

# INSCAPE

*Annual Digital Wall Magazine*



# Special Issue on Cross-Dressing



an initiative of  
Department of English  
Durgapur Government College

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# Chief Patron



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# Well Wishers



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# Foreword

The first issue of Inscape, the Annual Digital Wall Magazine of the Department of English was inaugurated on 08.03.2024 i.e. on the occasion of International Women's Day last year. The Chief editor of the first issue, Dr. Antara Mukherjee who currently heads the Department and also happens to be the Co-ordinator of the Women's Cell, Durgapur Government College came forth with the brilliant idea of publishing the second issue of Inscape on the same day this year. The theme of International Women's Day 2025 is "Accelerate Action". The prerequisite for every "Action" is an idea, a concept or thought. Repressive structures are therefore ever wary of the subversive and transgressive potential of "ideas", "concepts" and "thoughts". The very act of thinking, to have "thought" is rife with possibilities -possibilities of subverting, questioning and perhaps destabilising the dominant structures that be - the "Action" which occurs in the ideational realm but can lead to praxis. This Special issue on Cross- Dressing, therefore is dedicated to taking cognizance of the subversive and transgressive potential of not only concepts, ideas and thoughts but also of "action"-of the performative aspects of the sartorial choices and bodily expressions. Judith Butler has shown how the figure of the drag queen and drag performances in their outlandish mimicry and imitation epitomise subversion and transgression. The ultimate subversive power of the drag is to resist the power structures that seek to consolidate the heteronormative order and destabilise the "truth" of a fixed gender identity.

The current issue of Inscape (front and back cover designed by Nilanjana Das and Srija Chakraborty respectively) with its focus on "Cross-dressing", we believe has given the students of the department an opportunity to engage with and understand the subversive possibilities inherent in the domain of thought and 'action' - in literary, artistic and theoretical expressions of gender performativity.

The students' contributions range from poems to artwork, articles to personal essays that document both the lived experience of difference and the imagined representation of the same. Srija Chakraborty's article -"Cross-dressing: a complex issue" is an accessible introduction to the phenomenon as observed in a variety of contexts ranging from mythology to popular culture. Rikita Mitra on the other hand gives the readers a unique perspective on memory and insight in the personal essay "Cross-dressing in India: past and present".

The poetry in this issue follows a similar narrative trajectory that portrays the self in its many garbs. In "My Own Costume" Priyadisha Chakraborty explores the ways that dress has defined social and creative identity across ages while Rinita Chakraborty's "The Woman" shows how artists have used the stage and the celluloid to express the motley self that mainstream society has been selectively tolerant of. Archita Mahanty and Moumita Das's lineworks in this vein portray performance art as the medium that de-stabilises the boundaries of self-expression. Srija Chakraborty's "Unravelling Identities" and Disha Raha's "Unbound in Thread" are a more personal look at how performativity through dress both liberates and confines and identity remains in need of perpetual negotiation- a sentiment that Roopsha Roy neatly encapsulates in an optimistic yet timely tale of self-determination and acceptance told in verse.

**SUNRITA CHAKRAVARTI & SAMPRIKTA PAL**



# Crossdressing: A Complex Issue

## Srija Chakraborty

Crossdressing, the practice of wearing clothes traditionally associated with the opposite sex, has been observed across cultures and civilizations. This phenomenon has been documented in various forms of literature, history, and art.

### **Historical Context**

Crossdressing has been observed across cultures and civilizations. In ancient Greece and Rome, men wore women's clothing for theatrical performances (Garber, 1992). Similarly, in many indigenous cultures, crossdressing was a common practice among spiritual leaders and healers (Feinberg, 1996). For example, in some Native American cultures, crossdressing was a way for individuals to access spiritual power and communicate with the divine.

### **Social views on crossdressing**

Social views on crossdressing vary widely. In ancient Greece and Rome, crossdressing was accepted in theatre and ritual contexts. However, in modern times, crossdressers have faced discrimination and marginalization. The 1969 Stonewall riots, led by trans and crossdressing individuals, marked a turning point in the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Today, many countries recognize and protect the rights of crossdressers and trans individuals.

### **Indian Literature and Mythology**

In the Mahabharata, the character of Shikhandi is a notable example of a crossdressing individual (Bhattacharya, 2009). Shikhandi, born as a woman, is raised as a man and later becomes a key figure in the epic battle.

Another example from the Mahabharata is Arjun's transformation into Brihannala, a dance teacher (Bhattacharya, 2009). Arjun, one of the Pandavas, disguises himself as a woman to teach dance to the princess of Virata. This episode highlights the fluidity of gender roles in ancient Indian society.

### **Crossdressing in English Literature**

In Shakespeare's plays, male actors played female roles, often wearing elaborate costumes and wigs (Shakespeare, 1623). This practice, known as "boy players," was a common convention in Elizabethan theatre.

