



Motherhood and Desire: A Postcolonial Literary Interpretation of Devdutt Pattanaik's Works

Neeraj Sharma Research Scholar, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Madhav University Rajasthan

Dr. Ruchi Thakar Research Guide, Faculty of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Madhav University Rajasthan

Abstract

The concepts of gender and biological sex both play significant roles in determining human behaviour. Unveiling the underlying power structures that actively maintain gender binarism stems from a significant shift in theoretical perspective. Similarly, postmodern feminist and queer theorists question gender as a social construct rather than a natural expression of biological sex. Gender nonconformity disrupts the traditionally constructed gender binary by privileging traditional masculinity and granting it power and privilege associated with gendered behavior. However, the definition of gender transgression varies across cultures and historical periods. The perpetuation of gender binarism and hierarchical power systems is deeply rooted in Western culture. These power structures are embedded in entrenched social norms and government policies. This paper focuses on identifying forms of gender transgression and their ideological implications. Drawing on insights from queer theory and postcolonial studies, this paper emphasizes the importance of a two-pronged theoretical approach. Following recent research that redefines queer discourse, this paper, under the spotlight of postcolonial theory and narratives, argues that re-examining mythological queer fiction can challenge biases in Western queer paradigms. Queer narratives from the South Asian subcontinent highlight the importance of race, class, religion, diaspora, ethnicity, and linguistic structures in the representation of non-binary gender and sexual orientation.

Through an in-depth reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological text, **The Pregnant King**, this study circumvents Western models of queer identity, attempting to reposition transformative non-Euro-American contexts and grant queer as a multifaceted critical construct legal standing.

Keywords: desire, post-colonial, Queer, South Asian mythology, gender contravention

Introduction

Literature and mythology are inextricably linked. Neither can be reduced to the other, nor can they exist in isolation: Mythology is consistently an "essential component of literature" (Frye, 1989, p. 21). It provides a source of multi-dimensional stories for the fictional world of literature, and mythological elements are expanded, refined, or rewritten in the creative and reception processes. As Aristotle's **Poetics** suggests, mythology provides the narrative strategies upon which literary development depends (Aristotle, 1996, VI. 1450a). In this context, "mythos" refers to the plot, which "constitutes a unified structure of necessary and possible actions" (Baubach,

2009, p. 1). Furthermore, mythology symbolizes the origin of literature, which is rooted in oral tradition and the performance of literary texts, as the etymology of the word "mythos" indicates. In discussing Aristotle's view of the term "mythos," Northrop Frye conceives of mythology as "the structural organizing principle of literary forms" (Frye, 1965, p. 341). Although mythology is rooted in oral tradition, it relies on the transformation of its imagery and "knowledge" into other art forms, and literature, in order to be preserved and transmitted, thus enabling it to be understood and utilized in different cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts.

Literature has become an ideal vehicle for the dissemination of mythological stories. Literature enables people to understand the mythological elements present in works of art and ultimately facilitates their reintegration into the literary dimension, making them "readable" and "interpretable." Therefore, the transmission of myths is both a component of literature and its foundation. Myths and fictional stories have had a profound impact on the human psyche and society across different cultures, as well as on the literary works created by those societies. The renowned myth critic Robert Graves points out: "Myths have two main functions. The first is to answer those perplexing questions that children ask:

Who created the world? How will the world end?... The second function of myths is to justify existing social institutions and explain traditional rituals and customs" (Graves, 1968, p. 5). Literary works, in particular, define the legitimacy of human existence in society. Through ideas and generalizations, they articulate the representation or re-representation of the social world. This paper keenly explores how mythological figures continue to thrive in contemporary literature, a striking contrast to their long history. Today, mythological stories are told through various media, including music, printed texts, comics, films, computer games, and television programs.

Ancient stories spread at an unprecedented pace, reaching more people than ever before. However, the various themes within mythological stories have captivated readers and writers for generations. A popular trend in contemporary Global South writing is the retelling of myths in entirely new and modern ways. Ancient stories are being presented in new forms and integrated with modern literary works. Modern writers interpret these stories in different ways; they reinterpret these traditional myths from entirely new perspectives, thus subverting the rigidity of the original stories.

