

Ardhanarishvara and *Mona Lisa*: A Study of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*

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Abstract

Indian mythology engages with deep folklore and stories that has innumerable ideas to offer. The *Puranas* particularly gives the mythological tales associated with Indian Gods and Goddesses. Shiva being one of the supreme deities is worshipped by his followers. One of the iconography associated with Shiva and Parvati is the ardhhanarishvara which refers to lord who is half woman. The right half of the body is male and the left side of the body is female. Their union signifies divinity, balance and creation.

Dan Brown's work *The Da Vinci Code* consist of an interpretation of Da Vinci's the *Mona Lisa*. Brown writes that the painting is also half male and half female and carries a message of androgyny. The paper will study the concept of ardhhanarishvara and will employ it in Brown's interpretation of the *Mona Lisa*. It aims at drawing parallels between varied cultures through Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

Keywords: Mythology, Purana, Shiva, Ardhhanarishvara, Mona Lisa, Da Vinci

Indian mythology is a vast ocean of complex stories interwoven into each other to convey a set of meaningful ideas. The huge canon encapsulates interesting aspects of the Indian culture that has been passed on from generations. Many term it as Hindu mythology as it is concerned with the Hindu religion. The *Puranas* marked a significant event in the development of Hindu mythology. The eighteen *Puranas* provided a framework of mythological stories.

Raj Kumar Pruthi in his work *An Introduction to the Puranas* writes that the *Puranas* means something which lives from ancient times. He further adds, "the term signified 'ancient tale' or 'old narrative' in the Brahmana literature" (Pruthi 1). He also writes that the *Puranas* have all aspect of human life including secular and sacred. He says,

This made them grow to encyclopaedic proportions. At a time when the only access to knowledge that the masses had was by listening to the Puranas, they discharged their duties to society admirably well. (Pruthi vii-viii)

He further elaborates that the *Puranas* has been dynamic and floating. The texts have been subjected to several revisions and modifications. It covers various aspects of lie and antiquity is a characteristic of *Puranas*. Author Shashi Tharoor writes that *Puranas* promoted their values based on myths and stories. He further adds:

Puranic Hinduism witnessed the absorption (even ‘Sanskritization’) of the existing local cultures and the adoption of their deities and heroes into Hindu mythology; it is in the Puranic age that both Vaishnavites and Shaivites accepted idol worship, which was earlier absent from the Vedic faith. (Tharoor 58)

The work *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas* writes that the *Puranas* are composed in Sanskrit in a certain meter occasionally in prose. They are narrated as question and answer. Their content consists of stories of Hindu gods, goddesses and supernatural beings with tales of men, women and seers. Thus, the *Puranas* kept on growing by numerous accretions in successive historical eras.

One of the chief deities in Hinduism is regarded as Shiva or Siva. He is described in twenty eight different forms in *Shiva Purana*. He also has a sect that solely worships him the followers of which are known as Shaivaites. According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, “Shaivism refers to a cluster of religious schools and traditions in Hinduism devoted primarily to the worship of the god Shiva, who is one of the principle gods of the Hindu religion” (“Shaivism”). These groups worship Shiva and their various forms. As mentioned above, one of the eighteen *Puranas*, the *Shiva Purana* centres on Shiva and Parvati and belong to the Shaivites literature.

The work *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas* describes Shiva as the destroyer of the universe but at the same time the followers consider him to be the creator as well as the protector of the universe. It further writes:

The great god Siva possesses a multiple personality, the various facets of which interrelate in different ways in different stories; no facet, however stands out entirely alone. Siva has also accomplished a synthesis of different deities- while remaining a single personality himself. His character always includes complementary or opposing facets within a complex single self. (Buitenen 150)

Shiva is also known as Mahakala which refers to the annihilator of the universe. It implies to the Puranic mythology of time where “periodically the universe collapses into itself to become pure potential, after which all phenomena reemerge once again as before” (Buitenen 151). Shiva is wedded to Goddess Parvati and their children are Lord Ganesha and Kartikeya.

Naturally, the tradition of Shaivism has given rise to rich iconography and images. Numerous temples in India reflect stunning Shiva and Parvati iconography. One of the popular images is the ardhnanarishvara. The meaning of the word is ‘The Lord who is half woman’. Ardhnanarishvara is an androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati. The image of ardhnanarishvara is depicted as half male which is Shiva and half female which is Parvati. The right side is represented by male and the left side is represented by the female.

