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Trading the Slippery Ground: Blurring lines of Gender Identities in Devdutt Pattanaik's 'The Pregnant King'

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Abstract

Post-millennial Indian English fiction witnessed a marked rise in the novels inspired by Indian mythology. A sudden spurt of mythological fiction underlines the changing trends in the themes, structures and genres of fiction in Indian literature. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Anand Neelkantan, Ashwin Sanghi, Rajiv Menon, Krishna Udayshankar, Sharath Komarraju, Kavita Kane and few more have attracted the attention of readers especially, the younger generation. The majority of writers mentioned above have tried to liberate marginalised voices suppressed by a dominant discourse which tried to subjugate LGBTQ communities.

The present paper scrutinises Devdutt Pattanaik's novel, 'The Pregnant King' (2008) in light of the 'power dynamics'. It also studies the gender-based discrimination and possible reasons behind it.

Keywords: Myth, Gender, LGBTQ, Dharma, Mahabharata

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Introduction

The Indian English novel is a well-established genre in the world literature now. The success of Indian authors in the global literary scenario is the real testimony of the literary merit they inherit from rich Indian tradition which gave birth to the Vedas, the Upanishads and

some of the literary masterpieces of the world. The 'Indian-ness' in this writing showcases the distinctive spirit of Indian ethos. Aeschylus had aptly remarked that his plays were slices from Homer's banquet. It can be said that a large part of Indian literature is slices of the Indian mythological stories latent

in the collective subconscious of the readers and the writers. The Indian myths are ever present in contemporary Indian consciousness.

At the turn of the millennium, the trends in Indian English writing have also changed. The writers have experimented with a variety of subjects to exploit their creative genius. The writings after 2000 are termed as Post-millennial literature. The novel selected for the present study is a part of Post-millennial fiction, which is gaining popularity and reception of the contemporary reading public.

In an article “Myth and the Indian Writer in English”, noted scholar and critic P. Lal laments the lack of use of myths in the writings of Indian English literature. He recommends that Indian writer in English should not 'commit pen to paper until he has spent ten years of his adult life carefully pondering the Indian classics, learning the Indian tradition, and observing the Indian myth' (Naik, 18). P. Lal is of the view that unless the Indian mythology is not absorbed by the writer, he or she cannot be a good writer. He also laments that the word 'myth' is always related to a pagan world view. According to P. Lal, 'myth holds communities and races more strongly than language, territory, and government; myth provides insights into the mysteries of life and death with a poetic richness that has startling truth and immediacy. There is no secular substitute to myth (Naik, 15)

Devdutt Pattanaik is a leading

mythologist and popular columnist of present times. He has written extensively on the application of myths in contemporary life. His popularity rests on the modern retellings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. His only novel 'The Pregnant King' (2008) is an essential instance of the application of gender theory to Indian mythology. The novel tells the story of King Yuvanasha, ruler of Vallabhi. He mistakenly drinks a potion prepared by Sage Yaja and Upayaja. The drink was made to make King Yuvanashva's wife pregnant. But, the King mistakenly drinks it and becomes pregnant. The story is an interesting study of blurring lines of gender identities. The novel throws light on the LGBTQ communities by juxtaposing the mythical queer characters like Shikhandi, Brihannada, King Illeshwara, and so on. The relevance of the present novel grows multi-fold when the Supreme Court of India decriminalized LGBTQ relations by rejecting Article 377 of the Indian Constitution recently.

Devdutt Pattanaik has become successful in bringing to the fore the power of myth in the fields like Management, Corporate and overall national discourse. He gave currency to the word 'myth' so much so that the foreign educated corporate and policymakers are showing interest in Indian mythology. The jargon-spewing corporate intelligentsia is reading Pattanaik's Business Sutras. The argument given by Devdutt Pattanaik runs thus- if you want to

market or manage the specific community, try to understand their mythology. Through mythology, one gets to know the culture, thinking patterns, customs and value system. This approach is unique to the Indian Management, Corporate and Business scenario.

In the preface of the book *Shikhandi and other Tales, They Don't Tell You* (2014) Devdutt Pattanaik observes, 'When two adult men hold their hands in public in the US, they are deemed gay, not so in India. Cultural filters are essential to understand queerness. Also, we need an increased awareness that these filters can sometimes choke voices'.

The novel is an interesting tour de force of unravelling the zones of epistemological perceptions specific to different genders. The problems of LGBTQ communities in the period of the Mahabharata are studied in the light of modern sensibilities of our times. The idea of Dharma, which is taken in the Indian context as 'duty' is extensively studied in the light of Devdutt Pattanaik's novel. A utopian world view of an imagined society is envisioned in the novel where there will be no discrimination based on gender. The galaxy of characters like King Yuvanashva, Shilavati, Keshini, Shikhandi, Illa and a few more have been studied in the light of marginalisation. This paper attempts to redefine the slippery nature of 'gender identities' which are difficult to classify into binaries of 'man', 'women' and 'other'.