The enduring and retellable nature of myths is a hallmark of understanding different cultures, helping to depict the transformations of these cultures. Myths serve as a bridge, spanning and connecting the boundaries of fiction, imagination, religious practices, and social customs. The creative use of myths encompasses discussions in literature, visual culture, religion, as well as philosophy, science, and politics. In Lorna Hardwick's analysis of myths and their depiction in modern literature, she notes: "Different versions of particular myths are sometimes popular, sometimes dormant. The reshaping of myths marks shifts and conflicts in the way people view the world" (Hardwick, 2017, p. 12). The **Dictionary of Classical Mythology**, edited by Rosemary Wright, is a valuable resource containing retellings of myths from ancient Greece and Rome. In the preface to the dictionary, Wright notes:

The different versions of narratives and genealogies in this material are an inherent characteristic of studying this subject, as these variations are preserved in oral cultural traditions and then adapted to suit the literary contexts of family and urban propaganda, drama and poetry, the evolution of rituals, and the expansion of knowledge

about the material and human aspects of the inhabited world... We have preserved not only these narratives but also ancient attempts to explore and explain them through allegory, personification, and Euhemerism (an ancient form of reductionism), often associated with a healthy skepticism (Wright, 2012).

To influence public belief, myths are often combined with legends, history, and folktales. The West has a long history of incorporating myths and folklore into literary works. Every genre of English literature incorporates Greek mythology and biblical stories to deepen the meaning of the works. This practice continues to this day. The works of contemporary poets, novelists, and artists such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and William Golding are heavily infused with myths and legends. We find that myths and folklore have a long history, especially in India. Indian mythology has a profound background, which has enabled Indian writers to inherit and develop it in various literary forms. Storylines from the Upanishads, Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and various Buddhist scriptures are incorporated into Indian English literature, enriching it further. Many myths, including those found in the Puranas, epics, and Vedic texts, form the basis of Hindu cultural truths. Indian mythology enriches Indian culture, distinguishing it from other cultures of the world. Patnaik's "The Pregnant King" is one of the modern retellings of stories of marginality and gender transgression, in which the author connects these stories with mythological evidence and characters. Mark E. Workman, in his article "The Role of Myth in Modern Literature," defines the significance of myth, stating, "If myth can be used metaphorically to juxtapose and thus expand our cognitive categories, it can also be used transformatively to utterly dismantle these same modes of perception" (Workman, 1981, p. 43). "Myths can serve literature both as metaphors and as allegories" (Raj, 2017, p. 309), which highlights the importance of mythology in literature.

Review of Literature

In her study, "The Body at the Margins: Interpreting the Excess of the Body in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*" (2022), Rajani Mujeral explores the male body of the protagonist, Yuvanashva, during his childbirth experience, highlighting the materiality of the body. Pattanaik's narrative places the body at the center of the discussion, depicting a reversal that occurs in a non-mainstream space. The author concludes that Pattanaik celebrates the excessiveness of the body in his retelling of the story (Mujeral, 2022).

The paper by Pushpendra Singh and Divya Joshi (2020), "The Psychological Journey of Yuvanashva and Shilavati in *The Pregnant King*", focuses on the psychological journey of Yuvanashva in the novel. This paper explores the psychological trauma suffered by both Yuvanashva and Shilavati (Singh and Joshi, 2020).

The paper by Ritu Raj Choudhary and Yashoda Verma (2020), "Deconstructing Double Marginalization in Psychology and Character: A Social Constructivist Analysis of Devdutt Pattanaik's 'The Pregnant King'," analyzes gender and psychological issues from the perspective of double marginalization. This paper re-examines the complex realm of mythology from a modern perspective, aiming to deconstruct queer identity and challenge the inherent notions of a heteronormative society (Choudhary & Varma, 2020). Vaishnavi. P's (2019) article, "Exploring the Truth of Gender Power through Devdutt Pattanaik's 'The Pregnant King'," elucidates the concepts of male and female gender roles through the character of Yuvanashva. The author not only challenges the binary opposition of male and female but also reaffirms the existence of intermediate genders (Vaishnavi, 2019). The paper by Sruthy Shaji and Devi. K (2019), "Unveiling Heteronormativity: A Study of Devdutt Pattanaik's 'The

Pregnant King'," explores transgender voices in the novel and questions heteronormative norms that do not conform to binary concepts. This paper further explores the social construction of gender and sexuality. The article concludes that Pattanaik's work blurs the traditional binary opposition of male and female, masculine and feminine (Shaji & Devi, 2019).

