



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

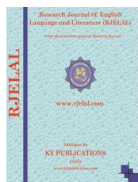
## DECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE AND NORMATIVITY IN DEVADUTT PATTANAİK'S *THE PREGNANT KING*

SANTHI KRISHNA

Assistant Professor (On Contract)

PRDS College of Arts and Science, Changanacherry

Email: [santhirakesh1988@gmail.com](mailto:santhirakesh1988@gmail.com)



Article Received:19/02/2021

Article Accepted: 26/03/2021

Published online:31/03/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.1.226](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.1.226)

### Abstract

The paper entitled "Deconstructing the Narrative and Normativity in Devadutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*" (2008) examines how deftly the author topples the narrative of (hetero) normative sexuality in mythology by twisting the narrative itself. Retelling some lesser known tales told in *The Mahabharata*, the novel subverts the feminine/ masculine binaries and hetero normative sexuality perpetuated in scriptures. Pattanaik skilfully weaves existing mythology into his story to give his point of view. All along the tale, he has blurred the line that divides man and woman. The title suggests the unfolding of male and female forms. Torn between fatherhood and motherhood, Yuvanashva begins a quest to console his mind and explores many other characters who experienced both manhood and womanhood in their bodies.

Keywords: gender fluidity, hetero normativity, queerness, performativity, mythology etc.

Human beings perceive the world in combination of binary opposition-good/bad, white/black, man/woman so on and so forth, and whatever fails to confirm to this binary structure is undermined to the margins and in due course effortlessly eliminated. *The Pregnant King* is an exploration of societies' recurrent efforts to silence all human behaviours that register an indirect violation of this structure which is steeped in sexual binaries. In the novel, on the other hand, myths are retold, manipulated, the chronological order of stories is shifted so as to subvert the norms. Pattanaik says in the "Preface" of this novel, literary creation "a deliberate distortion of tales in the epics" to have new characters and subplots that contribute towards "a celebration of stories narrated by our

ancestors that are rarely retold as they seem to challenge popular notions of normality" (34).

India's literary tradition is rooted in four thousand years old Vedas, Puranas, Tantras and Bhakti literatures. They do have close links with mythologies which are the study of people's subjective truths expressed in stories, symbols, and rituals. In Indian literature, Hindu mythology has a very significant role, which are taken to have deeper, often symbolic, meaning, and have been given a complex range of interpretations. The representation of queerness in Hindu mythology has acquired a very unique space of its own in the Indian literary texts. In Ancient India, there were over fifty words for non-heterosexual gender and sexualities in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil: *napunsaka*, *kliba*,

kinnara, pedi, pandaka. These references are found in veda, itihasa, purana, dharma-shastra, kama-shastra, natya-shastra, ayurveda, of the Hindus, as well as in Jain agamas and Buddhist pitakas. Today most are still used in local languages but in a pejorative way. According to some Sanskrit texts, this third sex or gender includes people who have conventionally called homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender people and intersex people. Vedas mention two different sexes of human beings as "Purusha" (male) and "Prakriti" (female) but also recognises existence of another sex-"Tritiya Prakriti" or "third gender". Sanskrit language that originated in India mentions the existence of four gender states-Pung (masculine), Stree (feminine), Kliba (neuter) and Ubhayalinga (common gender). Queer studies is not a western import, modern or sexual. The Vedas and Manusmriti speak about "gender identity" and "sexual identity" which reveal the presence of queerness in Indian contexts before many centuries.

Pattanaik is an Indian physician turned mythologist, author, theorist whose works focus on largely on the area of myth, religion and mythology. He is the first person to acknowledge, compile and comment on Queer ideas in Hindu metaphysics and mythology. Rejection or acceptance of society does not render any sexual or gender expression invalid in the cosmos. In the Hindu world, everything is a manifestation of the divine. Pattanaik's first work of fiction *The Pregnant King* is a re-telling of some selective episodes of The Mahabharata which produces a counter discussion to the heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality. It talks about experiencing life inside and outside. He raises important questions related to gender discourse wherein it is supposed that everyone should be given equal rights on common grounds. Only then we can describe ourselves as the most sensible creature on the planet. Among the lesser known sub-stories in The Mahabharata, one is told by the sage Lomasha to the exiled Pandavas. The novel revolves around Vallabhi prince Yuvanashva, who accidentally slips into to the dilemma of fatherhood and motherhood. Yuvanashva is a childless king who accidentally gets pregnant, later revealed that it was not an accident, but designed by

the ghosts of two Brahmin boys who were burned alive by the king. Several complications about separation of the sexes and differentiation between genders lie there deftly woven into the tale of Yuvanashva - the story of young Somvat who surrenders his genitals to become a wife of his friend Sumedha, Shikhandi, a daughter brought up as a son who fathered a child with borrowed penis, Arjuna who disguised as a woman in the court of king Virat after being cursed by a nymph, Aruni, the god of dawn, who masqueraded as a woman and was forced to accept the seed of both Indra and Surya, Ila, a god on full moon days and a goddess on new moon night, who experienced both fatherhood and motherhood, whose memory as the bard claim "was restricted to the rituals of temple" (Pattanaik 4) and Adi-natha, the teacher of teachers, worshipped as a hermit by some and as a enchantress by others.

