



Queer Politics in Hindu Mythology: Locating Misrepresentation of Gender Fluidity in *Amar Chitra Katha's* “Krishna” and other Titles

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Abstract

In India, the Vedas and other Hindu mythologies mention third-gendered gods and even some that manifest all three genders, along with mentions of gods that cross-dress, without any gender transition. One such multi-faceted character in Hindu mythology is the character of Krishna. While commentaries on Krishna in Brahmanical texts portray him as a masculine warrior, the non-brahmanical commentaries, such as *Srimad Bhagavatam*, see Krishna in feminine terms. Krishna, in such commentaries, is seen as a cross-dressing, gender-fluid being who is comfortable in both his masculine and feminine identities, and adheres to both and none simultaneously. However, most retellings and adaptations of Krishna's lore depict him as alluding to the former masculine identity, thus completely subduing and ignoring the queer aspects of his character. Such focused partial exposure, unfortunately, begins at a very young age through the works of children's literature. One such very influential franchise in India is the *Amar Chitra Katha*. In this paper, I would attempt to analyze the titles of *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* and *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* thoroughly and explore how every aspect of it is changed or omitted to provide a heteronormative and heterosexual narrative.

Keywords: Queer, homosexuality, gender fluidity, Krishna, *Amar Chitra Katha*, mythology

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Introduction

Mythological stories and figures have immense significance in Indian society. The majoritarian Hindu tradition has always referred to myths and their characters as references to modern life. Thus, it is common nowadays for people to still speculate about Hindu mythology. In India, the Vedas mention the two sexes of human beings, namely the *Purusha* (male) and *Prakriti* (female). But it also recognized the existence of another sex, the *Tritiya Prakriti* or third gender. The Sanskrit language mentions the existence of four gender states – *Pung* (masculine), *Stree* (feminine), *Kliba* (neutral), and *Ubhayalinga* (common gender). The Vedas talk about “gender identity” and “sexual identity” which reveal the presence of queerness in Indian contexts many centuries ago. Hinduism, during the era of the composition of the scriptures and epics, was more accommodating of queer communities, and this can be observed in the depictions of Mohini, Shikhandi, Ardhnareshwar, and so on. Even the gods and goddesses in Hindu mythic stories exhibit gender fluidity and queerness. During the Vedic period, stories of gods transitioning into goddesses emerged in the scriptures. There are mentions of third-gendered gods and even some that manifest all three genders, along with mentions of gods that cross-dress without any gender transition (Debroy, 1994). Various examples of this can be found in the scriptures, where many characters are characterized by their queerness. Some of these characters are Brihannala, Shikhandi, Bhagashavana, Yuvanashva, Ila, Mohini, and so on.

One of the most multi-faceted characters in Hindu mythology is the character of Krishna. Considered one of the ten avatars of Vishnu, Krishna is believed to be one of the most formidable of Vishnu’s avatars. In addition to being one of the greatest warriors in Hindu mythology, Krishna is also known for his romantic and fluid identity. Krishna, thus, depicts signs of de-gendering, gender blending, and gender-bending. De-gendering is the removal of gender distinctions. Gender blending is dressing and behaving in a way that blends the characteristics of both sexes. A gender bender is a person who dresses up and acts like the opposite sex. Through his cross-dressing and mannerisms such as dancing and singing, Krishna transgresses gender boundaries (de-gendering), and blends the characteristics of both male and female (gender blending). He also plays an active role

in breaking the molds of gender stereotypes by dressing up and acting like the opposite sex (gender bending).

Commentaries on Krishna by male Brahmanical scholars such as Shankara, Madhava, and Ramanuja, who chose to be celibate, portray him as a masculine warrior instigating Arjuna to fight and cause war. Commentaries such as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, see Krishna in feminine terms. Krishna, in such commentaries, is seen as a cross-dressing, gender-fluid person who identifies as both masculine and feminine and adheres to both and none of these identities simultaneously. However, most retellings and adaptations of Krishna's lore depict him on the basis of the former masculinist identity, thus completely subduing and ignoring the gender-fluid aspects of his character. Thus, readers of Krishna's stories are exposed only to this masculinist aspect of Krishna while remaining completely ignorant about his queer aspects (Enswistle, 1987). Such focused partial exposure, unfortunately, begins at a very young age through the works of children's literature.