Methodology

To conduct this study, the researchers combined qualitative research methods with exploratory research techniques. Through a reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, the novel **The Pregnant King** allows the narrative voice to present a more subjective and fluid understanding of the individual body. The novel "challenges gender binaries from the outset through the characters of Shilavati, Nabaka, and Prasenjit" (Khatana, 2017, p. 34). This paper explores and analyzes the characters in the book who exhibit unconventional behavior and whose inner feelings have never been acknowledged. Through this extraordinary story, Patnaik reminds us that our limited experiences hinder us from seeing and understanding beyond appearances, from accepting what is considered normal, and from comprehending things that transcend what is considered natural.

Knowledge Gap

Existing research on the selected works primarily focuses on gender and psychological themes. However, there is a significant gap in research exploring themes such as gender transgression, motherhood, and desire from a South Asian queer perspective. Furthermore, studies employing queer and postcolonial interpretations of mythological texts are also very limited. This study will focus on the characters within the Indian context of the book *"The Pregnant King,"* aiming to illuminate the possibility of queerness as a natural existence by challenging Western models of queer identity.

Background

Following Michel Foucault's definition of "homosexuality" as a "species" category (Foucault, 1978), David Halperin pointed out: "What we currently understand as homosexuality and heterosexuality are both products of modern Western bourgeois society" (Halperin, 1989, p. 140). Similarly, this paper aims to challenge the notion that "homosexuality" is a Western concept of diversity. Instead, this study focuses on South Asian narratives and their traditional representations of sexuality in mythology. Through an in-depth reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological text, **The Pregnant King**, this study bypasses Western queer identity models, attempting to reposition gender transformation in non-Euro-American contexts and legitimize queerness as a form of diverse critique.

Combining insights from queer theory and postcolonial studies, this paper emphasizes the crucial importance of a dual theoretical approach. Drawing on recent research that redefines queer discourse within postcolonial theory and narrative contexts, this paper argues that rereading queer narratives in mythology helps challenge Western biases in the queer paradigm. This paper focuses on gender transgression and its various ideological manifestations.

Queer narratives from the South Asian subcontinent demonstrate that race, class, religion, diaspora, ethnicity, and language constitute are crucial to the representation of non-binary genders and sexualities. In their groundbreaking work, **Same-Sex Love in India** (2000), Indian queer historians Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai constructed an informative archive.

In the preface to **Same-Sex Love in India**, Vanita writes:

Despite the enormous differences between regions, language groups, religious and social groups, there is still enough commonality in literary and intellectual traditions to justify studying this region of the world as a whole. The cultural continuity between many texts (including those we have chosen) supports this assertion. We disagree with those social scientists who argue that this commonality is a fabrication of Western Orientalists. In a sense, all commonalities are a form of construction, but this particular construction predates the arrival of the British by several centuries (Vanita and Kidwai, 2021, p. 15).

Similar to Vanitha's argument, this paper emphasizes the necessity of questioning the tendency of "queer theorists to avoid using terms such as 'homosexual' to refer to people or relationships in early European history or in contemporary non-First World regions" (Vanitha, 2001, p. 1). This study focuses on gender narratives in ancient and medieval stories and enhances the visibility of Third World voices and their marginalized knowledge regarding gender and sexual orientation in India. In the Indian context, relevant literature includes Suparna Bhaskaran's analysis of queer representations in media and print, **Made in India** (2004), Vanitha's work on same-sex marriage, **Love's Rite** (2005), and the groundbreaking anthology on the Indian queer social movement edited by Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, **Because I Have a Voice** (2005).

The novel **The Pregnant King** is divided into ten parts, eight of which correspond to volumes one through eight, in addition to a prologue and an epilogue. Before beginning the story, Patnaik introduces the characters and the chronological order of events to the reader. "As an omniscient narrator, Patnaik skillfully utilizes his knowledge of mythology and incorporates it into his fictional work" (Dowerah, 2021, p. 226). As an Indian mythologist, Patnaik "integrates his understanding of ancient Indian mythology into a fictional world, thereby providing an interpretive analysis of gender fluidity" (Dowerah, 2021, p. 225). **The Pregnant King**'s portrayal of queer identity challenges the ever-shifting boundaries between gender binaries. The title **The Pregnant King** "provokes controversy regarding gender positioning" (Dowerah, 2021, p. 225).

