of Ardhanareeshwara in the Kerala Mural Painting tradition through the intersecting lenses of indigenous aesthetic frameworks and contemporary gender theory. The study traces the mythological and philosophical foundations of this form by drawing on textual sources alongside classical treatises on art and aesthetics. A close reading of the Kerala mural depiction of Ardhanareeshwara examines posture, attributes, colour, ornamentation, and stylistic conventions. The analysis uses semiotic theory, indigenous aesthetic frameworks (abhinaya, dhvani, rasa), and theories of performativity to show how Ardhanareeshwara enacts gender as relational, fluid, and embodied. From a decolonial and intersectional perspective, the paper shows how colonial frameworks systematically marginalized indigenous conceptions of gender. Kerala mural representation of Ardhanareeshwara, thus, offers an indigenous model for understanding gender, embodiment, and cosmology, providing insights that enrich global discussions on identity, emotion, and visual culture.*

Keywords: *Ardhanareeshwara, gender fluidity, indigenous aesthetics, Kerala Mural Painting*

1. Introduction

Ardhanareeshwara is derived from the Sanskrit words “*ardha*” (half), “*nari*” (woman), and “*eeshwara*” (lord). It is the composite form of the Hindu deities Shiva (male) and Parvati (female, also known as Shakti, meaning power or energy), depicted as a single body split vertically into two halves - one male, the other female. This form is deeply embedded in Indian

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metaphysical thought, going beyond art and mythology. It symbolizes the inseparability and interdependence of the masculine (*Purusha or Consciousness*) and feminine (*Prakriti or Nature*) principles, embodying the cosmic balance necessary for creation and existence (Sivaramamurti, 1978; Kramrisch, 1981). It is philosophically rooted in non-dualistic traditions, such as *Advaita Vedanta*, which believes that there is no essential division between the masculine and the feminine (Nampoothiry, 1999). The form dissolves the rigid boundaries between male and female, suggesting that all beings contain both energies. *Ardhanareeshwara* thus transcends gender binaries, offering a vision of unity, harmony, and fluid identity that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of gender, embodiment, and selfhood (Butler, 1990; Davis, 2014).

Anchored in this philosophy, this paper pursues five interconnected objectives. First, it traces the mythological and philosophical roots of *Ardhanareeshwara*; second, it transitions from text to image, examining the deity's artistic representation in the Kerala Mural Painting tradition within the broader mural tradition of Southern Peninsular India; third, it interprets its iconography through a dialogue between contemporary gender theories, semiotic theories of meaning-making, and indigenous aesthetic frameworks; fourth, it argues for its relevance in gender discourse from a decolonial perspective, while also using intersectionality to trace how different aspects of identity and power, together, shape peoples' experiences; and fifth, it seeks to reclaim indigenous visual traditions as a non-western framework for understanding gender, embodiment and cosmology.

2. Methodology

In order to address the objectives outlined in the preceding section, this study takes a multilayered approach, beginning with textual analysis, then examining visual representation, and finally interpreting the form of *Ardhanareeshwara* within historical and contemporary frameworks. The analysis proceeds over four interrelated stages. It begins by tracing the mythological and philosophical foundations of the *Ardhanareeshwara* concept through textual analysis of ancient treatises, including the *Shiva Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, and *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, as well as canonical texts on art and aesthetics such as the *Silparatna* and the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. A close study of the visual representation of *Ardhanareeshwara* in the Kerala Mural Painting tradition follows this. It must be noted that the visual representation

of *Ardhanareeshwara* is not confined to painting alone. The form is seen in temple sculptures, invoked in ritual performances, and featured in classical dance traditions like *Bharatanatyam* (Srinivasan, 2016).

Although *Ardhanareeshwara* is represented in myriad ways across Indian art, the foundational principle of a vertical division between the masculine and feminine halves remains consistent. Across these traditions and representations, there are variations in posture, attributes such as weapons, and ornamentation, yet these differences do not significantly alter the interpretive meaning of this composite form. Thus, a single mural depiction has been selected as a representative case study for close analysis, a *pratyaksha* (direct visual engagement) approach. The selected image was created by the author under the guidance of eminent Kerala Mural Artist, Sri Sasi Edavarad.

The study then interprets this representation through the combined lens of visual semiotics, indigenous aesthetic frameworks, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. The semiotic analysis applies Roland Barthes' (1977) concepts of connotation and denotation. Denotation refers to the literal features of the image, including posture, attributes, and ornamentation. In contrast, connotation refers to the cultural and symbolic meanings these features evoke within Indian philosophical and aesthetic traditions. Indigenous aesthetic frameworks, including Bharata's Theory of *Abhinaya* (modes of expression), Anandavardhana's Theory of Suggestion (*dhvani*), and Bharata's Theory of *Rasa* (aesthetic essence), extend this analysis by foregrounding the mural's affective and experiential dimensions that exceed literal representation. Butler's framework of performativity examines how the mural disrupts fixed binary conceptions of gender and enacts fluidity through posture, colour, attribute, and ornament. Building on Butler's theory of performativity, this study also considers contemporary scholarship on gender fluidity and multiplicity.