Traditionally speaking, children's literature can be defined as literature meant for children. Children's literature is in fact, one of the few types of literature defined by the age group of its presumed audience. Most definitions of children's literature have taken it as a given that it is the literature produced for children by adults. However, scholarship in children's literature has evolved from being meant just for children to including topics of race, gender, sexuality, and class in constructing childhood. Works on race, gender, sexuality, or class serve to pierce the idealization of childhood. Scholars reckon with how childhood is not always a sheltered and cherished space but one where children face similar challenges to their adult counterparts, with the literature reflecting those challenges (Hunt, 1999). Children's literature refers to a subset of literary works and a field of academic study. As an academic field, it draws from several disciplines, including literary studies, education, developmental psychology, and librarianship. It covers the genres of comics, picture books, and traditional literature including folktales, myths, fables, fantasy, realism, mystery, science fiction, non-fiction, biography, autobiography, poetry, and so on. Of these, comics have created a niche for themselves as the genre to dominate its readership.

Traditionally, scholars of children's literature have treated comics for and about children in a sweeping manner without a sustained interest; this lapse has sorely impoverished the field. This approach is, at last, starting to change, as children's literature scholars are showing a new and unprecedented curiosity in comics. There have been cursory attempts to position comics vis-à-vis children's literature. Unfortunately, until recently the sustained aesthetic study of comics alongside, rather than in contra-distinction to, children's books has been neglected. This represents not simply a blind spot in the field of children's literature studies, but arguably one of those constitutive absences around which the field has built itself. This is unfortunate given that comics are a lively, diverse global phenomenon that is strongly associated with childhood. For reasons that have nothing to do with ease or simplicity of reading, they ought to have a more prominent place among the studies in children's literature (Meskin, 2007a; see also Meskin, 2009b).

Children's literature in India, especially works of folklore and mythology, has been a very influential source of information for young children. It is, hence, necessary to monitor the ideas propagated by this literature and the impact it has on the children's minds. One such influential franchise in India known for having a profound impact on many children from a very young age is the Amar Chitra Katha.

In 1967, Anant Pai launched a series of picture books for children to bring back India's rich heritage and past. These series, titled, Amar Chitra Katha, became very popular among children and adults alike and soon became a staple of every middle-class Indian household. Produced on newsprint, with colourful illustrations presented in a comic-book format, libraries, railway stations, and roadside bookstalls began to be flooded with copies of this popular book series. The books covered everything from the tales of great heroes and (a few) heroines, deities, warriors, political figures, and popular folk tales. The book became responsible for a renewed interest in the country's history and cultural context. These series also promoted a sense of nationalism through its narrative.

However, the sense of nationalism promoted by the series was mostly based on the middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu realm of society, and thus, its claim to bring back the history of India became

the history of only a certain group. The most prominent of the notions created by the series was the idea of masculinity. All the mythological books in the series that told the story of men as central figures portrayed them as fair-complexioned, muscular, and heroic. These men belonged inevitably to the upper caste and had an air of holiness and purity about them while maintaining the personality of a warrior. They are depicted to be rigid upholders of dharma who have a streak of violence even in their benevolence. Thus, the series established not only as an idea of masculinity but also suppressed any queer aspect of the character through such rigid portrayals.

In a country like India, where mythological characters are worshipped as deities and children are taught to emulate their qualities as role models, the portrayal of these characters becomes extremely important. For a child reading the titles depicting the mythological characters, it becomes a significant textual influence rather than a mere comic book. Also, it forms their outlook on society and themselves. Thus, a graphic text on a queer character not only informs the child about the character but the values presented in the book and the manner of portrayal that forms their idea of queerness.

There are no titles in *Amar Chitra Katha* that depict queer characters represented in mythology or history. Even mythological characters who have queer identity are portrayed rigidly as either masculine or feminine. One such mythological character, the first and most famous title of *Amar Chitra Katha*, is Krishna. Nine works have been released based on Krishna, including a special issue called *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*. *Krishna* (1967) was the first title of *Amar Chitra Katha* to be released. The title garnered considerable popularity among the Indian audience, who found its appeal in the transcendental image of the character and warrior-like masculinity presented in the book. However, the selectively presented ideas propagated by the books can be interpreted in a manner that might present a distorted idea of masculinity. The titles ignore the queerness of Krishna's character that is portrayed in the books that the works are based on. In this section, the author attempts to analyze the titles, "*Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran*" and "*Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*" to examine how the language, narrative, and illustrations, are manipulated, distorted, or omitted to provide a solely heteronormative narrative.

