

Love Beyond Binaries: Gender Fluidity and Queer Perspectives in the Poetry of H.S. Shivaprakash

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of gender fluidity and queer perspectives in the poetry of H.S. Shivaprakash, focusing on his works "Lost and Found in Havana" and "Majnu to Laila". It examines how Shivaprakash breaks away from traditional ideas of gender and love, offering a more inclusive and flexible view of identity and relationships. The aim is to show how his poetry challenges societal norms about gender roles and highlights a deeper understanding of love as a universal experience. The study uses textual analysis to interpret the selected poems' imagery, metaphors, and structure. Key themes include transformation, love that transcends social boundaries, and the rejection of strict gender roles. The analysis reveals that Shivaprakash draws on myths and reflective language to blur the lines between traditional categories, such as male and female or lover and beloved. His poetry celebrates the evolving nature of identity and creates a space for diverse expressions of love and selfhood, resonating with queer themes. This research contributes to discussions about the role of Indian poetry in embracing modern ideas of gender and love while staying connected to its cultural roots. It highlights Shivaprakash's work as a bridge between tradition and progressive thought.

Keywords: H.S. Shivaprakash, Gender Fluidity, Non-binary Identities, Indian Poetry.

Introduction

Exploring flexible identities and non-binary perspectives has become increasingly prominent in modern literary analysis, particularly in works that challenge traditional expectations. H.S. Shivaprakash, a highly respected Kannada poet and dramatist, examined these themes through his evocative and profoundly introspective writing. Although his poetry does not exclusively focus on LGBTQ issues, it frequently opens up avenues for queer interpretation by breaking down societal constructs around identity and relationships (Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2023; Singh, 2021).

This paper focuses on Shivaprakash's poems, *Lost and Found in Havana* and *Majnu to Laila* (which the poet Dr HS Shivaprakash translated into English) to reveal how his work embraces the themes of change, connection, and universal love. By analyzing his poetic use of metaphors, symbolism, and storytelling, this study highlights how his poetry resonates with contemporary explorations of fluidity and inclusiveness.

‘I was lost a moment ago / Like a precious ring lost in the river’ (*Lost and Found in Havana*)

This quote illustrates the theme of personal transformation and fluid identity. It sets the stage for the journey of self-discovery that the poem describes, aligning with Shivaprakash’s exploration of evolving selfhood.

Literature Review

The study of gender fluidity and identity in Indian poetry has gained significant attention in recent scholarship, mainly through the lens of queer theory, which challenges binary notions of gender and sexuality. In Indian regional literature, scholars are beginning to examine how poetic texts engage with evolving concepts of love, identity, and desire.

Queer Theory and Indian Poetics

Chakraborty and Chakraborty (2023) emphasize how vernacular Indian languages and regional literary forms offer fertile ground for exploring queerness beyond Western paradigms. This insight is foundational in examining Kannada poetry like Shivaprakash’s, which uses deeply rooted Indian metaphors and narrative traditions to question normative identities.

Aanchal Chauhan’s (2022) dissertation explores poems from *The World That Belongs to Us*, a queer South Asian anthology, revealing how language, memory, and identity converge in queer expression. Her method of close reading and cultural contextualization serves as a model for this paper’s approach to analyzing Shivaprakash’s “Lost and Found in Havana” and “Majnu to Laila”.

Bradway and McCallum (2019) argue that post-queer literary criticism must explore how texts resist fixed categories through poetic ambiguity, a notion that aligns closely with Shivaprakash’s symbolic dismantling of heteronormativity. Shivaprakash’s intertextual play with Bhakti traditions—known for their devotional passion and spiritual fluidity—makes it crucial to consider how Bhakti thought intersects with queer theory. Bhattacharya (2018) explores how gender ambiguity in devotional poetry subverts religious and social hierarchies, suggesting a long-standing tradition of fluid identity in Indian poetics.

Pattanaik (2014) further explores mythological stories involving transformation and divine union, suggesting a cultural precedent for understanding gender as non-fixed and spiritual love as transcendent. His reinterpretations mirror Shivaprakash’s poetic reimagining of love and devotion beyond gender binaries.