Finally, the study adopts a decolonial perspective to investigate how colonial frameworks reshaped understandings of gender, suppressing indigenous epistemologies. Anchored in Quijano's (2000) idea of the "coloniality of power" and Mignolo's (2011) advocacy of decoloniality as an alternative way of knowing, this stage examines how Western binaries were imposed on South Asian contexts. Within this decolonial perspective, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) is used as an additional lens to examine how different aspects of identity and power intersect to shape lived experience. *Hijra* (the third gender) communities, once integral to the cultural and religious fabric of the

Indian subcontinent but marginalized under colonial rule, are used as sites for understanding these intersections. Recent scholarship in transgender studies (Stryker, 2021) and queer theory (Puar, 2022) further extends this analysis by highlighting inclusion and exclusion. By bringing indigenous frameworks into conversation with contemporary decolonial thought, the study aims to “write back” to dominant narratives in art history and gender theory, foregrounding epistemologies that have been historically marginalized.

It must be noted that the scope of this study is necessarily limited by its focus on a single painted image, which, while representative, cannot capture the full range of *Ardhanareeshwara*’s diverse visual expressions across Indian traditions. With the four stages now outlined, this paper proceeds to a textual analysis of the mythological and philosophical foundations of the *Ardhanareeshwara* concept.

3. Mythological and philosophical background

The *Puranas* are a genre of ancient and medieval Indian literature composed in Sanskrit that serve as narrative repositories of myth, cosmology, theology, and cultural memory. Narratives from the *Shiva Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, *Linga Purana*, and *Devi Bhagavatha Purana* construct *Ardhanareeshwara* as a powerful theological and symbolic figure, embodying the indivisibility of gendered principles within the divine (Shastri, 1970; Tagare, 1996; Devi Bhagavata Purana, 1999). In the *Rudra Samhita* of the *Shiva Purana*, Sage Narada tells Himavat, the father of Parvati, “Shiva will become *Ardhanareeshwara* (half male and half female), with your daughter forming half the part of his body. Their meeting once again will be delightful”. This signifies not only the reunion of Shiva and Parvati but also portrays gender duality within a single divine body where difference does not imply separation but rather integration.

Affirming this ontological unity, Shiva says to Parvati, “Half of my body, O Devi, is yours indeed” (Shastri, 1970, pp. 504, 1067). This theological vision of *Ardhanareeshwara* is further echoed in the *Skanda Purana*, particularly in Chapter 34 of the *Kedara Khanda*, where the form of *Ardhanareeshwara* is described through a divine epiphany, “That goddess was seen by him as though joined to half of the body of Shiva.” (Tagare, 1996, p. 290). This visually reiterates how the male and female forms join together, making the divine whole and complete.

While the *Shiva Purana* emphasizes the symbolic and metaphysical union of Shiva and Parvati, the *Skanda Purana* offers a visual imagery that emphasizes their inseparability.

These texts, thus, contribute to a distinctly non-dualistic understanding in which the male is seen as fundamentally unified with the female, and the human with the divine, rejecting hierarchies of God over human and male over female. Such a portrayal challenges contemporary binary constructions, allowing us to connect modern gender theories with knowledge rooted in indigenous traditions (Shastri, 1970; Tagare, 1996).

The theme of the Lord who is half woman resonates further in the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, where, although the emphasis is on the Goddess, the narrative affirms that Shiva cannot exist without Shakti, and vice versa. The goddess is described as his energy and source of power. Without her, Shiva is inert. With her, he is the lord of the universe. Such interdependence reaffirms the concept of *Ardhanareeshwara*, in which the deity is complete only when both aspects are equally revered (Devi Bhagavata Purana, 1999). This foundational idea is succinctly expressed by Adi Shankaracharya in his *Saundaryalahari*, where he proclaims in Sanskrit, “Sivah saktih yuktaḥ,” meaning “Shiva, united with Shakti, is capable of creation.” (Shankaracharya, 2002). This statement captures the ideological essence of *Ardhanareeshwara*, showing that male and female principles must come together to drive all cosmic activity. Across these textual traditions, *Ardhanareeshwara* is a profound symbol of unity, representing gender as indivisible and coexistent rather than oppositional, a vision that resonates deeply with contemporary queer and gender-fluid philosophies.