Discussion

Western Bias in the Queer Paradigm: Interpreting Queer Pluralism in "The Pregnant King"

The novel "The Pregnant King" is a captivating masterpiece that reveals the unique spectrum of cognitive perception across different genders. The novel examines the issues faced by the LGBTQ community in the era of the Mahabharata from a contemporary perspective. In Devdutt Pattanaik's novel, the concept of "dharma," interpreted as "duty" in the Indian context, is explored in depth. The novel presents an idealized vision of a society where gender discrimination no longer exists. In recent years, contemporary writers, within the framework of postcolonial gender perspectives, have explored issues of sexuality in their queer critical literary works. These sexualities are often confined within extremely narrow heteronormative definitions. Shramana Das Purkayastha writes in her article: "The possibility/feasibility of cultivating a spirit of creative scepticism is crucial for deconstructing existing paradigms and envisioning alternative forms of identity based on counter-normative behaviors, which has occupied a central place in the development of queer critical literature in recent years" (Purkayastha, 2014, p. 120). Thus, a political understanding of gender has become crucial in the aftermath of colonial invasion.

The story of "The Pregnant King" begins in Vallabhi, a small but prosperous kingdom situated on the banks of the Kalindi River between Hastinapura and Panchala. King Ila built the Ilesh Wara temple long ago. This temple is renowned for its ability to fulfil the wishes of infertile couples seeking children. The divine power of the Ilesh Wara temple is described as follows: Every month, people would come here, men on the full moon day, women on the new moon night, men dressed in white, women in red, men wearing white mandala flower garlands, women wearing red hibiscus flower garlands. Everyone would leave full of hope, and a year later, they would return with a daughter (on the eighth day of the waning moon) or a son (on the eighth night of the waxing moon) (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 13).

Prutarasva ruled over Valabhi. When King Drupada of Panchala visited the Ilesh war temple, Prutarasva greeted him and arranged for Drupada and his wife Sudamini's visit. Ten months later, "the cry of a baby was heard in the kingdom of Panchala. A girl was born" (Patnaik, 2014, p. 18). Drupada introduced the child to the world: "This is the son promised to me by Lord Shiva, who will kill Drona and Bhishma. I name him Shikhandi, meaning peacock" (Patnaik, 2014, p. 18). When Drupada demanded wealth from Drona, he humiliated his childhood friend. This incident made Drupada and Drona mortal enemies, and Drupada desired a child who could kill Drona. This storyline eventually converges at the end of the novel when Mandhata marries Shikhandi's daughter, Amba. In this novel, Devdutt Patnaik interweaves many stories and creates many queer or transgender characters. Shikhandi is a character who appears in the first chapter of the novel; she was born a girl but was raised as a boy due to her gender identity.

Patnaik's interpretation of this story prompts reflection on gender binarism and showcases the image of gender-fluid characters. For example, Shilavati (Yuvanshva's mother), the widowed queen, took over the kingdom of Valabhi after her husband's death. She was willing to continue ruling the kingdom. Unfortunately, according to Dharma, she had to relinquish the throne when her son ascended to the throne. In this sense, she could not hold power for as long as she wished. Towards the end of the story, when her grandson Mandhata refused to inherit the throne, she confided her desires to him:

"I see the soul of a king in you. That is what matters most. Valabhi needs you. Perfect or not, you must be king. I too possess the soul of a king. Angirasa saw this. But my body hindered me." I won't let these foolish, superficial rules stand in your way. You deserve to be king (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 302).

It was the king's duty to produce an heir, but despite having three wives, Yuvan Ashva had been unable to father an heir for thirteen years. He was left with few options to secure his throne. He organized a "sacrifice to concoct a powerful magic potion to make his wives pregnant" (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 109). King Yuvan Ashva of Vallabhi accidentally drank the potion intended to help his wives conceive and gave birth to his first child, Mandhata. Shilavati was ordered to kill the child because there were fears that Yuvanashva's gender would be questioned, thus threatening his kingship. Shilavati was worried.