Devdutt Pattnaik writes about Ardhnanarishvara that the left side is associated with the heart and the right side comes to be associated with the brain. One can defend this stance with the help of science as the right-brain, which controls the left side of the body, has been found

to be associated with 'feminine traits' such as intuition, abstract thought and creativity while the left-brain, which controls the right half of the body, is associated with 'masculine traits' such as logic, systematic thought and mathematics. He further writes:

The female form has long represented materialism, while the male form has represented spirituality. He is the ascetic or the householder. The former seeks to transcend material things while the latter tries to control it. The woman seduces the world-rejecting hermit and eludes the world-craving householder. She is enchanting yet mercurial like a nymph. Ideally, she (materialism), should support and submit to him (spirituality), hence she occupies the inferior left half. The male form is otherworldly. The female form is worldly. Shiva rejects worldly life; Shakti celebrates it. By uniting the two, Shiva harmonizes the worlds of the hermit and the householder. And yet, the 'hierarchy of halves' remains. The material world remains in the profane left half. Yoga, restraint, embodied in the male form demands a higher position over bhoga, indulgence, embodied in the female form. (Pattnaik)

Dr Alka Pande writes that "The Ardhanarisvara image of Siva symbolises the syncretic ideology, for it symbolises the union of the cult of Siva and Sakti. The ideological union of Siva and Sakti has been delineated by many early and some late texts" (Pande). She further enlightens about a story from *Shiva Purana* associated with ardhnanarishvara. She writes that when Brahma commanded the Prajapatis to create other beings and they were unable to do so, Brahma was deeply distressed. He meditated on Shiva who appeared in ardhnanarishvara form. Brahma realised his mistake that he was not creating females and on looking at the ardhnanarishvara he understood his error. He prayed to Uma, the female half of the Maheshwara and he was given a female to continue the process of creation. Such kinds of stories can be read in the *Puranas*.

The theme of Ardhanarishvara is popular in many art forms such as painting and sculpture. Many ancient sculptures dedicated to the theme can be seen in many parts of the country. Many temples, particularly in Madhya Pradesh have sculptures and iconographies related to ardhnanarishvara. Paintings and literary works also depict the nuances of the theme describing the androgynous form. This paper associates the concept of ardhnanarishvara with an American work that involves the painting of an Italian painter. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* will be analysed in this paper to illustrate comparisons between the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci and ardhnanarishvara.

Dan Brown, an American writer published *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003. The novel became *New York Times* bestseller and garnered much critical attention despite its controversial content. The work revolves around an age old truth being protected by a secret group the Priory of Sion, the Grand master of which is also the curator of Louvre museum. The truth can break the foundations of the Catholic establishments. The Grand master is murdered by a monk of Opus Dei, a fringe Christian group. But Saunier, the Grand master leaves clues for his granddaughter, Sophie and Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon to find the truth. The novel leads them to various locations and to various ideas in order to find the truth related to religious history.

While deciphering the clues left by Sophie's grandfather in the Louvre museum, Langdon comes across the *Mona Lisa*. Saunier has left a clue on it as well. But Langdon marvels at the evergreen piece of art painted by renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci. Here

Brown gives a classic interpretation of *Mona Lisa* and the symbolism deeply embedded in it. It was painted in the sfumato style in which form appear to evaporate into one another. Da Vinci used to hide clues in his paintings which are now being decoded by artists and literary enthusiasts in the contemporary times.

Dan Brown tries to present an interpretation Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting *Mona Lisa* in his work. Leonardo Da Vinci was a prolific Italian painter, sculptor, astronomer, mathematician and had great knowledge associated with anatomy, palaeontology, engineering, geology, architecture, cartography and botany. He painted *Mona Lisa* in early sixteenth century in Florence, Italy. Charles Nicholl writes about *Mona Lisa* "She is older than the rocks among which she sits", wrote the Victorian aesthete Walter Pater, poetically if not very gallantly." (Nicholl). He further illustrates critical comments by famous writers on *Mona Lisa*. He writes:

Oscar Wilde ('The Critic as Artist', 1891) comments perceptively on this seductive Pateresque blarney – "the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing" - but the idea of the *Mona Lisa*'s 'secret' continued to reverberate. In Forster's *A Room with a View* (1907), Lucy Honeychurch's sojourn in Tuscany gives her a touch of the Gioconda mystery: "he detected in her a wonderful reticence. She was like a woman of Leonardo da Vinci's, whom we love not so much for herself as for the things she will not tell us." (Nicholl)