Vanita (2013), in her landmark work *Queering India*, discusses same-sex love and the eroticism of devotion in Indian literature and culture. Her insights help situate Shivaprakash within a broader history of queer expression in Indian poetry and spirituality.

Cultural and Political Context

Christopher (2025) highlights how art—particularly poetry—can serve as “artivism” (art + activism) that challenges existing gender and sexuality norms. Shivaprakash’s subversive reimagining of traditional love stories positions him as part of this lineage of poetic activism.

Veena (2024) examines gender construction in Rituparno Ghosh’s films and notes that regional cultural narratives allow for nuanced portrayals of identity. This idea applies to Shivaprakash, who uses Kannada idioms and imagery to reflect a non-Western, yet progressive, view of gender and love.

Goyal (2022), analyzing Ocean Vuong, discusses how poets use metaphor and trauma to narrate queer experiences. Vuong’s technique of weaving personal and collective identity through poetic fragments resonates with Shivaprakash’s treatment of transformation and rediscovery.

Finally, Singh (2021) describes queer becoming as a poetic, nonlinear, and cultural process,

especially in India, where identity often merges with spirituality and resistance. This theoretical framework is key to understanding Shivaprakash's portrayal of transformation as both gendered and philosophical.

The studies reviewed here show that combining ideas from Bhakti philosophy, queer theory, and gender identity gives us a meaningful way to look at H.S. Shivaprakash's poetry. Scholars have pointed out that Indian spiritual traditions, especially in poetry, have always made room for expressions of love and identity that don't fit into strict gender roles.

‘Still less that it is the void plucking void as I, too, am made of you
O Guru O Shivalinga O Great Void’ (Majnu to Laila)

These lines demonstrate Shivaprakash's use of Indian spiritual traditions and mythology. By invoking concepts like ‘Guru’ and ‘Shivalinga’, he adds layers of meaning to his exploration of love and identity, rooting his modern ideas in traditional cultural contexts.

Recent writers and theorists have built on this, pushing back against fixed ideas about how people should live and love. Shivaprakash's poems draw from ancient Indian stories and today's global conversations about queerness and identity, making his work especially powerful and relevant. These sources provide the background and tools to understand how his poetry questions old norms and celebrates fluid, evolving identities.

Research Methods

This study used a qualitative method to explore the themes of gender and identity in the poetry of H.S. Shivaprakash. Two poems—*Lost and Found in Havana* and *Majnu to Laila*—were chosen because they directly engage with ideas of love, transformation, and fluid identities. The analysis looked closely at recurring themes, symbols, and storytelling techniques to better understand the more profound messages in these works. The poems were also placed in the context of queer theory and Indian spiritual traditions, particularly Kannada literature, to explore their broader cultural and social meanings.

The primary theoretical lens used in this study is queer theory, which helps analyze how Shivaprakash's poetry questions traditional views of gender and relationships.

Like my youth lost in sleepless, lonely nights Like a glorious dream, I lost
In wakefulness’ (*Lost and Found in Havana*)

This quote challenges traditional roles by presenting vulnerability and loss as part of the human experience. It blends personal reflection with universal themes, showcasing Shivaprakash's ability to connect individual experiences with broader human conditions.

This is especially important because his poems often deal with love that doesn't follow typical norms or boundaries. Alongside queer theory, the study also draws on Bhakti philosophy, which plays a key role in understanding the spiritual elements in his work. Shivaprakash often writes about deep, emotional connections that reflect the devotion in Bhakti poetry. Combining these two perspectives gives us a richer understanding of how his poems blend personal identity with cultural and spiritual meaning.

Bhakti and queer theory together offer a powerful way to explore Shivaprakash's poetry. For example, Bhakti speaks of love that goes beyond rules and social expectations, something queer theory also embraces. In both traditions, identity is seen as flexible and evolving. Shivaprakash often blurs the line between lover and beloved, echoing Bhakti's idea of becoming one with the divine while also reflecting queer theory's view of identity as fluid. His poetry also questions social norms, especially around gender roles, much like Bhakti saints once challenged religious authorities, and queer voices challenge modern norms today.

Another important aspect of his work is the way he uses symbolism and metaphor. The sun,

moon, stars, and other cosmic imagery aren't just decorative, they carry deeper meanings about love, identity, and transformation. This metaphor allows Shivaprakash to express queerness and spirituality subtly but powerfully. By weaving together spiritual devotion and modern ideas about identity, his poetry becomes a space where tradition and change meet.