This rich textual and philosophical foundation is the conceptual framework through which *Ardhanareeshwara* is understood in Indian thought. This duality and relationality inherent in *Ardhanareeshwara*’s depiction precedes modern understandings of fluid embodiment, as discussed by contemporary scholars such as Butler (1990), Halberstam (2020), and Arondekar (2023), among others.

In the subsequent sections, as we move from text to image, this conceptual idea of *Ardhanareeshwara* takes on a powerful visual life using line, colour, proportion, attribute, and ornament. Philosophy is now made visible, and the image is but a continuation of the text - verbal expression in visual language. The following section first traces the historical evolution of the Kerala Mural Painting tradition. It then examines the manifestation of *Ardhanareeshwara* in this tradition.

4. Kerala mural tradition and the depiction of *Ardhanareeshwara*

The word ‘mural’ etymologically refers to the Latin ‘murus’, meaning ‘wall’; thus, ‘mural paintings’ refer to paintings on the wall. The word ‘mural’ by itself is also often referred to as a “painting on a wall, ceiling, bridge, or other permanent substrates, it is usually connected with architecture” (Wang & Wu, 2023, p. 2). The earliest mural paintings coming from ancient India, in the historical period, date back to the 2nd century BC and can be traced to the Jogimara caves of Madhya Pradesh. This is followed by the spectacular paintings at the Buddhist monastic caves of Ajanta (a UNESCO World Heritage site), attributed to the Satavahana and Vakataka dynasties (Reddy, 2018, p. 56). Some of the subsequent mural paintings, post Ajanta, chronologically, are found in the 6th century rock-cut caves of the Chalukya Dynasty at Badami, Karnataka, (Sharma, 2007, p. 1418), the 7th century Pallava Dynasty Kailasanatha Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and the Vaikunthaperumal Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu, at their capital Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu (Paramasivan, 1939, p. 77), the Pandya dynasty Jain cave temple at Sittanavasal (although the cave temple corresponds to the Pallava king Mahendravarman I, 580 – 630 AD, the frescoes belong to early Pandya kings of the 7th century) (Mariyapillai et al., p. 1620), the Rashtrakuta dynasty rock cut Jain caves at Ellora, Maharashtra, under the patronage of Amoghavarsha I (Owen, 2010, p. 188), the Chola dynasty temples – specifically the 11th century Brihadiswara Temple at Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, the 11th century Thyagaraja temple at Thirvarur, Tamil Nadu, and the 12th century Airateshwara temple at Darasuram, Tamil Nadu, with remnants of murals from the Nayaka Dynasty (UNESCO, n.d.).

These murals, spanning centuries and dynasties, stand in silent testimony to an unbroken and continuing mural tradition. This distinct art survives today as Kerala Mural Art, in the southern state of Kerala, India, and continues to inspire artists to this day (Nambirajan, 2015, p. 7). Executed primarily in sacred spaces, on temple walls, and around the sanctum sanctorum, Kerala murals are embedded in the ritual and sacred landscape of the region. The temples function as both religious and cultural institutions, where the murals serve as visual scriptures that convey mythological narratives, theological concepts, and devotional ideals. Temples such as the Thodeekalam Siva Temple in Kannur, Lokanarkavu Bhagavathi Temple in Kozhikode, Pundareekapuram Vishnu Temple in Kottayam, the Chemanthitta Mahadeva Temple in Trissur, as well as sites like Krishnapuram Palace in Kayamkulam, Mattancherry Dutch Palace in Kochi,

and Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kanyakumari (present-day Tamil Nadu), represent just a few of the many locations that house exquisite examples of Kerala mural paintings.

The themes in these murals are mainly drawn from Hindu mythology. Stories from the *puranas* and epics, such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are depicted - an ancient narrative tradition of telling stories through pictures. This visual language, spanning over two millennia and representing the world of mythology, adheres strictly to the classical canons of iconography as described in the *Citrasutras* (ancient treatises on art and craft). The earliest *Citrasutra* texts highlighting this art form include the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Nagnajit's *Chitalaksana* and *Brhat Samhita* (Nardi et al., 2006, p. 11). The 16th century text, *Silparatna*, authored by Sri Kumara under the patronage of King Devanarayana of Travancore (Nardi et al., 2006, p. 12) was the treatise that Kerala Mural artists strictly adhered to.

In the classical canon of iconography - *Vishnudharmottara Purana* - Sage Markandeya, in his dialogue with King Vajra, explains that the rules on painting in the *Citrasutra* section of the *purana* are but a summary. The sage explains that it would have been impossible to lay out the details even over a hundred years. He further clarifies that what has been left untold in the *Citrasutra* should be understood from the *Natyashastra* (the ancient treatise on dance and drama that preceded the *Citrasutra* texts), and that what has been left untold in the *Natyashastra* was to be improvised from painting (Nardi et al., 2006).