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the character of Viola cross-dresses as a man to serve the lovesick Orsino, whom she falls in love with (Shakespeare, 1623). Orsino is in love with the Countess Olivia and sends Viola disguised as Sebastian to court her for him. The plot thickens when Olivia falls for Viola dressed as a man. Sebastian arrives, causing a flood of mistaken identities which are ultimately resolved and he marries Olivia while Orsino proposes to Viola.

Another notable example of crossdressing in English literature is found in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (Woolf, 1928). The novel follows the life of Orlando, a young nobleman who transforms into a woman and lives for centuries, exploring themes of identity, love, and transformation.

In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the character of Lord Henry Wotton remarks, "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all" (Wilde, 1890). This quote reflects the tension between societal expectations and individual desires, a common theme in crossdressing narratives.

### **Cross-dressing in India**

The Koovagam Temple in Tamil Nadu, South India, is an important site of a unique tradition. This tradition is showcased during the annual Koovagam Festival.

Men participate in this tradition by dressing up as women, known as "Thirunangai." This act is performed to honour the Hindu God Aravan. According to legend, Aravan was a warrior who married a woman for a night before going to war. His spirit is appeased by men dressing up as women.

This tradition highlights the fluidity of gender roles in ancient Indian culture. It provides a space for self-expression and spiritual exploration.

The Koovagam Festival is a remarkable example of India's diverse cultural heritage, showcasing the country's rich history and traditions.

### **Modern Works**

In recent years, crossdressing has been explored in various forms of media, including TV shows and movies. For example, the TV show "Transparent" (2014-2019) follows the life of Maura Pfefferman, a trans woman who transitions later in life. The show explores themes of identity, family, and acceptance.

Another example is the movie "The Danish Girl" (2015), which tells the story of Lili Elbe, a trans woman who first cross-dresses and then undergoes sex reassignment surgery in the 1930s. The film explores themes of identity, love, and transformation.

## **Psychological and Sociological Aspects**

Research suggests that crossdressers often experience high levels of anxiety and depression due to societal pressures (Schrock, 1997). However, many crossdressers also report feelings of liberation and self-acceptance when they can express themselves authentically.

A study published in the Journal of Sex Research found that crossdressers often engage in this practice as a means of coping with stress and anxiety (Docter, 1988).

## **Legal and Human Rights Issues**

Many countries lack laws and policies that protect the rights of crossdressers, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination and persecution (Human Rights Campaign, 2020).

In 2014, the Indian Supreme Court recognized the rights of transgender individuals, including crossdressers, in the landmark case of National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India (Supreme Court of India, 2014).

## **Reference :**

First Folio - Book by William Shakespeare, 1623

The Māhābhārata of Vyāsa, Vol. 12-2: The Complete Śānti Parva (Part 2: Moksha-Dhrama) : Pradip Bhattacharya , 2009

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman : Feinbergg, 1996

Vested interests: Cross-dressing & cultural anxiety: Garber, 1992

Orlando: A Biography : Virginia Woolf, 1928

# Crossdressing in India: Past and Present

Rikita Mitra

Since our childhood, our family used to go to these 'Jagrans' dedicated to Lord Krishna and his beloved, Radha. It used to be fun, and the most interesting thing was that all the parts were played by boys and men as they used to dress up as women to be the gopis and Radha. Similarly, In the Jagrans dedicated to Shiva, the role of Parvati was generally played by a man.

They used to perform traditional bhajans, but also those "Bollywood-Inspired" bhajans, which amused me most of the time. Everyone present there used to admire these performers, but only when they were performing. The concept of cross-dressing, the main attraction of the show, is appreciated only when it's done for god and rituals.



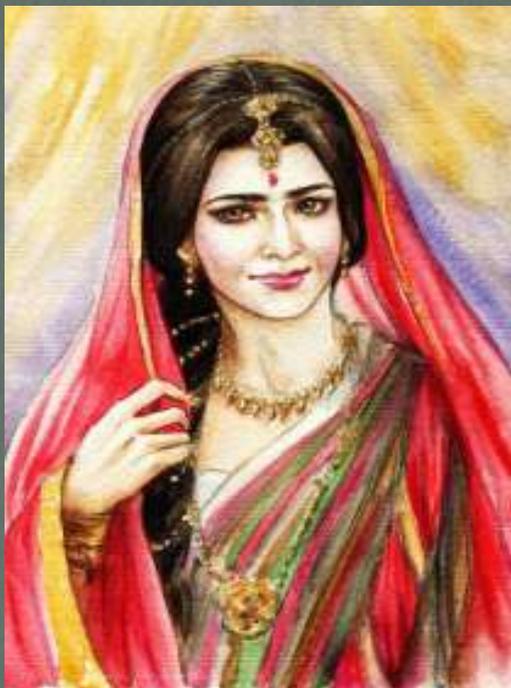
Cross-Dressing, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, is 'the act of wearing clothes usually worn by the opposite sex'. It has been used for purposes of disguise, solace, comedy, and self-expression in current times and throughout the past.