As the basic trajectory of the story of Yuvanashva goes, he accidentally drinks an enchantment meant to impregnate his wives and as a result he conceives a child.. From here begins his trial, his desperate attempts at overcoming with his shattered sexual and gender identity. After having given birth to his son, Mandhata, he impregnates his second wife Pulomi who has begotten him a son Jayanta. But the king who always follows the path of Dharma now finds himself in a dilemma. "He looked at Jayanta. He will call me 'father', as he should. Then he looked at Mandhata. What should this one call me? Father or mother?" (238). The King who is supposed to be the incarnation of manhood and the preserver of Dharma longs till his last breath to be called 'mother' just once by Mandhata. It is the irony of the story that holds till the end of the novel. Yuvanashva asks,

What sounds sweeter, father or mother?" (239). He is lost between the obscure line that separates a 'man' from a 'woman' and a 'father' from a 'mother'. "I may look like a man but I am not sure that I am a man. . . . I have created life outside me as men do. But I have also created life inside me, as women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetter or free me?" (331-32)

Hence the king's identity is ruined by the society's demand of a paternal role as well as the maternal feelings sprouted in his soul. Desire has always been socially organised and regulated. Desires should only be addressed when one has to abide by the norms. He found himself out of the established, accepted and expected norms and behavioural patterns of gender. Society considers the man, woman categorization neither negotiable nor transferable. Heteronormativity is the norm in our society that validates sexual desire. When Yuvanashva says he would like to be both, Simantini argues that such shuffling of gender roles is forbidden. "To be a mother", she says, "you must be a woman. Are you saying you are a woman Arya? If you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne." (258) Mandhata's obsession with social codes never allowed him to address Yuvanashva as "mother" and harshly rejected by him. Shilavati, Yuvanashva's mother, is portrayed as a victim of gender roles. The Brahmin elders of Vallabhi are reluctant to accept a woman as the ruler. Rules dictated under the name of dharma throws a woman out of power. These repeated performances are only the re-enactment of already established meanings by the hegemonic structures.

Though the context of heterosexuality being the origin and foundation of societies heteronormative stability, the concept of queerness focuses on "mismatches between sex, gender and desire" (Jagose 3). It turned into a symbol of struggle against heterosexual culture, becoming a term of reference for those marginal sexualities that could not fit into the traditional discourse about gender and sexuality. Queer theory is not just confined to sexualities or sexual rights. It also questions established social, economic and political power relations. Butler's main argument in *Gender Trouble* is that the coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality-the natural-seeming coherence, for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies-is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, through their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological "core" gender (Butler 140). This is the sense in which Butler

famously theorizes gender, along with sex and sexuality, as performative. Butler talks about gender as an imitation for which there exist no original and which comes into play only through the act of repeated performance. In the process, the appearance of originality emerges only as an effect of repetition. This focus on repetition ultimately suggests that there can be no stable gendered or sexual identity.

The novel offers another instance of transsexualism through Sumedha and Somavat, a brahmin boy, who were imprisoned by Yuvanashva for impersonation as a Brahmin couple in the cow giving ceremony. On the night of their imprisonment, Somavat lamented his manhood. At that instance, Sthunakarna, a yaksh came to rescue Somvat and took away his manhood. Somvat's transformation as a woman Somvati in the night worsened the situation more. When his transformation came to light he was even more criticized. Her womanhood was blindly rejected. Yuvanashva proclaims "The Dharma-shastras say that roles and responsibilities of a Manava are determined at birth by his biology. . . .You are born a man. . . .You are forever a man" (159). After a long debate on Dharma, the judgement was given. They are set ablaze on the pyres.