The *Pregnant King* opens with the locale of Vallabhi, a small but prosperous kingdom between Hastinapura and Panchala on the banks of river Kalindi. There is a temple of Illeshwara which was established by King Ilalong ego. The temple is known for blessing the childless parents to have children. Vallabhi is ruled by Pruthalashva. When Drupada, King of Panchala, comes to visit Illeshvar temple, Pruthalashva welcomes him and makes the arrangements of Drupad's and his wife Soudamini's visit to the temple. Draupad has killed six sons because they were no match for Drona's students, i.e. Pandava. Drupada has great enmity with Drona, and he wants to father a child who will kill Drona. He wants to receive blessings of Illeshwara for the son. Lord Illeshwara blesses Drupada with a girl Shikhandi. Drupada declares the birth of a son in desperation. No one says that it was a girl out of fear of King, and the girl is brought up as a male child. This thread of the story gets united at the end of the novel when Mandhata marries Shikhandi's girl Amba. Devdutt Pattanaik weaves several stories which have the birth of queer or transgendered characters in the novel. The opening episode of the novel depicts the birth of Shikhandi, who is born as a girl but bought up as a boy.

In Indian culture, it has been an accepted practice of performing Yagna, Sacrifice to fulfil one's wishes. In the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, there were umpteen instances of this kind. The birth of

Lord Ram and his siblings have been an output of certain Yagna called 'Putrakameshti'. A well trained and expert priest is essential and advised to perform the elaboraterituals of Yagna. Yuvanashva invites Yaja and Upayaja for this job. They come to Vallabhi and take charge of the Yagna. They use their magical and scriptural powers to invoke the gods to their help. They have been summoned to Vallabhi to perform Yagna so that the queens of Yuvanashva would produce an heir to the kingdom.

Yuvanashva announces that he would donate cows to Brahmins to earn merit so that he can father a child. This news spreads in the neighbouring states. Brahmin couples came across Ila-vrita in hordes to receive cows. Somvat and Sumedha come to Ilavrita in disguise as husband and wife. Somvat comes as Somavati. It has been pointed out by Pulomi in the cow offering ceremony. The couple has been arrested for this gross mistake and is confined in the dungeons. There comes a Yaksha called Sthunakarna, who has a strange offer. Sthunakarna says 'I am Sthunakarna. A Yaksha; Maker of riddles; Guardian of treasures; Follower of Kubera; Resident of Alaka-puri; I can go wherever I please- through walls, into dreams. Rules of Manavas do not apply to me. It was I who made Shikhandi a man and a husband. I can make you a woman and a wife'. (The Pregnant King:127)

Yaksha narrates the story of

Shikhandi to Somvat and Sumedha. Shikhandi is born a female child, but her father Drupada brought her up as a boy. Shikhandi marries Hiranyavarni, Princess of Dasharn. On the first wedding day, she comes to know the secret of Shikhandi's being women. Feeling cheated, she returns to her father. Her father is angry with Drupada and wages war against him.

Meanwhile, Shikhandi feels very humiliated and tries to commit suicide to escape further humiliation. Sthunakarna comes to the rescue of Shikhandi and offers manhood to him. Shikhandi comes back and proves his manhood.

Through this story, Devdutt Pattanaik changes the perspective with the changing gender roles. He portrays the mental turmoil and oppression that comes with the changed gender. Pattanaik is also interested in the possibility of the existence of transgendered like Shikhandi in ancient society. He weaves a fabric of queer stories together to make a collage of transgendered, LGBTQ communities to hear their marginalised voices.

In the book *Shikhandi and other Tales, They Don't Tell You* (2014) Devdutt Pattanaik says that: Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions of maleness and femaleness. There are stories of men, who become women, and women who become men, and women who create children without

men, and of creatures who are neither this, nor that, but a little bit of both. There are many words in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil such as Kliba, Napumsaka, Mukhabhaga, Sanda, Panda, Pandaka, Pedi that suggest a long familiarity with queer thought and behaviour. It is common to either deny the existence of such fluidity in our stories, or simply locate them in the realm of supernatural or point to law books that, besides endorsing patriarchy and casteism, also frown upon queer behaviour. The stories are repeatedly told and shown. Gentle attempts, perhaps, of wise sages to open up stubborn finite minds and lead them towards infinity.

Devdutt Pattanaik (2014) says that Queer people is an umbrella term for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered and intersexed people, cross-dressers, hijras etc. who did not fit into the rigid definitions of male and female, come out in parades refusing to conform and stay invisible for the benefits of others. The world changed forever. It is the world we now live in.

The episode of burning pyres of Somvat and Sumedha has far-reaching implications on the storyline of the novel. The subplots of Drupada's visit to Ileshwara temple, Shikhandi, Somavati, Sudymna, Nara and Narayana are significant to denote the queer and transgendered identities. It is the starting point of the transformation of Yuvanashva into a pregnant king. The ghosts of Sumedha and Sumati play a pivotal role in giving the

magic potion to King when his throat is parching with thirst. The spirits direct the king to drink the potion. Yuvanashva sees the earthenware with elaborate geometrical patterns around its neck. He picks it up and drinks it. The potion has started showing effects on Yuvanashva's body. The king becomes pregnant. It is a crucial moment in the novel. It can be inferred that it is the curse of Somavati and Sumedha behind Yuvanashva's transformation as a pregnant king. This controversial pregnancy raises eyebrows of Shilavati when Asanga tells her that Yuvanashva must have accidentally drunk the magic potion produced by Yaja and Upyaja to make the queens pregnant. Shilavati is astonished and rushed to Yuvanashva's chamber.