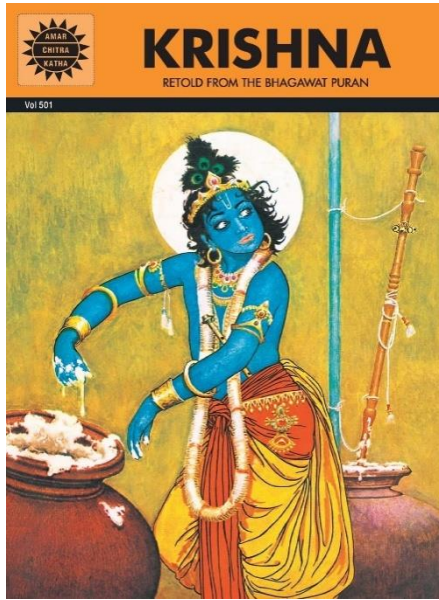


Fig. 1: Title page of Krishna-Retold from the Bhagawat Puran

The title page of *Krishna-Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* (Fig.1) depicts the titular character with blue complexion. The title page depicts Krishna as a bejeweled child stealing butter from a pot. The character has a halo around his head, thus establishing his divinity and purity. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the young Krishna, the son of a humble cowherd, is adorned with flowers, garlands, and red *kumkuma* on their hands and feet, more than jewellery. Depicting Krishna with more jewellery distances his image from a gender-fluid representation, as being portrayed with flowers is associated with femininity. Here, Krishna is portrayed as an affluent child (since it was acceptable for men too to wear jewellery during that time), which is unlike his original image (Pattanaik, 2014). Some of these statements in *Srimad Bhagavata* can be studied to identify the original descriptions of Krishna:

...they remembered how Krsna dressed: decorated with a peacock feather on his head, just like a dancing actor, and with blue flowers pushed over his ear. His garment glowed yellow-gold, and he was garlanded with a Vaijayanti necklace...they held new twigs of the mango tree, peacock feathers and bunches of flowers in

their hands, dressed in garlands of flowers... (“The Gopis Attracted by The Flute”, Canto Ten, *Srimad Bhagavatam*).

More such descriptions appear in the later parts of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*:

...He was seen nicely decorated with *tilaka* on his face. He was garlanded with different kinds of forest flowers, and his body was smeared with the pulp of sandalwood and *Tulasi* leaves...” (*The Gopis Feeling of Separation, Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam*)

Krishna’s valorous acts since childhood are repeatedly highlighted in the work. Yet, instances from his childhood that depict his gender fluidity and feminine qualities are deliberately omitted in favour of the more masculine ones. For instance, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* refers to an episode where Krishna decides to play a prank on the *gopikas* (Fig.2). He steals their clothes while they bath and refuses to return them until the milkmaids appear exposed before him. To punish him, the milkmaids dress Krishna as a woman. But to their surprise, instead of being offended or ashamed, Krishna insists on them giving him their best jewellery and painting his face. Also, to remind him of their love, Krishna ends up declaring that all images of him would sport a nose ring and a braid decorated with flowers and jewellery, like a woman. He is also said to have painted his palms and soles red with *alta* (Varma, 1983). While this episode is depicted in *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, the scenes depicting the crossdressing and Krishna’s gender fluidity are omitted in *Amar Chitra Katha*.



In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, Krishna, when playing his flute, is described to be in *tribhanga* or the tri-bent posture, and hence was called *Tribhanga Murari* (Fig.3). This posture is primarily considered to be a feminine posture and Krishna's stance of using this posture for his flute-playing may be considered as an ode to his gender fluidity (Prabhupada, 1970). However, in neither *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* nor *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, does Krishna adopt this pose. Rather, he plays the flute in a straight and more masculine posture (Fig.4).



Fig. 3: Krishna in the Tribhanga posture



Fig. 4: Krishna's tribhanga posture missing from ACK

Even the instances and depictions of Krishna dancing in a feminine way, in *Krishna-Retold from the Bhagawat Puran*, are immediately followed by a speech bubble exclaiming Krishna to be a wondrous boy. He is hailed as a wonder boy (Fig. 5) or a strong man recurrently in the speech bubbles after every feat to reinforce his identity as a masculine warrior, despite having feminine traits.