In the final part of the novel Yuvanashva realizes the futility of his struggle with his identity and renounces the world and moves into the vanaprastha ashram. He gives up his royalty and moves to the forest as an ascetic. Yuvanashva's quest for solace consoles his mind after his journey to the forest. The stories of Shikhandi, Arjuna, Krishna, Bhangashvana and Adi-natha enlighten him as he is free from the snarling power games between men and women. One such figure is Shikhandi. She is Drupada's daughter brought up as a son who fathered a child with borrowed penis. During the Kurekshetra war, Bhisma recognised him as the reincarnation of Amba with whom he refused to fight. Accordingly, Arjuna hid behind Shikhandi in order to defeat the invincible Bhisma. Arjuna himself is an example of gender variance. When he refused Urvashi's amorous advances, the nymph Urvashi cursed him that he would become a eunuch. Arjuna took the name Brihanalla and dressed in

women's clothes and taught the arts of music, singing and dancing to the princess Uttara of the city ruled by king Virata. The greatest archer in Arya-vrita feels liberating to live as a eunuch. "Liberating actually. I could get away with anything. I could cry and dance and sing as I pleased. I had to answer to no woman or man. I was no one's husband or wife" (246).

Answering Yuvanashva's question of whether there is any man who would have experienced a women's emotions, Arjuna mentions lord Krishna, incarnation of Vishnu, who took the form of Mohini and married Iravan. This was in order to give Iravan the chance to experience love before his death, as he had volunteered to be sacrificed. Krishna had been mourning as Mohini for some time after Iravan's death. Arjuna told Yuvanashva, "We never spoke of that night ever again. But it was the only time I had seen Krishna cry. I have seen many widows cry. But none like Krishna" (253).

After the renunciation, moving to the forest, Yuvanashva was blocked by the bards. They have one last story for Yuvanashva. The story that has been never told, except by Bhishma to the Pandavas before he died. It was the story of Bhangashvana or Ila, the great ancestor of Yuvanashva who like the king had experienced motherhood. Ila was a king whose masculinity waxed and waned with the moon owing to the spell of Shiva. On full-moon days he was a complete man and on a new-moon light he was a woman. After changing the sex, Ila loses the memory of being the other gender. During one such period, Ila married Budh, god of the planet mercury, and she had begotten him children, both sons and daughters. Also he sired children out of his lawful wedlock. The bards tell Yuvanashva that his story will be erased from memory.

Numerous deities have been considered as patrons of third-sex or homoerotically-inclined people. This patronage can originate in mythological stories about the deity, or from religious practices and rituals. For example, in this novel Ileshwara has been worshiped as the god of fertility who showers blessings to men and women to become fathers and mothers. Finally, the story of Adi-natha, the teacher of all teachers, is narrated in which Yuvanashva

concludes his various questions regarding his identity. Yaja and Upayaja are students of Adi-natha. For Yaja, Adi-natha is a man, an ascetic and for Upayaja, Adi-natha is a woman, a nymph. But Adi-natha is neither a man nor a woman. Adi-natha is beyond our flesh, mutually interdependent two halves of the same idea. To Yaja, his master's teaching has revealed the truth of the soul, the unchanging truth within us that witnesses all things. He has chosen to represent this as a man. To Upayaja, his master's teaching has shown him the truth of the world that is constantly changing around us. He has chosen to represent this as a woman. Yuvanashva's heart flutters with new found wisdom. A new spirit dawns upon him and he thinks "He was nothing but soul wrapped in flesh; an unusual flesh that had created life within itself and outside. Flesh nevertheless. Mortal flesh that enjoyed, suffered, aged and would one day be ash. Within was the soul" (338-39). As Judith Butler says in her influential work *Gender Trouble*, by subverting gender norms and by refusing the characteristics socially assigned to a particular biological sex, binary gender categories could be deconstructed, and a multitude of possible gender 'positions' would then become available.

The novel thus underscores gender fluidity. Pattanaik deconstructs the narrative and weaves a new tale by distorting and inventing imaginary characters. The unheard voices and unnoticed sexual identities in the Mahabharata are brought to the fore and the pseudo notions of truth and normality are vehemently demolished in this tale.

#### WORKS CITED

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Print.
- Namrata. "Book Review: *The Pregnant King* by Devadutt Pattanaik." *Medium.com*, 1 Oct. 2015, [medium.com/content-shailee/book-review-the-pregnant-king-by-devdutt](https://medium.com/content-shailee/book-review-the-pregnant-king-by-devdutt)

---

[pattanaik-3c5c484c0b82](#). Accessed 2 August 2020.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Pregnant King*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008. Print.

Piantato, G. "How has queer theory influenced the ways we think about gender?" *Working Paper of Public Health*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-11, *Page Press*, doi:10.4081/wpph.2016.6948. Accessed 10 Dec. 2020.

Sanyal, Srija, and Abhik Maiti. "A Discordant Harmony: A Critical Evaluation of the Queer Theory from an Indian Perspective." *International Journal of Asian History, Culture and Tradition*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 15-31, doi. /10.19044/llc.v5no1a5. Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.

---