Even though there are shreds of historical evidence regarding commoners, kings and even gods practicing cross-dressing, there's still a bizarre amount of hostility against it. For instance, my grandfather and uncle used to perform in Ram Leela as Kunti and Sita respectively in their time. However, doing the same on the streets or in their own homes, wouldn't have been accepted at any cost.

Even in Hindu mythology, Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers, took the form of Brihannala – an eunuch during the incognito (staying in disguise for a year) exile in the Mahabharata. As Brihannala, Arjuna taught dance and music to Uttara, the daughter of the King of Virata.

Historical evidence of cross-dressing can be traced back to ancient Egypt. Hatshepsut, was a woman who dressed and acted like a man and has been portrayed in statues and carvings wearing a symbolic royal beard.

Whereas, when a man cross-dressed, people resist more easily. As was found out in the following incident from history. An Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal in the fifth century B.C.E., used to spend much of his time in his palace, dressed in women's clothing and surrounded by concubines. As the news got known to more people, some of his nobles revolted. Although his cross-dressing was looked down upon as it showed feminine weakness, he fought long and bravely for two years before facing defeat and committing suicide. As once quoted by Rebecca Watson from "Straight CrossDressers", "Society celebrates anything that becomes masculine and rejects anything that becomes feminine." The attitude of society towards women who cross-dress versus the men who cross-dress is significantly contrary.



In India, those who cross-dress in the name of God are celebrated; however, those who cross-dress for themselves become the victim of ill-treatment. Festivals like the Chamayavilakku festival of Kerala celebrated at Kottankulangara Sree Devi Temple in Kollam, is an example of performing cross-dressing as a ritual for the Goddess.

During Uttar Pradesh's Jhansi wedding season, 'Launda Naach' is a local tradition done by performing cross-dressing. 'Launda Naach' – a phrase that defies simple translation into English – is a dance performed by young boys and men under 25, who dress up as women and basically, go wild to the beat of the dhol.

The 'behlol' is a ritual that's popular across UP's Bundelkhand. A women-only event, the 'behlol' is game played after the brides' bidaai, during which the women of the house join forces in role-playing, including the role of the groom.

Indian scriptures say "cross-dressing as a woman is one of the eight evils a man must shun" yet India has many local traditions and historical instances of cross-dressing.

Even in the present times, the new 'trend' of genderless fashion is looked down upon by most of society though it's more socially acceptable for women to use masculine products than it is for men to use feminine products. From wearing make-up to becoming a stay-at-home dad, men are constantly criticized for not being manly enough. Women in jeans and suits are considered normal but men wearing sarees and dresses is considered a sexual dysfunction.

Image Courtesy

<https://images.app.goo.gl/YdJdoVynw64n2Fuv9>

<https://images.app.goo.gl/ob8eBtbnxe1MABkn7>

# My Own Costume

## Priyadisha Chakraborty

The pretty colourful floral patches,  
Applied on tees and shirts,  
Amazed his eyes-a perfect match,  
Chose it, keeping social stigmas unheard.

Her wardrobe tells of coats and trousers,  
And not of sarees and shawls.  
Confidence wrapped in every collar,  
Rejects femininity, gives a masculine call.

Tolerating bullies for days, months and years,  
Wore, and spread it on digital channels.  
Netizens appreciated with a huge cheer!  
But still, some commented, "Bloody well."

Odia dance "Gotipua", history narrates,  
In which lads dressed in female attire  
To praise Lord Jagannatha-it relates,  
Which, 16th century society, highly admires.

"Drag queens" of Shakespearean theatre,  
Disguised in man's clothing,  
Received huge support from spectators-  
None devalued it as something loathing.

India's Razia Sultana to Rani Lakshmi Bai,  
Nationwide Lady armies to film stars,  
Billy Porter to Ranveer Singh, flew high,  
Perfecting cross-dress-for social purposes.

Restroyers of stereotypes, they are,  
Challenging gendered rules and norms,  
Favored their souls and hearts by far,  
Using non-conventional apparel forms.

State saviors, and stage entertainers: both we require.  
Cross-dressing: not a vice, but acts as medicines,  
A glorious societal outlook will we acquire  
If history and modern standpoint intertwine.



# The Woman

## Rinita Chakraborty

A shadow moved on to the stage -  
Donning a long gown, accessories and a pair of heels,  
Performing, dancing and singing, the best  
A thousand hearts to kill.  
Bravo lady! Bravo!  
What a performance you did!