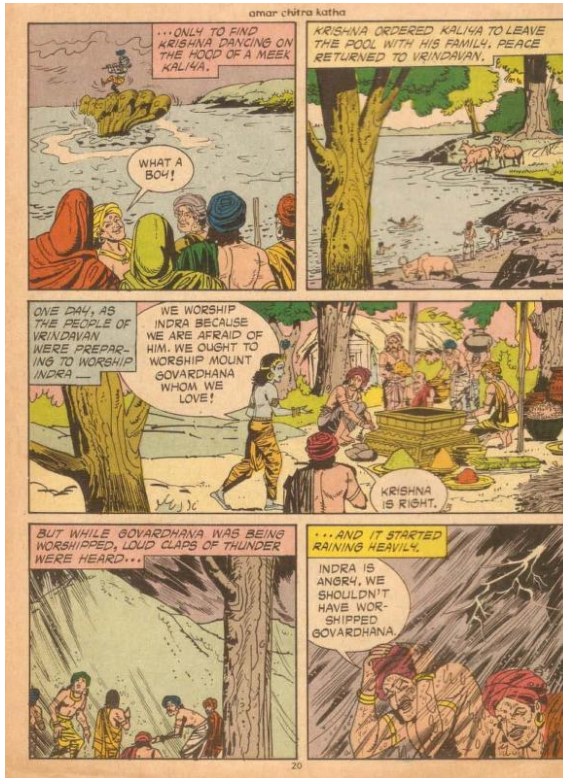


Fig. 5: Krishna is claimed to be a 'wonder boy

The Srimad Bhagavatam describes the effect of Krishna on animals. Being compassionate and soft towards animals, to the extent of having a hypnotic effect on them, is conventionally considered a feminine trait (Thapar, 1999). Krishna is often described to have a hypnotic effect on cows, deer, elephants, and other animals, when he plays the flute and can thus tame them easily.

...My dear friends, just see the deer! Although they are dumb animals, they have approached the son of Maharaja Nanda, Krsna. Not only are they attracted by the dress of Krsna...but as soon as they hear the playing of the flute, the deer along with their husbands, offer respectful obeisances...even the cows and calves in Vrindavana knew how to cry for Krsna and embrace his heart to heart ("The Gopis Attracted by The Flute", Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam).

However, both *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* and *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* depict instances of unruly strength and violence against animals, to portray a more masculine personality and suppress the trait of kindness towards them (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Instance of Krishna's violence against animals

The title page of *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* (Fig. 7), shows a muscular Krishna atop the multiple heads of Kaliya, the serpent demon. It also shows illustrations of Krishna's feats in lifting the Govardhana mountain and fighting from his chariot in his divine form. The striking part of these depictions is that Krishna is depicted as a muscular warrior figure whereas, during the occurrence of this episode, Krishna was merely a seven- or eight-year-old child. Thus, from the very title page of the work, an attempt is made to depict the character of Krishna as more masculine and warrior-like. This depiction also lacks symbols such as his flower adornments (which have been replaced by gold jewellery), his braided hair, or his nose ring, which highlights the queerness in his character (Pattanaik, 2014).



Fig. 7: Title page of Bhagwat- The Krishna Avatar

Flute-playing, dancing, or singing was a huge part of Krishna’s childhood as described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. However, instances of these activities are depicted at a bare minimum in the chapters on Krishna’s childhood, namely “Krishna-Darling of Gokul” or “Krishna- Subduer of Kaliya”. In these chapters, the idea is to put forth a fantastical, magical image of Krishna. However, the stress is repeatedly given to his accomplishments as a warrior instead of highlighting his feminine aspects as well (Prabhupada, 1970). For example, in “Krishna-The Subduer of Kaliya”, Krishna is shown to be playing flute for his friends, in the forest. However, in the very next panel, the boys are shown to be fighting like bulls. Not only is Krishna’s *tribhanga* posture ignored in these panels, but it is a deliberate choice to include an aggressively masculine activity immediately after an activity that might be considered feminine or queer (Fig.8).



Fig.8: Assertion of Krishna’s masculinity

One of the most important episodes in Krishna’s life, as described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, is the *raas-leela* (Fig. 9). As defined in the work, the *raasleela* is a group dance where a theatrical actor dances among many dancing girls. This episode is a testament to the queer aspects of Krishna’s character as several concepts such as the *Krishna shringar*, and the dance are highlighted in this portion. However, many of these concepts are missing in its adaptation of *Bhagawat-The Krishna Avatar*. Not only are the queer aspects of Krishna’s character suppressed in this depiction of the *raas-leela*, but concepts such as the *Krishna shringar* or explicit references to homoerotic behavior are omitted completely. For instance, Krishna’s *tribhanga* posture when enchanting the *gopikas* is repeatedly ignored (Prabhupada, 1970).