The power structure comes in to play when Shilavati tries to kill or cut the lump in Yuvanashva's abdomen. Asanga makes her understand the fact that she cannot kill the grandchild. Sheelavati raises some questions:

'If it is a child, as you say it is, then what will Yuvanashva be after he gives birth to it, that is if he survives childbirth? A woman? A half-woman? What? Who will accept such a man as the king? It will be the end of his kingship. And that child, a man born of a man. Everybody will consider it a monster. Nobody will accept him as a king. If this child survives, I will have a son and a grandson, but Vallabhi will have no king. I cannot

let that happen. Kill that thing in my son's thigh. Do it, Asanaga or I will do it myself.'(The Pregnant King:195)

Shilavati is worried about what people would say. Her son would be a butt of jokes across the country. He could not make any woman pregnant, so he got himself pregnant.

In his essay 'The Order of Discourse', Foucault talks about how the discourse is regulated by power structures. He opines, 'in every society the production of discourses at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality (Foucault 1999:52)

The royal codes and conducts are fixed. The King cannot be pregnant. But in this unusual and strange case if King is pregnant, then the problem of public perception is important. Shilavati represents power structures. King's pregnancy changes the dynamics of power structures in the kingdom. His pregnancy ends his right of ruling the kingdom. The change of gender can invalidate Yuvanshava's birth right to rule the kingdom as he becomes a woman.

In the book *Shikhandi and other Tales, They Don't Tell You* (2014) Devdutt Pattanaik laments that there are no significant retellings of

the epics told from the perspectives of trans-gender characters such as Shikhandi.

Shikhandini, who became Shikhandi, is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female-to-maletranssexual, as per body goes through a very specific change genitally. But retellers avoid details and end to portray him/her either as a eunuch (castrated male), a male-to-female transsexual (a man who rejects his male biology), a male-to-female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Amba) in his past life. It reveals a patriarchal bias even in the queer space.

No author has yet explored the relationship of Draupadi, the complete woman, and Dhristadhyumna, the complete man, with Shikhandi, who is neither a complete woman nor a complete man. Who will inherit Drupada's throne? The elder Shikhandi or, the younger Dhristadhyumna? And what about Shikhandi's relationship with his wife? How does it feel to know that your husband was a woman on the wedding night and then is a man in the following nights, sporting someone else's genitalia?

Foucault's discussion of external exclusion is very relevant in the study of marginalisation. In his article 'The Order of Discourse' Foucault demonstrates the procedures of exclusions in a

discourse. The procedures he suggests, consist of three external exclusions, and they are taboo; the distinction between the mad and the sane; and the distinction between true and false.

Taboo is a form of prohibition since it makes it difficult to speak about certain subjects such as sexuality and death and constrains the way that we talk about these subjects. The second external exclusion is the distinction between the speech of the mad and the sane, as Foucault has shown in his book *Madness and Civilisation* (1976) since the speech of those people who have been considered to be insane is not attended to. It is treated as if it did not exist. [...] In this sense, only the statements of those considered sane are attended to. The division between true and false is the third exclusionary practice described by Foucault; those in positions of authority who are seen to be 'experts' are those who can speak the truth. Those who make statements which are not in positions of power will be considered not to be speaking the truth. The notion of the truth must not be taken as self-evident; he shows in his work how truth is something which is supported materially by a whole range of practices and institutions: universities, government departments, publishing houses, scientific bodies and so on. All these institutions work to exclude statements which they characterise as false, and they keep in circulation those statements which they characterise as false, and they keep in circulation those

statements which they characterise as true. (Mills, 57-58)

The above statement is relevant to analyse the exclusion of Yuvanashva based on his gender identity. His pregnancy is seen as an 'illness'. He is denied his right to rule unless he fathers a child. The discourse which has been manipulated by Shilavati is the testimony of Yuvanashva's marginalisation. The people who control the discourse are considered as speaking truth. The discourse declares Yuvanshava as insane. His opinions are not taken into consideration.

The present study is extremely relevant when the Supreme Court of India has given a verdict by decriminalising same-sex marriages on 6th September 2018, on Article 377 of the Indian constitution, which criminalised same-sex relations. The court has underlined the supremacy of 'constitutional morality' over 'societal marginality'. Justice Malhotra, one of the judges of the Bench who has given this historic verdict says, "History owes an apology to the members of this (LGBTQ) community and their families for the delay in providing redressal for the ignominy and ostracism that they have suffered through centuries. (Indian Express 2018: Online). The above verdict is considered as the major victory of LGBTQ rights in the country. This chapter throws light on the mythological characters such as Yuvanashva, Shikhandi, Brihannala, Illeshwara etc. which are marginalised based on their gender identities.

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