Transgressive Desires in Indian Mythology: A Reading of *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*

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Abstract: Stories of a particular time always resonate with its society. In the Indian milieu, stories have been passed down from one generation to the next with certain ideological modifications. These versions change from one another based on the time, space and socio-cultural matrix of the community they are germinated from. Many Postmodernist Indian writers in English dismantle authority and sexist values by breaking stereotypes. This paper attempts to explore how notions of agency and victimhood are brilliantly dealt within these modern retellings of Indian epics. The paper will also focus on establishing the idea that the marginalized like sexual minorities and gender queer persons shared a comparatively better position in the prehistoric times in South Asia. Instead of marginalization queerness was deemed as 'natural' or sometimes celebrated. To validate this argument, the paper has analysed Devdutt Pattanaik's book *Shikhandi and The Other Tales They Don't Tell You*. It is a collection of short stories from several myths across India which express the suppressed voices in the Grand Narratives of Indian mythology. The author exposes the queer presence in Indian folklores which describe about the gays, lesbians and hijras of the society which accepts queer behaviour, be it cross dressing or homosexual intimacies, as perfectly natural.

Intex Terms: Queer Narrative, Folklore, Hegemony, Myth, Ideology, Retelling, Grand Narrative.

In a nation where we still continue to frown upon the queer community; there arises a need to look back to a bygone era of folklores and ancient myths which reaffirm to an idea of a way more tolerant India. The socially dictated ways of conduct expected men and women to behave themselves in accordance with what is normal. Any deviancy from the dictated ways of life was deemed as 'abnormal' or the 'other'. The rigid programming of the human community suppresses the voices from margins who fail to express themselves especially in the matters of gender identities and sexual desires. Consequently such marginal communities confront social stigma, humiliation and stereotyping on a daily basis. Here comes the significance of literature to make the people aware of a 'threshold status' or 'in-betweenness' in the binaries of gender as something quite normal.

In every society mythology has always occupied an important place, where cultures have always asked for reference from each other. The Greek term mythology refers to the collective experiences and the spoken stories of people. According to Herbert Jennings Rosays "Myth is a cognitive structure analogue to language through which primitive people organise their experience".(37) Though the oral transmission through generations makes mythology modified over the years, it retains the essence of tradition and culture intertwined with collective experience, social structures and the knowledge system of the community. Just like mythology the notion of queerness is also very much a part of the collective unconscious since ancient times. North American tribal concept of "Two Spirits", the effeminate flower prince Xochipilli who is the patron of pleasures and same sex eroticism, *Seid* in Viking mythology, who explores the feminine and involves in cross dressing, the androgynous Inari in the Japanese Shinto Mythology, Dionysus, the God of hermaphrodites or Aphrodite, the goddess of love and the ally of homosexuals in Greek mythology, *linga purana* or *Ardhanareeswara* (Lord Shiva in the Image of a pallus in a vagina) representing the 'inbetweenness in Indian mythology, affirm that mythology had no boundaries. Therefore the primordial mythological works and folklores across the globe speak of recognition rather than that of rejection.

Though we can trace a substantial amount of queer literary writing in India, the number of theoretical or academic work dealing with queer presence in mythology is rather slender. Amara Das Wilheim's *Tritiya Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Condition through Hinduism* explores the queerness in ancient Indian texts. Ruth Vanitha's *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Cuture and Society* is a collection of essays on varied topics ranging from homoeroticism to Kamasutra. *Shikhandi and Other Tales They don't Tell You* by Devdutt Pattanaik explores the dynamics of

sexuality and its presence in ancient Hindu mythology. Shikhandi speaks about the celebration of differences in sexualities and gender identities without ascribing them any taboos. The work showcases how mythology is more receptive in terms of gender performativity and how it repudiates the compartmentalization of femininity and masculinity. The several short stories in this collection proclaim that ancient India cared for differences in sexual orientations and gender identities. Being an exclusive fusion of tales and cultural practices, the work provides a comprehensive idea about a eunuch, transsexual, transvestite, transgender, intersex hermaphrodite, homosexuals, effeminate gaymen etc. Each story is an attempt to rectify the generalised notion about the LGBT community and to celebrate the uniqueness of each category. The book thus celebrate a past where homoerotic gestures co-existed with heterosexual intimacies rather comfortably without any camouflage.