Brown through his character Robert Langdon in the work interprets the symbolism associated with the *Mona Lisa*. He says that Da Vinci deliberately painted the horizon line on the left lower than the right. By doing this, he made *Mona Lisa* look much larger from the left side than the right side. Brown further elaborates:

Historically, the concepts, of male and female have assigned sides-left is female, and right is male. Because Da Vinci was a big fan of feminine principles, he made *Mona Lisa* look more majestic from the left than the right. (Brown 128)

Da Vinci was trying to portray both male and female elements. He believed in an androgynous form of being. Brown writes "his *Mona Lisa* is neither male nor female. It carries a subtle message of androgyny. It is a fusing of both" (Brown 129). In other words, it is a combination of both male and female elements coming together to form an androgynous being.

Brown also illustrates meaning hidden behind name *Mona Lisa*. He says that *Mona* is an anagram for *Amon*. *Amon* was the Egyptian God of fertility and is represented as a man with a ram's head with curved horns. The Egyptian goddess of fertility was *Isis* and female counterpart of *Amon*. The ancient pictogram of *Isis* was once written as *L'isa*. Therefore *Mona Lisa* is an anagram for *Amon L'isa* which signifies the union of male and female elements. So not only the image but also the name of *Mona Lisa* denotes androgyny and a reason behind her enigmatic smile.

The above explanation can be compared with previously mentioned concept of *ardhanarishvara*. Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* represents and androgynous form. The Hindu concept *ardhanarishvara* also elucidate the same idea wherein *Shiva* and *Parvati* come together in to form a composite androgynous image. In *The Da Vinci*

Code, Mona Lisa is interpreted by Dan Brown in such way that it comes out neither entirely male nor female but a mixture of both. In other words, both female and male elements are necessary for the balance required in nature. Similarly, ardhnanarishvara says that the union of Shiva and Prakrati is fundamental for the creation of the universe.

Both ardhnanarishvara and *Mona Lisa* reflect the same idea in different cultural scenario. The idea of ardhnanarishvara dates back to the Vedic age in the Indian subcontinent. *Mona Lisa* was painted by Leonardo Da Vinci in early sixteenth century in Florence, Italy. It is Dan Brown's interpretation of the painting that it is an androgynous being. But if one believes so, Da Vinci knowingly or unknowingly employed the concept of ardhnanarishvara in his painting. It is because the idea or the symbolism of ardhnanarishvara is echoed in the painting of *Mona Lisa*. It stands as a powerful symbol of male-female combination and the impact it generates in its nature. Brown also considers it a reason for her mysterious smile that draws so much enigma and speculation across globe.

Besides the fusion of male and female elements for creation, ardhnanarishvara in *Mona Lisa* symbolises that a soul could only be enlightened until it has both male and female elements. Each being has some masculine and some feminine aspects to its personalities. As mentioned above, in ardhnanarishvara the right side or male side signifies brain and logic. The left side or the female side is associated with heart, intuition and creativity. A balance between heart and mind is necessary and fundamental for enlightenment and ultimate success. One must have a fusion of both to maintain a balance in life.

Similarly, *Mona Lisa* is also divided into two sides by Brown. The left side is attributed to female while right side is male. As mentioned previously, the male and female sides have meanings associated with it. The union of mind which is male and heart which is female leads to clarity of thoughts.

Basically the image of Ardhanarinara represents an attempt to trace the male and female polarity itself to a single unitary source; hence the sometimes confusing language and imagery involved in insisting that two are in reality only one. (Buitenen 153)

The union makes them one single androgynous being that exhibits a single force. Both *Mona Lisa* and Ardhanarishvara illustrate the same concepts and ideas.

It is enthralling to observe ardhnanarishvara in the *Mona Lisa* which is culturally a completely different artefact. But through this paper, an Indian mythological idea is studied and analysed in a western piece of art. Ardhanarishvara in *Mona Lisa* depict that fusion of male and female leads to balance, creation and enlightenment. Brown gave an interpretation of *Mona Lisa* that presented her in a new light. Employing her with Ardhanarishvara helps one understands the idea and how it can be applied in life. Also, the paper helps in comprehending the parallels between the two cultures mediated through Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

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