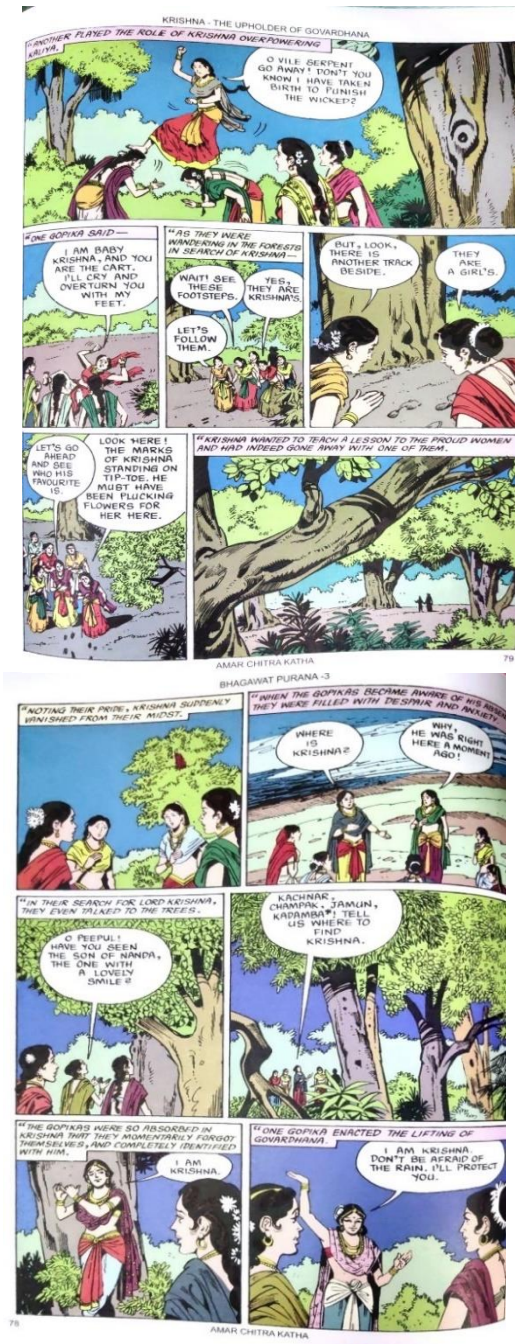


Fig. 9: Amar Chitra Katha's depiction of the raas-leela

The Sanskrit word, *Shringar*, denotes beautiful, sublime emotions like love, adoration, beauty, and attraction. Being the divine embodiment of attraction, Krishna and *Shringar* are inseparable. The concept of *Krishna Shringar* celebrates the fact that males and females are not separate but are a seamless whole. This concept is even celebrated through various rituals and practices. The *Srimad Bhagavatam* references *Krishna Shringar* through the description of Krishna as jewellery, a description that is extremely feminine in itself (Ambalal, 1995). The following comment exemplifies this: “It appeared that Krsna was a greenish sapphire locket amid a golden necklace decorated with valuable stones” (“Description of the Rasa Dance”, Canto Ten, *Srimad Bhagavatam*).

In one of the *shringar kridas* or plays, Radha and Krishna exchange clothes, hoping to interchange the lover roles. Radha risks everything to be with Krishna. She slips out of her house in the middle of the night and makes her way through the woods to the meadows of Madhuvana on the banks of the river Yamuna, where Krishnas play the flute and enchant her. In her love for Krishna, she felt he never understands her anguish and longing until he becomes her. So, to pacify Radha, Krishna decides that they should exchange roles one night. At the appointed hour, Krishna wears Radha’s clothes, and Radha wears Krishna’s clothes. She plays the flute, and he dances around her. However, this entire concept is not mentioned in *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* nor *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*.

The chapter “Krishna: The Upholder of Govardhana” from *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* shows a different side of Krishna than those shown in other titles based on him. However, it lacks many aspects that make the character of Krishna queer. The depiction of Krishna in this chapter makes him appear as a romantic, but it also robs him of the many feminine and queer qualities that add depth and meaning to his character, thus also manipulating the original storyline.