Stella Kramrisch, in her book *The Art of India: Traditions of Indian Sculpture, Painting and Architecture*, further emphasizes this and explains that art in India is neither religious nor secular. She discusses the conversation between King Vajra and Sage Markandeya and explains how the sage insists that, to study the arts, the king must necessarily study painting, dancing, and music. The sage explains that “without a knowledge of all the arts, their effect in space and time cannot be fully understood, nor their purpose be achieved” (Kramrisch, 1987, p. 9).

This interconnectedness becomes increasingly evident in the art and architecture of India, as the paintings complement the sculptures, the colours, forms, themes, representations, attributions of value, and the combining of three-dimensional and two-dimensional spaces to create a single visual experience, anchored in multiple ancient treatises. With this historical and contextual background established, we now turn to the depiction of *Ardhanareeshwara* within the Kerala Mural tradition.

4.1. *Ardhanareeshwara* in the Kerala mural painting tradition



Figure 1. *Ardhanareeshwara*

Figure 1 depicts *Ardhanareeshwara* in the Kerala Mural Painting tradition. It was created by the author under the guidance of eminent Kerala Mural Artist, Sri Sasi Edavarad, founder of Chitrasopanam Art Foundation, Bengaluru, India. The representation of any deity in this tradition is primarily informed by a corresponding meditative verse (called a *dhyanasloka* in Sanskrit), which provides a textual guide for visualizing the deity. The verse in Sanskrit reads:

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Neelapravalarchiram vilastrinetram
Pasharunotpalakapalakashulahastam
Arthambige shamanisham pravibhakta bhusham,
Balendu bandah makutam, pranamami roopam.
(Nampoothirippad, 2013).

The following is the author's translation in English, verified by Sri Sasi Edavarad, an expert in Kerala Mural tradition and Sanskrit-based iconographic texts:

Half blue, half coral-hued, radiant, three-eyed,
Holding the noose, lotus, skull-bowl and trident in hand,
Whose one half is Goddess Ambika (Parvati) for all eternity,
Crowned with a crescent moon, to this form I bow.

While this verse conveys essential features such as colour, key attributes, and divine identity, it does not provide exhaustive details on posture, clothing, ornaments, etc. Other textual sources, oral transmission, and direct instruction from the teacher in the master-apprentice mode of learning (*guru-shishya parampara*) supplement the visual representation.

Accordingly, the half corresponding to the figure's right side is Shiva. He is adorned with matted locks, holds a trident and skull bowl in each of his two hands, and is seated with his leg folded. The left half is Parvati. She holds a lotus and a noose in each of her two hands; her leg hangs down and gently rests on the earth. Both Shiva and Parvati have ornate jewellery - earrings, necklaces, armlets, bangles, and anklets. This vertical division signifies duality within unity. The body of *Ardhanareeshwara* flows seamlessly into both the male and female halves without any sharp divisions. Shiva's side is rendered in a yellow or saffron hue, symbolizing asceticism and transcendence. Parvati's side is depicted in blue, signifying fertility, beauty, and worldly power (Rajagopalan, 2012). The divide between the male and female principles is softened and is fluid in nature. One struggles to understand where the male ends and the female begins, and vice versa, allowing the form to neatly align with a non-binary conception of gender.

What makes this image distinctively Kerala mural is the use of natural pigments and the stylization: the elongated fish-like eyes, the bold black outlines, the fine detailing with delicate black lines, and the intricate rendering of ornaments, garments, and the background motifs that

follow conventions prescribed in the *Silparatna*. The technique of painting is layered. Shades of yellow are applied first, followed by red, blue, and green, each built up gradually until the desired saturation is achieved. The final outline is drawn in black. Shading is accomplished through stippling. Traditionally, such images were painted on the inner temple walls close to the sanctum, where they formed part of the sacred visual environment. While this section provides a broad overview of the image and its stylistic features in the Kerala mural tradition, a detailed iconographic and semiotic analysis of each element of this depiction of *Ardhanareeshwara* is provided in Section 6.1.

This basic description of the *Ardhanareeshwara* image marks a shift from textual foundations to the visual domain, enabling a deeper interpretive analysis. The visual and philosophical concept of *Ardhanareeshwara*, rooted in ancient Indian tradition, lends itself to contemporary gender theories. While Butler (1990) initiated this critique of gender, recent scholarship (Arondekar, 2023; Davis, 2014; Puar, 2022; Stryker, 2021), further problematizes these rigid categories, particularly within postcolonial and global contexts, thus offering useful lenses for interpreting non-binary and fluid representations. Placing these contemporary theories in dialogue with ancient Indian philosophical and aesthetic principles opens up possibilities for rethinking the fluidities and relationality of gender. Thus, the following section first outlines contemporary gender theories and indigenous aesthetic theories to understand gender as performative, fluid, and culturally constructed, and then applies them to the image of *Ardhanareeshwara* to explore how it challenges gender binaries.