Together, these ideas provide a well-rounded and culturally sensitive way to read Shivaprakash's poetry. They show how his work connects Indian philosophical thought with modern conversations about gender and love, offering a thoughtful and inclusive vision of human experience.

Results

The analysis of H.S. Shivaprakash's poems '*Lost and Found in Havana*' and '*Majnu to Laila*' reveals a nuanced exploration of fluid identities and boundless love that challenges traditional norms while embracing cultural richness. The study finds that Shivaprakash employs celestial imagery and mythological references to portray love as a transcendent force that defies conventional boundaries.¹ His innovative retelling of the Laila-Majnu story, for instance, blurs the lines between lover and beloved, suggesting a more fluid conception of identity and relationships.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates how Shivaprakash skilfully intertwines spiritual and romantic themes, echoing Bhakti traditions while aligning with contemporary queer theory. This synthesis creates a poetic space where personal transformation, universal love, and fluid identities coexist, offering fresh perspectives on love and self-expression.

The study concludes that Shivaprakash's poetry bridges tradition and modernity, contributing significantly to the evolving landscape of gender representation in Kannada literature and opening new avenues for understanding love, identity, and relationships in a broader, more inclusive context.

Discussions

Fluidity and Transformation in Identity

In *Lost and Found in Havana*, the theme of personal rediscovery is pivotal to *Lost and Found in Havana*. The protagonist's journey, catalyzed by a relationship with "Deyanira," is a metaphor for the evolving nature of selfhood. This echoes the experiences of individuals exploring non-traditional identities, emphasizing that transformation is a continuous process influenced by reflection and interaction.

Boundless Love

In *Majnu to Laila*, Shivaprakash retells a classic love story to show that love has no limits. He replaces the image of the moon with the face of the beloved, suggesting that love is more powerful than cultural rules or social expectations. This shows how love can exist outside traditional ideas about right and wrong. Similarly, his poem *Lost and Found in Havana* explores a relationship with 'Deyanira' that doesn't follow typical gender roles. The journey from being "lost" to being "found" through love hints at a personal transformation that challenges traditional gender boundaries.

Shivaprakash's use of celestial imagery in '*Majnu to Laila*' significantly contributes to the theme of boundless love. The poem replaces traditional celestial bodies with the beloved's features, emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of love. This imagery suggests that love transcends physical and temporal boundaries, becoming as vast and eternal as the cosmos. The beloved's eyes are compared to stars visible at all times, both day and night, in wakefulness and dreams, symbolizing the omnipresence of love. This use of celestial imagery elevates love to a cosmic, almost divine level, reinforcing its boundless nature.

This kind of love also connects to Bhakti philosophy, which speaks of a deep, spiritual love

beyond everyday life. When viewed through queer theory, this spiritual love can be seen as breaking away from rigid ideas about gender and relationships. Shivaprakash brings these two ideas together in *Majnu to Laila*, where love is shown as timeless and limitless. His poetry blends the emotional depth of Bhakti devotion with queer theory's push for openness and freedom, offering a version of love that goes beyond physical and social boundaries.

Mythological and Symbolic Depth

Shivaprakash often draws on Indian spiritual traditions, especially ideas from the Bhakti movement, to explore themes like identity and relationships in his poetry.

‘Like my guru lost on the island of man-eaters
Like my only child in a forest
Bursting with starving lions’ (*Lost and Found in Havana*)

These lines incorporate mythological and symbolic depth into the poem. They use vivid, culturally resonant imagery to convey the sense of being lost, connecting personal experience to broader cultural narratives.

He uses myths and cultural stories not just for decoration but to add deeper meaning to his work. By weaving these elements into his poems, he connects traditional Indian beliefs with modern ideas about diversity and self-expression. This mix helps him create poetry that speaks to both cultural heritage and current conversations around gender and identity.