In the chapter “Krishna- The Lord of Dwarka” from *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, a reference is made to Krishna’s education under his guru, Sandipani (Fig. 10). While the *Srimad Bhagavatam* describes Krishna’s education very comprehensively, portraying details all the sixty-four arts learned by the children, *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*

depicts through illustrations, only the masculine ones such as yoga, weaponry, archery, fighting and so on. Arts conventionally associated with feminine nature, such as singing, dancing, decorating their faces and hair, making clothes, music, sewing, embroidery, and so on, are not illustrated in *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*. The following are tracts from the *Srimad Bhagavatam* that identify the gender-neutral aspects of learning,

First of all, they learned how to sing, how to compose songs, and how to recognize the different tunes; They learned the favourable and unfavourable accents and meters, how to sing different kinds of rhythms and melodies, and how to follow them by beating different kinds of drums. They learned how to dance with rhythm, melody, and different songs. They learned how to write dramas, and they learned the various types of paintings, beginning from different village arts up to the highest perfectional stage. They also learned how to paint tilaka on the face and make different kinds of dots on the forehead and cheeks. Then they learned the art of making paintings on the floor with a liquid paste of rice and flour; such paintings are very popular at auspicious ceremonies performed at household affairs or in the temple. They learned how to make a resting place with flowers and how to decorate clothing and leaves with colorful paintings. They also learned how to set valuable jewels in ornaments (“Krsna Recovers the Son of His Teacher”, Canto Ten, *Srimad Bhagavatam*).

More such descriptions appear regarding the gender-fluid nature of their learning,

Krsna and Balarama learned the art of dressing hair in various styles and fixing a helmet in different positions on the head... Krsna and Balarama also learned how to make beverages required at various times, and They studied syrups and tastes and the effects of intoxication. They learned also different types of sewing and embroidery works, as well as how to manipulate thin threads for dancing puppets. They learned how to

string wires on musical instruments, such as the vina, sitar, esaraj, and tamboura, to produce melodious sounds. Then They learned puzzles and how to set and solve them. Krsna and Balarama also learned the art of architecture--how to construct residential buildings. They learned to recognize valuable jewels by studying the luster and the quality of their colors. Then They learned the art of setting jewels with gold and silver. They also learned how to study soil to find minerals ("Krsna Recovers the Son of His Teacher", Canto Ten, *Srimad Bhagavatam*)



Fig.10: Krishna’s education as depicted in Amar Chitra Katha

In addition to these traits, it may be argued that Krishna was polyamorous and preferred and kept the company of multiple women and men and maintained a respectful and equal relationship

with all of them. Krishna's polyamorous nature, though not explicitly mentioned, is shown in *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* in the chapters "Krishna- The Enchanter" and "Krishna-The Victorious". However, they are shown through the heterosexual and heteronormative process of marriage instead of depicting the free relationships that Krishna originally maintained (Vanita and Kidwai, 2008).

Except for Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran and Bhagawat-The Krishna Avatar, there are eight more individual titles based on Krishna. These are Krishna and Narakasura-Confidence versus Arrogance, Bhanumati-Granddaughter of Krishna, Krishna and Shishupala-He was Forgiven a Hundred Times, Sudama-The Power of True Friendship, Krishna and the False Vaasudeva-Pride Meets Its Doom, Krishna and Jarasandha-Krishna Outsmarts His Fierce Adversary, Pradyumna-Son of Krishna, and Aniruddha-Beloved Grandson of Krishna. These texts tell individual tales of Krishna's valorous acts as described in the different sections of the Srimad Bhagavatam. However, none of these individual titles depict the queerness or the gender fluidity of Krishna. They depict only his heroic and warrior side. There is no mention of the raasleela, the krishnashringar, the gopikas, or other episodes from Krishna's life that highlight his gender fluidity. Instead, Krishna's masculinity is continuously asserted in these individual titles to portray him as a valiant and holy warrior. The only work in which these episodes are featured, albeit manipulatively, is *Bhagawat-The Krishna Avatar*, a special issue work that is not as advertised or as easily available as the rest of the individual titles. Thus, the episodes of gender fluidity in Krishna's life remain either manipulated or omitted completely from children's literature like the *Amar Chitra Katha*, which robs the readers not only of greater knowledge about a beloved Indian character but also hinders the acceptance of queer concepts and traits among young readers in Indian society.

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