5. Theoretical frameworks: Semiotics, indigenous aesthetics, and performativity

A useful starting point for this discussion is represented by Roland Barthes' semiotic theories. In his work, especially *Mythologies* and *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes explores how images function as signs, producing meaning within a cultural context. Barthes' concept of denotation and connotation may be applied to the image of *Ardhanareeshwara* to analyse how the deity's gendered and symbolic components produce meaning. Barthes' concept of denotation refers to the literal, direct meaning of an image, whereas connotation relates to the cultural or emotional associations that the image carries (Barthes, 1977). For instance, in the image of *Ardhanareeshwara*, the denoted image is a deity depicted as a single body representing the union of two different genders in one form. The connotative meaning of the

Ardhanareeshwara image extends beyond this mere literal representation conveying the union of opposites and the idea of non-duality. It suggests androgyny and highlights the interconnection between male and female energies, offering a philosophical understanding of gender as fluid, rather than strictly binary. The image also carries cultural and spiritual associations with creation, cosmic order, and the inseparability of the divine feminine and masculine principles (Kramrisch, 1981; Sivaramamurti, 1978).

A parallel indigenous semiotic approach is Bharata's Theory of Expression (or *Abhinaya*), (from his 2nd century BCE text, *Natyashastra*, later expanded by Abhinavagupta in his 11th century text, *Abhinavabharati*), which deals with the modes through which a work of art communicates meaning. *Abhinaya* or modes of expression include bodily gestures (*angika*), speech (*vachika*), costumes and ornaments (*aharya*), and inner emotional experiences expressed involuntarily like tears, trembling, etc (*sattvika*) (Bharata, ca. 2nd century CE/Ed. Kavi, 1926). In the context of *Ardhanareeshwara*, *abhinaya* can be read in the deity's posture, adornment, and facial expressions, which work together to signal both masculine and feminine qualities.

Enhancing this Theory of Expression is the Theory of Suggestion, *Dhvani*, developed by Anandavardhana in the 9th-century text *Dhvanyaloka* (ca. 9th century CE, trans. Krishnamoorthy, 1955). This theory explains that the meaning of art is often not explicitly stated, but rather suggested, and understood intuitively by the spectator. *Abhinaya* includes the visible and audible modes of expression, while *dhvani* explains how these expressions contain layered meanings that transcend the literal.

Together, *abhinaya* (expression) and *dhvani* (suggestion) operate as semiotic cues that guide the spectator towards layered meaning-making, ultimately leading to an aesthetic and emotional experience that Bharata, in his *Natyashastra*, calls *Rasa*. The Theory of *Rasa* provides a broader indigenous aesthetic framework within which *abhinaya* and *dhvani* function. It explains how art evokes specific feelings or '*rasas*' (like love, anger, disgust, fear etc) when the viewer interacts with it, emphasizing that meaning arises not from the work of art, but in how the viewer makes meaning of it in an emotional experience (Bharata, ca. 2nd century CE, trans. Ghosh, 1951).

This centrality of the viewer resonates with Barthes, who also emphasizes the active role of the viewer in interpreting signs. He argues that the viewer's cultural, social, and historical context shapes their interpretive engagement with the work of art. This aligns closely

with Bharata's concept of '*sahrdaya*' or the 'like-hearted spectator' in *Rasa* Theory. The *sahrdaya* is the ideal spectator who is able to experience the aesthetic flavour (*rasa*) from a work of art. Similar to Barthes, *Rasa* Theory positions the viewer at the centre of aesthetic experience, where meanings unfold emotionally and intuitively. Thus, the image of *Ardhanareeshwara* is not a static artifact but a dynamic site of affect, theory, and philosophy, with its reception shifting according to the viewer's perspective. For modern viewers, specifically from gender-fluid communities, the image of *Ardhanareeshwara* may resonate with non-binary identities, perhaps reflecting their own experiences of resisting traditional male/female categories, allowing them to connect with the image in a way that validates diverse gender expressions. For traditional viewers, the image is a sacred union between male and female energies, emphasising that although the halves are essential and distinct, they are interdependent, and together constitute the whole.

To both Bharata and Barthes, thus, *Ardhanareeshwara*'s meanings are rooted in cultural contexts and the position of the spectator. Complementing this is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity that explores how the image of *Ardhanareeshwara* constructs gender and questions it. In her 1990 seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges the notion of gender as a fixed, natural identity. In the first chapter of her book, she argues that "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). In this light, the figure of *Ardhanareeshwara*, a deity whose body simultaneously performs and contains both male and female identities, exemplifies this notion of gender performativity.