Shikhandi comes in two parts. Part one 'Appreciating Queerness' introduces the reader to the notion of queerness and the immense diversity present in mythologies across the world that subvert the heterosexual discourses. The second part discusses the retelling of tales from multiple sources such as mythology, folklore, epics, Tamil Temple Lore, ancient collection of Tamil poetry and the oral tradition of Bengal and Gangetic plains. Tracing back the origin of queerness in Indian mythology, *Shikhandi* compares queerness in other ancient mythologies such as Aztec, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Viking, Persian, Japanese Shinto etc. To begin with *Shikhndi* explains 'symbols', how symbols create meaning within communities and how these symbols are subjected to change in the passage of time. According to the author mythology is a "study of people's subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals." (Pattanaik 35) As mentioned before there are thirty stories in the book from various mythologies. The work begins with the most important one being the titular story of *Shikhandi* from Mahabharata.

Shikhandi had been born in a previous life as a woman named Amba, who was the oldest daughter of the King of Kashi. Along with her two sisters, she was forcibly taken from their wedding by Bhishma, as punishment to the king of Kashi for not inviting the nobility of Hastinapur to the event. After defeating several kings, including Shalva, the King of Saubala, Bhishma presented the princess for marriage to Vichitravirya, the prince of Hastinapur. Vichitravirya could marry only two of them, because Amba told Bhishma that she had already fallen in love with Shalva. Upon her request Bhishma sent Amba to Shalva with pomp but Shalwa rejected her in shame of losing the war against Bhishma. On returning to Bhishma, Amba demanded him to marry her, but Bhishma refused due to his vow of celibacy. Furious at the insult, she compelled other kings to wage a war with Bhishma. Afraid of incurring the wrath of the great warrior, no one came forward. Thereupon Amba underwent severe penance to Lord Shiva for a boon to cause Bhishma's death. Though her prayers were answered she was doubtful if she could accomplish the task as being a woman with no military training. He responded that her future incarnation would be the one to actually bring about Bhishma's downfall. Eager to bring this about, Amba killed herself and was reborn as Shikhandini, the eunuch child of King Drupada. During the battle in Mahabharata, Shikhandi or rather the soul of Amba seeks revenge from Bhishma as she is a woman and a man in the same body hence could enter the battlefield. The tone of gender fluidity evoked by this story is further discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet*. The author throws light upon the patriarchal ideologies and hypocrisy in presenting Shikhandi as a eunuch wherein reality Shikhandi is a transsexual. Differences in sexual orientations and gender identities were never considered as a taboo in ancient India. Capricious sexual attitudes made the society to set certain restrictions which in the passage of time became taboos. The other stories included in the collection are also equally exciting. The stories on Mahadeva, Vishnu, Kali, Gopeshwar, Aruna and Aravan are about the transformation of gender identities. Interestingly the story "Vishnu" indicates women are objectified as seductresses. It shows how patriarchal values operate within society in multiple ways. In the story "Chudala", Chudala's husband Shikidhvaja was in constant exploration of wisdom. Though Chudala was a wise woman, he did not admit her wisdom due to her gender status. As woman she was branded as unreasonable. Comprehending this Chudala changes herself to a man, as Kumbhaka an ascetic. Not knowing this Shikidhvaja becomes recipient of the wisdom passed on by Kumbhaka, a man. Later on when Shikidhvaja came to know that it was his wife, he recognized that gender does not limit anyones wisdom. This reveals the patriarchal bias where women are regarded less efficient than men and in order to prove one's competency one has to portray oneself as a male. Thus "Chudala" interrogates the stereotyping of women only as a procreating machine or sexual object. In the latter story "Madhata, whose mother was a man", Yuvanasva, a man delivers a child and the author raises a critical question at this juncture, "if a man uses medical science to bear a child and lactate, how would modern society treat him?" (81)

In "Bhangashvana, who was a mother and a man" Bhangashvana is cursed into a woman. Later when being asked about which gender would he prefer to be, he said he would rather be a woman since women enjoy