Yuvanashva, after giving birth to the child, what would that child be? A woman? A half-man, half-woman? What? Who would accept such a man as king? This would be the end of his kingship. And that child, a child born of a man. Everyone would consider him a monster. No one would accept him as king. If this child lives, I will have sons and grandsons, but Vallabhi will have no king. I cannot let this happen. Kill that thing in my son's thigh. Do it, Asanga, or I will do it myself (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 195).

Unlike Yuvanashva, Shilavati was more than capable of fulfilling the role of mother and performing her duties as queen. Shilavati often brought the child's cradle to royal meetings, but Yuvan Ashva was not allowed to hold or feed the child. Due to the ambiguity of gender binaries at the time, both motherhood and fatherhood were challenged. Therefore, being a "real" man required more than just conforming to biological gender norms; it also required men to fulfill the social expectations associated with it. The core concept of masculinity is the "othering" of women (Strayer, 2018). As Sharon Bird (1996) aptly points out in her article, "to be male... means not to be female" (Bird, 1996, p. 124).

The author distinguishes between two types of gender transgression conflicts: one at the individual level and the other at the socially unacceptable level. The individual conflict relates to the internal struggles experienced by the couple before the incident and later during their "imprisonment and forced sex reassignment surgery by the Yaksha" (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 128). Sumeda and Somwat were unaware of the negative consequences of the sex reassignment. They did it at the instigation of Kaviri, a widow in the village. The widow of Tarinipur village was the only one willing to marry her daughter to Sumeda and Somwat, two boys who were orphans, but she stipulated a condition: "...they must acquire at least one cow for themselves before marriage to prove their ability to support a wife" (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 142). In this context, marriage was important for the two boys because "without a wife by their side, Sumeda and Somwat could not perform the Yagna and Puja rituals, nor could they serve as Acharyas" (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 141).

Ann Stoler elaborates on how colonial societies regulated normative behavior in historical colonies; in her words, colonial institutions were built on the foundation of "the education of desire" (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110). In this sense, colonial power differentiated between people's "normative life subjects" (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110) and the "governed population" (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110). These colonial practices regarding "sex education" still have an impact even today. According to Giti Thadani and Shah (1998), in the South Asian context, "the acceptance of 'homophobia' by the Indian middle class is a legacy of British colonialism, which enforced heterosexuality and sexual conservatism" (Shan, 1998, p. 147). In fact, studies of pre-colonial South Asia reveal a very different picture of sexual culture than what we see today. As various archaeological excavations have shown,

homosexuality has always existed in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Many Hindu scriptures and sex manuals discuss same-sex sexual behavior. Religious sculptures also depict homosexual activities...; Tantric initiation rituals, Hindu festivals, and sects... all celebrate homosexual behavior; the Kama Sutra also contains descriptions of sodomy...; the Mahabharata and Ramayana also contain accounts of women loving women...; furthermore, there is evidence suggesting the existence of a female world based on pleasure and fertility before 1500 BC (Shah, 1998, pp. 146-147).

Conclusion

The unsettling ruptures in the novel **The Pregnant King** emphasize gender rather than sexual orientation. Diane Richardson explores the relationship between gender and sexual orientation: "Gender categories would not exist if there were no social differentiation. Within this conceptual framework, the binary division between heterosexuality and homosexuality is considered to stem from gender" (Richardson, 2007, p. 461). Richardson further notes that gender "constitutes sexual orientation, and at the same time, sexual orientation can be seen as

an expression of gender” (Richardson, 2007, p. 461). The author creates the character of Yuvanashva to deconstruct socially constructed notions of gender and to open up new possibilities by transcending binary oppositions. This paper responds to the academic call for “reimagining queer studies” (Bakshi, 2011, p. 233), aiming to draw on the critical insights of the burgeoning field of queer studies from a postcolonial perspective to make queer studies more relevant and reflective of contemporary issues. Halberstam points out: “The contemporary mainstream acceptance of gay identity—as a consumer lifestyle disseminated through mass media and a contested legal category—requires us to re-examine queer studies and to be constantly vigilant that sexual orientation is not unrelated to other modes of difference, but rather intertwined with them” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1). The study of **The Pregnant King** emphasizes a Third World perspective, and its discussion of gender and sexual orientation highlights the importance of rethinking queer categories in the ongoing “renewal” of queer studies.

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