Building on Butler, contemporary scholars such as Jack Halberstam (2020) and Anjali Arondekar (2023) explore the fluidity of gender across social and cultural contexts. Halberstam (2020) argues that queer and gender-variant subjects often exist "without explanation, without a niche, outside of an orderly and inevitable scheme of life." (Halberstam, 2020, p. 36). Arondekar (2023) highlights the "radical abundance" of gender and sexuality across historical archives, which is evident in the multiple manifestations of the *Ardhanareeshwara* form in text, dance, sculpture, and folk art. Together, these frameworks – semiotics, *abhinaya*, *dhvani*, *rasa*, and performativity - position *Ardhanareeshwara* as a visual site where meaning, affect, and gender are constantly negotiated.

6. Applying the theoretical framework: Examining *Ardhanareeshwara*

With the theoretical foundations in place, the analysis now turns to the depiction of *Ardhanareeshwara* as portrayed in Figure 1. This section proceeds in three layers: first, a detailed iconographic, semiotic, and indigenous aesthetic reading that describes the posture, gestures, attributes, facial features and adornments and interprets their symbolic meanings; second, an application of Judith Butler's theory of performativity to the bodily and gestural enactments of gender; and finally, an integration of these perspectives that reveal relational gender and non-dual nature of the figure.

6.1. Iconography, semiotic reading, and indigenous aesthetic readings

The image of *Ardhanareeshwara* serves as a site for multiple interpretations - from description to semiotic decoding and finally to indigenous aesthetic experience. On the right side of Figure 1, Shiva is portrayed with matted hair, a crescent moon, a serpent, a trident, and a skull bowl. Each of these attributes carries layered meanings. Stella Kramrisch notes, "The Ganges is brought down through Siva. His matted hair receives the rushing river and makes it flow gently on the earth." (1981, p. 318). In Chapter IV of the same work, she interprets the trident as a symbol of Shiva's power over the three fundamental aspects of existence: creation, preservation, and destruction, thereby highlighting his role in maintaining balance in the universe. The crescent moon symbolizes cyclical time and immortality, the serpent connotes both danger and regenerative energy, the skull bowl symbolizes impermanence, death, and asceticism (Kramrisch, 1981; Sivaramamurti, 1978).

On the left side, Parvati holds a lotus and a noose (*padma* and *pasha*, respectively, in Sanskrit). The lotus symbolizes purity, beauty, and fertility, and the noose symbolizes attachment, bondage, or the power to control (Sivaramamurti, 1978). The body posture encodes meaning, too. Parvati's leg hangs down gracefully, touching the earth, symbolizing fertility and engagement with the world. In contrast, Shiva's leg folded in *ardha-padmasana* (half-lotus posture), signifies asceticism, meditation, and transcendence. While the figure is symmetrical, it is also differentiated, offering a visual enactment of gender that is relational rather than hierarchical (Michell, 1988; Davis, 2014).

Additionally, both halves are adorned with elaborate jewellery - earrings, necklaces, a crown, bangles, armlets, and anklets. At first glance, the ornaments appear symmetrical, with most ornaments, such as bangles, anklets, and armlets, mirroring each other across the two halves. Yet, a close analysis reveals subtle asymmetries. Parvati's earring is a string of beads, while Shiva's earring features a lion within the hoop, symbolizing power and ferocity. The necklace, too, reflects a similar contrast. Parvati adorns a graceful bead necklace, while Shiva's side bears a garland of skulls. These differences heighten the interplay between grace and austerity, life and death, beauty and renunciation.

Finally, colour functions as a powerful sign system. Shiva is painted in a saffron-yellow hue, conveying asceticism, fire, and spiritual austerity. In contrast, Parvati is painted in blue, symbolizing fertility, nature, and nurturing energy. The face of *Ardhanareeshwara*, although in two different colours, seamlessly merges into one, resisting binary distinctions. The expression on this unified face is calm and serene. The eyes are half closed, and there is no depiction of facial hair even on Shiva's side, blurring conventional gender markers and reinforcing an androgynous aesthetic. The shared third eye in the centre of the forehead appears to belong to both halves. According to Roland Barthes' theory of visual semiotics, these colours connote cultural and emotional meanings that go beyond their superficial appearance (Barthes, 1977).

From the perspective of Bharata's Theory of *Abhinaya*, Shiva's folded leg (*angika*), adornments and ornaments (*aharya*), and the calm facial expression (*sattvika*) together function as modes of expression that signify and perform gender and transcendence. Anandavardhana's Theory of *Dhvani* deepens this reading. The asymmetry of ornaments, posture, and the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine halves do not merely signify duality, but suggest non-duality, interdependence, and fluidity. For instance, the use of two different facial colours that simultaneously distinguish and integrate reinforces the philosophical non-duality embodied in *Ardhanareeshwara's* form. For the *sahrdaya* (the like-hearted spectator), these modes of expression and suggestions together evoke *rasa*, the aesthetic essence that transforms viewing into lived affect, an embodied experience of art. These layered readings of iconography, semiotics, and indigenous aesthetics provide a foundation for examining *Ardhanareeshwara* as a performative enactment of gender, discussed in the following section.