more sexual pleasures than men. Women were always restricted from openly expressing their sexual desires and in doing which they can be labelled on their character. The interesting part of the story is that Bhangashvana openly talks of sexual pleasures enjoyed by women which again affirms that Indian society not only is open about penetrative sexuality but also about non-normative sexualities. In stories such as "Ratnavali, who became the companion of her female friend" and Urvasi, who was born of no woman" tinges of same sex love can be identified in the close ally between Ratnavali and Brahmani and Nara and Narayana. In the kind of camaraderie that bonds Ratnavali and Brahmini that might not be sexual in nature, we can apply 'lesbian continuam' put forward by Adrienne Rich. The tale "Arjuna who was temporarily castrated for showing restraint" is about Arjuna being a eunuch and transvestite dancer named Brihannala in the last year of banishment serving a curse made to him by the celestial woman Urvasi. Arjuna was cursed as he refused to make love to Urvasi. This story takes up issues of female erotic desires boldly. Though being questioned on being articulate about her innate desires, she expresses it. Pattanaik points out the many examples of transvestism recurrent in Hindu mythology. In "Bhima, who wore women's clothes to punish", Bhima crossdresses as Draupadi to discipline Kichaka for his lust. "Vijaya who wore women's clothes to conquer" talks about Krishna and Arjuna cross dressing to attain sacred objects. Throughout ancient folktales there are stories on Krishna's crossdressing which again affirms the acceptability of being non-normative. The story "Samba, who wore women's clothes as a prank" again talks about cross-dressing. The story of Bahuchara upholds the issues of a transgender and echoes with the contemporary incidents of forceful weddings of queer persons to heterosexuals. According to Neha Arora "…their existence express the urgent need of a new prism of gender to develop new perspective about sex and gender and to understand their respective roles in society."(1) People who live on the outside of the fixed binaries and express non-normative desires were listed as criminal tribe during British rule . Many studies have proven that this 'othering' is purely the aftereffect of colonialism whereas India had an inclusive culture in terms of sexualities and gender identities. The hijras a particular sect of transgender persons in India and South Asia have been ostracised , callously stereotyped for their sexuality.

"Ram, who included all in his kingdom" is the last tale in this collection and it sets an optimist tone of inclusion and closure to the work. It is taken from the oral tradition of hijras. Ram the incarnation of Lord Vishnu was leaving Ayodhya for fourteen years of exile. On his departure he saw people following him. So he asked the men and women to return home. But hijras who were not sure about their gender status stayed back. On his return he saw them waiting by the riverside and on questioning they replied Rama asked only men and women to go back and they were neither of them. Impressed by their sincerity Rama blessed them with a boon, saying "never again shall you be invisible."(Pattanaik 173) Hence till date hijras presence and their blessings are sought after marriage and childbirth.

The repealing of section 377 under Indian Penal Code has opened up fresher avenues for the LGBT community. The repealing came out in September 6th 2018 has motivated many queer persons to come out of the closet without any fear. They began reclaiming the public spaces by parading for Pride Marches and waving rainbow flags. Prof. Raj Rao, queer rights activists and probably India's first gay theorist discusses the issues of homophobia in the society in *Criminal Love? Queer theory, Culture and Politics in India.* Indian society is moving towards acceptance with the involvement of the judiciary and various law implementing agencies. In 2014, a historical judgement was made by the Supreme Court of India by legally giving recognition to the third gender which made them strive for education and applying for jobs. The hijra community needs special care for their upward social mobility with a particular focus on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, medication on sexual issues and financial assistance for sexual Reassignment Surgeries. Most of the transgender rights activists like A. Revathi, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Kalki Subramaniam, Living Smile Vidya, Manobi Bandhopadhyay etc. advocate for the better educational opportunities of the gender queer persons. All of them in their self-narrative works discuss the importance of education as a prime factor which can facilitate their upliftment and also motivate them to come out of the ghettos other than begging in the streets and being sex workers. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's memoir *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* unapologetically comments on the rigid social norms and attacks the comfortable binary zone. Writers like Revathi and Vidya throw light on the marginalised section of the society and also goes deep into the psychological trauma she took to transform herself biologically. Serena Nanda's *Neither Man, Nor Woman* speaks about the silenced community of hijras and provide a platform for them to be articulate about their sexuality and identity

To conclude *Shikhandi* subverts the stereotyped portrayal of the third gender as the 'other'. The wide spectrum of stories reflects ancient India's approach to queerness. These stories do not frown upon any of the sexualities, intimacies and gender identities, which reveals the kind of tolerance that ancient India society must have possessed. Not only Indian mythological texts, but the sculpture of Khajuraho and other temple engravings

points out homoerotic gestures. According to Pramod K. Nayar, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity can be identified in several of these stories where the roles become prone to "negotiation and alteration"(91) contrary to the contemporary world. Mythology is an immense repository which invites researchers to explore many avenues. *Shikhandi* being a sincere attempt to trace the much celebrated queer presence in ancient Indian mythology becomes a reference in the fight for social acceptance of the LGBT community in India

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