He also reimagines old myths in new ways, making space for ideas from both Bhakti philosophy and queer theory to come together. For example, Bhakti's deep and emotional connection to the divine can be seen as a kind of love that goes beyond gender, which fits well with queer theory's belief in fluid and flexible identities. Bhakti's history of questioning rigid religious rules also mirrors how queer theory pushes back against fixed ideas of how people should live or love. Through this blend of old and new, Shivaprakash offers a fresh and inclusive view of love and identity that challenges traditional limits while staying rooted in Indian culture.

Challenging Traditional Roles

In both *Lost and Found in Havana* and *Majnu to Laila*, Shivaprakash questions traditional ideas about gender and relationships. In *Lost and Found in Havana*, how the characters interact in the relationship goes against typical roles, showing that love doesn't have to follow set rules. In *Majnu to Laila*, love is demonstrated as limitless and universal—breaking free from social and moral boundaries.

The poem challenges traditional interpretations of the Laila-Majnu story in several ways. It moves away from the narrative of tragic, unrequited love often associated with the Laila-Majnu tale. Instead, it presents a love that is ever-present and all-encompassing. The poem also blurs the distinction between the lover and the beloved, challenging the traditional roles assigned in the original story. By doing so, Shivaprakash presents a more fluid and inclusive interpretation of love and identity, aligning with contemporary discussions on gender and relationships. By retelling the famous Majnu-Laila story in his way, Shivaprakash brings together ideas from both Bhakti philosophy and queer theory to give the story new meaning.

In *Majnu to Laila*, love isn't tied to physical presence or time; it's something more significant. ‘When the sun goes down in the west,

It is not the moon that rises, But it is your face
Holding two stars
Your eyes, which appear only to my eyes’ (*Majnu to Laila*)

These lines illustrate Shivaprakash's reimagining of the classic love story. By replacing celestial

bodies with the beloved's features, he emphasizes the transcendent nature of love, showing how it surpasses cultural and social norms.

This idea fits with Bhakti's view of spiritual love and also with queer theory's push to break free from traditional relationship models.

'Yes, I have found myself through you And have started recovering
My lost oceans, islands, cities, Palaces, temples,
And my half-complete poems' (*Lost and Found in Havana*)

This quote encapsulates the theme of personal rediscovery through love. It shows how the protagonist's identity is fluid and evolving, recovering various aspects of self through the relationship. Shivaprakash opens space for new, more inclusive interpretations by changing the original story. The poem also plays with identity, showing how the line between lover and beloved can blur. This reflects both Bhakti's belief in becoming one with the divine and queer theory's idea of identity being fluid rather than fixed.

'Every time I pluck a flower
I see myself plucking only a flower
Never do I see myself plucking also the void
The size and shape of the flower' (*Majnu to Laila*)

This metaphorical exploration blurs the line between the lover and the beloved. It reflects both Bhakti's concept of union with the divine and queer theory's notion of fluid identity.

The poem takes this even further by showing love as eternal and beyond the rules of society. Shivaprakash uses images like the sun, moon, and stars to show how love is powerful and almost divine. At the same time, he moves away from the fixed gender roles in the original story, letting gender and desire feel more open and flexible.

Shivaprakash blends spiritual and romantic themes in *Laila to Majnu*, suggesting a complex view of love and identity. The poem intertwines romantic love with spiritual devotion, reminiscent of Bhakti poetry. The beloved is equated with divine entities ('O Guru O Shivalinga O Great Void'), suggesting that romantic love can lead to spiritual enlightenment. This blending implies that Shivaprakash views love as a transformative force that transcends the physical and merges with the spiritual. It also suggests that he sees identity as fluid and interconnected, where the boundaries between self, other, and the divine can dissolve.⁵ This perspective aligns with traditional Indian philosophical thought and contemporary ideas about fluid identities, creating a unique synthesis in Shivaprakash's poetry.

Through all these elements, he builds a poetic space where spiritual passion and modern ideas about identity come together. His work gives us a fresh and meaningful way to think about love and self-expression that goes beyond traditional limits.

Conclusions

Shivaprakash's poetry blends cultural richness with forward-thinking ideas, presenting themes of identity and love that transcend conventional boundaries. By questioning established norms and emphasizing fluidity and inclusiveness, his work is meaningful to modern Indian poetry. This study highlights Shivaprakash's role in fostering progressive discussions of identity and relationships, demonstrating how poetry can bridge tradition and modernity.

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