6.2. Performativity and the enactment of gender

From the lens of Judith Butler's performativity, the attributes and gestures of *Ardhanareeshwara* are not merely symbolic but enacted. For instance, Shiva's holding of the trident enacts power, control, and agency, qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. However, when held by *Ardhanareeshwara*, the trident no longer belongs exclusively to one gender; it is as much Parvati's as Shiva's. The weapon is, thus, re-signified. Similarly, the skull bowl in *Ardhanareeshwara*'s hand disrupts conventional gendered expectations of beauty and nurture associated with femininity, demonstrating that the feminine too can wield death and renunciation.

Parvati's attributes, lotus and noose, also function as performative elements. The act of holding the noose 'performs' authority, asserting that feminine power can be controlling, challenging the notion that power is exclusively masculine. The lotus, by contrast, 'performs' femininity. Yet, when held by the dual-gendered body of *Ardhanareeshwara*, as the skull bowl does in Shiva's hand, it destabilizes fixed associations, revealing that masculinity too can embody grace and fertility.

The arms of *Ardhanareeshwara* are symmetrically positioned, each holding distinct attributes, while the contrasting asymmetric posture of the legs reinforces *Ardhanareeshwara* as the harmonious union of complementary forces. The necklace, with beads on one side and skulls on the other, enacts a visual dialogue between femininity and masculinity. The blending of facial features, such as the absence of hair on Shiva's side and the shared third eye, challenges rigid distinctions between masculine and feminine appearances, making gender an ongoing negotiation. The contrasting colours, likewise, perform co-existence and interdependence, turning the painted body itself into a stage for the deliberate enactment of gender duality. From Butler's perspective, this bodily presentation - where the face, arms, legs, attributes, colour, posture, and adornment all signify gender roles - reveals gender not as a fixed essence but as repeated cultural acts (Butler, 1990; 1993).

6.3. Semiotics, performativity, and indigenous aesthetics: relational and non-dual conceptions of gender

Taken together, the semiotic, performative, and indigenous aesthetic dimensions of *Ardhanareeshwara* destabilize the binary view of gender found in both Western and many modern South Asian constructs. While Western theorists like Halberstam describe the gender-variant subject as a “wild card, a slice of disorder” (Halberstam, 2020, p. 36), *Ardhanareeshwara* resists this framing. Within its South Asian context, the figure is not seen as disruptive but as a deliberate expression of cosmic order, embodying the harmonious coexistence of masculine and feminine energies. This resonates closely with Arondekar’s (2023) notion of a “radical abundance” of gender and sexuality across archives, evident in *Ardhanareeshwara*’s multiple manifestations across painting traditions, sculptures, classical dance, and folk-art forms. The trident and skull bowl, the lotus and noose, the contrast between their postures, the asymmetrical jewellery, the blending of facial features, and the contrasting yet harmonized colours, are not isolated details but recurring features across multiple art forms (Srinivasan, 2016). Anchored in social and economic centres - the temples - this multiplicity is central, rather than marginal, enacting a vision of relational gender rooted in non-duality. The form rejects an “either/or” logic in favour of a “both/and” mode of existence, aligning with Butler’s insight that gender is not tied to biological essence but is constituted through repeated acts.

Simultaneously, from an indigenous perspective, the gestures, adornments, postures, and colour function as *abhinaya*, while the asymmetries and juxtapositions operate as *dhvani*, evoking *rasa* for the like-hearted spectator. Thus, *Ardhanareeshwara* is conceptually enacted, embodied, and affectively experienced, illustrating that masculine and feminine energies coexist and are mutually constitutive. This interpretive layering also demonstrates how indigenous aesthetic frameworks converge with Western semiotic and performative theories and, in some respects, even exceed them.

7. Decolonizing gender

The concept of gender, as it is widely understood today, has been largely influenced by Western Enlightenment ideas and knowledge systems established under colonial rule. These

frameworks historically established rigid binaries and hierarchies - male over female, reason over emotion, culture over nature - that have become dominant in many global discourses on gender. However, such binary understandings are not universal. Knowledge systems from precolonial South Asia, particularly those embedded within Hindu philosophy and visual culture, approached gender as fluid, interdependent, and spiritually integrated. The colonial encounter imposed Western modes of classification and normativity on colonized societies, suppressing indigenous knowledge systems and ontologies of being. Quijano (2000) describes this process as the “coloniality of power”, which restructured not just governance and economics but also knowledge, sexuality, and personhood. Mignolo (2011) takes this idea further, arguing that decoloniality is not just a political movement, but an alternative way of thinking that breaks away from Western frameworks of knowledge and understanding.