Then, he revealed himself.  
Is he Mr. Rochester of "Jane Eyre"?  
Is he a Drag queen from Shakespeare's play?  
None, but a "Silent" actor to do this dare.  
Chaplin! It's you!  
Cross - dressed as a lady, a 1915's man!

It was a voyage to new way,  
It was a proto feminist message to modern day,  
It served human guidelines in style -  
From English to US Fred Karno, the cross-dressed as a lady, a  
1915's man!

It was a voyage to new way,  
It was a proto feminist message to modern day,  
It served human guidelines in style -  
From English to US Fred Karno, the cross dresser's exile.



# From Chapal Bhaduri To Chapal Rani

Archita Mahanty



# Cross-Dressing Moumita Das



# Unraveling Identities

## Srija Chakraborty

In a world where clothes define us,  
I'm suffocating under the weight of expectations  
A skirt's too revealing, trousers are safe but deemed masculine  
But harassment knows no bounds, no escape.  
Why must I choose between comfort and safety?  
Why can't I just be, without the constant scrutiny?  
A saree's deemed decent, but only if worn correctly  
A test of worth, a measure of my femininity  
Must I conform to societal norms, or risk being ostracized?  
A business suit, a symbol of power and authority  
But only for men, it seems, not for me.  
And then there's the label, the term that's whispered  
Crossdresser, a word that's both liberating and suffocating  
A word that acknowledges my desire to blur the lines  
To wear what makes me feel alive, regardless of gender norms  
But with that label comes fear, comes shame  
The weight of societal expectations, the risk of being rejected  
Who am I, really?  
Is it the clothes I wear, the labels I'm given?  
Or is it something deeper, something more profound?  
A soul that yearns, a heart that beats with its own rhythm  
But isn't it true that,  
Since medieval times, clothes have evolved,  
Juggling genders, roles, and emotions unresolved  
I'm tired of being defined by what I wear  
I want to be free to choose, to wear what makes me feel alive  
To be seen as more than just a collection of clothes  
I'll take control of my own identity  
I'll weave my own narrative, thread by thread  
I'll wear what makes me feel strong, what makes me feel beautiful  
And I'll do it without apology, without explanation.  
Because after all, my identity is only mine.



## Unbound in Thread

### Disha Raha

A thread of silk, a borrowed sleeve,  
A whispering lace in which I weave  
A tale of self, both bold and free,  
A truth unbound by he or she.  
The mirror sings in softened tones,  
No rigid shapes, no sculpted stones.  
For cloth is cloth, yet names confine,  
Who dares to say what's yours or mine?  
The world may mock, may sneer, may stare,  
Yet fabric knows no law, no heir.  
But should the heart obey such chains,  
When joy outshines the world's refrains?  
Let garments flow like rivers wide,  
Unchained by fear, untouched by pride.  
For style is soul, and soul is vast,  
Beyond the limits of the past.  
For in this garb, I stand complete,  
No borrowed rags, no false conceit.  
The dance of self is mine to twirl,  
A king, a queen a boundless pearl.

# Red Lipstick

Roopsha Roy

It was my sixteenth birthday,  
And mom got me aftershave.  
Her eyes twinkled, as flashed  
Her biggest smile my way.

I was almost glad,  
So was my mother,  
Our reasons?  
Vastly different from one another.

"A well-groomed beard's all you need  
Now that you're a man"  
How I wish I could have agreed,  
But the truth was far from that.

Most people thought it's just a phase,  
Many assumed I was ill,  
But to me it was my absolute truth,  
To me, it was God's will.

I really did like my birthday present,  
For I loathed having a beard.  
Now I could just shave it all off,  
I never felt like a real man, anyway.

A few years later, my mother found out.  
Was it from the way I walked, or the way I dressed?  
Although, I don't really know how,  
But I was more than just terrified,  
Somehow, I felt....ashamed.

It was right before my 21st birthday,  
I was sure, I was getting disowned,  
That's when I received a little brown parcel,  
And the label said, 'Mom'

As I unpacked it,  
My hands trembled, and a thought popped in my head,  
"Is this the last time Mom sends me something,  
Or am I getting ahead of myself?"  
But to my surprise, The package was surprisingly light,  
And within it was a red lipstick.

# List of Contributors

Nilanjana Sen (Cover Illustration) – Second Semester

Srija Chakraborty – Final Semester

Rikita Mitra – Final Semester

Priyadisha Chakraborty – Fourth Semester

Rinita Chakraborty – Fourth Semester

Archita Mahanty – Fourth Semester

Moumita Das – Final Semester

Disha Raha – Fourth Semester

Roopsha Roy – Fourth Semester





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We also express our sincere thanks to Sayan Mukherjee, an alumnus of the department, for providing technical support and assistance.

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The Head of the Department, Dr. Antara Mukherjee, and her team collaborated effectively to prepare the Digital Wall Magazine.



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