In this context, decolonizing gender implies questioning the binary gender divisions introduced by the West and reviving indigenous ways of seeing gender as flexible and interconnected. Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality is a useful analytical tool here. Crenshaw says people’s lives are shaped by multiple identities at any given time, gender among them. Intersectionality allows us to investigate how systems of power, such as colonialism, overlap with gender to shape people’s perceptions (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013). This implies that viewing *Ardhanareeshwara* through a singular lens of gender is insufficient. Within decolonial frameworks, intersectionality allows us to examine how colonial and postcolonial power structures shape gender. A poignant example is the *hijra* community, a long-recognized third-gender group in South Asia. *Hijras* have long been an integral part of Hindu mythology, folklore, and epics, where they appear as powerful figures. For instance: Mohini, Aravan, Brihannala, Ila, Shikhandi, etc. (Srinivasan & Chandrasekaran, 2020). Many *hijras* find resonance in *Ardhanareeshwara* and regard the deity as a symbol of gender fluidity, often including him in their worship. Revered as the third-gender, for centuries, they played a significant role in the social, cultural, and religious life in pre-colonial India. During the colonial rule, laws like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalized non-normative gender expressions and sexualities, leading to the social exclusion and exploitation of *hijras* and other gender-nonconforming communities (Rawat, 2024).

Recent scholarship has taken up these intersectional approaches to gender and sexuality. Susan Stryker’s (2021) interview in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, discusses

the evolution of transgender studies and highlights trans feminism as a way to challenge cis-normative structures that push for greater inclusion. Similarly, Jasbir Puar's essay, "Whither Homonationalism?", examines how nationalism, sexuality, and disability overlap, showing how nationalist agendas sometimes use LGBTQ+ rights to exclude rather than include (Puar, 2022). These studies demonstrate the need for an intersectional approach that accounts for overlapping dimensions of identity and power.

The figure of *Ardhanareeshwara*, as depicted in Kerala mural painting, is a powerful example of these ideas. This androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati resists Western binary categorizations, showing gender as dynamic and interconnected. Decolonizing gender also brings indigenous aesthetic frameworks to the forefront. *Abhinaya* (modes of expression), *dhvani* (suggestion), and *rasa* (aesthetic affect), together with the concept of *sahrdaya* (a like-hearted viewer), guide the viewer to perceive non-duality, interdependence, and fluidity in visual forms such as *Ardhanareeshwara*. It emerges as a symbolic figure, a decolonial way of seeing, one that reclaims indigenous epistemologies.

On 7th April 2025, the *Natyashastra* was recognized in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register for its invaluable contribution to cultural heritage. This highlights the continuing relevance of indigenous aesthetic and philosophical frameworks. Decolonizing gender, however, is not about rejecting all aspects of contemporary theory but about recognizing and reviving indigenous ways of thinking that, for centuries, have understood gender as non-binary and non-hierarchical.

8. Conclusion

The depiction of *Ardhanareeshwara* in Kerala mural painting challenges Western ideas of gender as strictly male or female. By uniting Shiva and Parvati in a single form, it balances masculine and feminine energies, reflecting the Indian philosophical idea of non-duality. This union further illustrates that gender is fluid, relational, and interdependent. This study demonstrates that indigenous frameworks like *abhinaya*, *dhvani*, and *rasa* do not merely parallel Western theoretical models such as Butler's theory of performativity or Barthes' Semiotics Theory, but rather actively challenge and extend them. While Western frameworks often view gender as social or performative, indigenous aesthetic systems foreground embodiment, affect, and relationality, emphasizing unity and interdependence. Situating

Ardhanareeshwara within these frameworks demonstrates that indigenous visual traditions provide a valuable perspective on gender, complementing and extending Western theories.

This paper challenges the colonial view that Indian traditions are inherently conservative and patriarchal. While modern gender theory often looks Westward, the iconography and philosophy surrounding *Ardhanareeshwara* offer a deeply rooted South Asian alternative. By centring South Asian epistemologies, it reclaims indigenous visual and philosophical frameworks as legitimate ways to understand gender, embodiment, and cosmology, emphasising that non-binary understandings of gender existed long before colonial influence. Through this approach, the study “writes back” to dominant narratives in art history and gender studies that often treat Western theories as universal. *Ardhanareeshwara*, thus, functions both as a symbolic figure and as a methodological lens, illustrating how non-Western knowledge systems can enrich, critique, and broaden global discourses on gender - an insight which is particularly relevant today, as debates around gender identity and queer rights continue to grow.

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