GENDER FLUIDITY AND QUEER CONSCIOUSNESS IN DEVDUTT PATTANAIK'S *THE PREGNANT KING*: A CONTEMPORARY REASSESSMENT

*Megharaj Wadeyar C

Assistant Professor, Hindustan College Mysore.

ABSTRACT

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* revisits the mythic universe of the *Mahabharata* by foregrounding characters whose identities defy rigid binaries of gender and sexuality. This research paper analyzes the novel through the lens of queer theory, drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's theories on power and discourse. Through characters such as Yuvanashva, Shilavati, Somvati, Sumedha, Shikhandi, Brihannala, Mohini, and Bahugami's husband, Pattanaik illuminates fluid identities that have long existed within the Indian mythological tradition but have been marginalized through rigid social interpretations. By analyzing the novel in conjunction with contemporary queer theory, this study argues that *The Pregnant King* destabilizes heteronormative assumptions within Vedic society and demonstrates that queerness is historically rooted within Indian cultural memory. This expanded analysis positions the novel as a significant cultural intervention in modern discussions on LGBTQ+ rights, representation, and identity formation.

KEYWORDS: Queerness, gender fluidity, transgender identity, mythology, performativity, Vedic society, LGBTQ literature

INTRODUCTION

Indian mythology, rich with narratives of transformation, ambiguity, and liminality, contains countless references to fluid identities that challenge contemporary heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality. However, centuries of socially conservative interpretation, especially through patriarchal, colonial, and Brahmanical lenses, have

suppressed or sanitized these stories. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* reclaims these silenced mythic strands by reconstructing them in a form accessible to modern readers. As Lakshmi Nair observes, Pattanaik "challenges the heteronormative and extremely conservative approach of the Vedic society on queerness and queers" through a retelling that foregrounds characters caught between gender categories (Nair 154).

Queer theory, emerging as an academic field in the 1990s, provides a framework for analyzing non-normative identities and interrogates how societies construct "normalcy." Judith Butler argues that gender is not innate but "a repeated performance" regulated by social codes (Butler 34). Michel Foucault highlights how sexuality is shaped by systems of power and discourse, rather than simply by biology (Foucault 42). When applied to Indian mythology, these theories reveal that categories like "male," "female," "husband," and "wife" emerge from cultural arrangements rather than timeless truths. Pattanaik's novel becomes a site where myth and queer theory intersect.

This research article explores how *The Pregnant King* destabilizes binary constructions of gender in Vedic society and reinstates queerness as an integral, historically authentic aspect of Indian mythology. By analyzing key characters and narrative arcs, this study demonstrates how the novel reinterprets ancient stories in ways relevant to current debates on identity, recognition, and LGBTQ+ rights.

Mythology as a Queer Archive

Mythology functions as a cultural archive—preserving social norms while simultaneously containing counter-narratives that challenge those norms. Indian mythic literature is filled with characters who undergo gender changes, possess dual identities, engage in same-sex relationships, or inhabit liminal spaces. Yet these dimensions are often overlooked in mainstream retellings. As Nair notes, Pattanaik's work highlights "characters… crawling in the whirlpool of dilemma caused by their gender identity, sexual orientation, and transgender identity" (Nair 154).

Queer theory's fundamental assertion—that gender is constructed rather than innate—applies powerfully to mythic characters who defy biological determinism. Butler's concept of performativity argues that gendered behavior is produced through repeated social acts rather than rooted in anatomy (Butler 25). Mythological figures, such as those in *The Pregnant King*, often change bodies, identities, and roles, illustrating that Indian tradition long recognized the instability of gender categories.

Through mythic retellings, Pattanaik challenges the modern assumption that queerness is alien to Indian culture. The fluidity of gender found in the *Mahabharata*, Puranas, and regional folklore demonstrates that queerness is indigenous to the subcontinent's cultural and spiritual imagination.

Yuvanashva: The Queering of Kingship and the Blurring of Gender Roles

Yuvanashva, the central protagonist, is the most explicit embodiment of gender fluidity. Born male and trained as a warrior and ruler, he accidentally consumes a fertility potion meant for his wives and becomes pregnant (Pattanaik 71). This biological anomaly disrupts the strict association between masculinity and kingship. As Nair points out, Yuvanashva becomes "the perfect example of masculine-femininity" in the novel (Nair 156).

Maternal Longing in a Male King

After giving birth to Mandhata, Yuvanashva experiences maternal emotions typically associated with women in Vedic society. His statement "I am his mother", reflects not merely a biological deviation but also an emotional truth (Pattanaik 204). He breastfeeds the child, sings lullabies, and feels a deep maternal connection actions that defy gender expectations.

The most significant moment comes when he confesses:

"There is sweetness when your son calls you 'father,' but there is more sweetness when he calls you 'mother.'" (Pattanaik 257)

This yearning to be called "mother" destabilizes the binary relationship between gender identity and parental role.

Dharma and the Crisis of Identity

The social consequences of Yuvanashva's maternal identity reveal the constructed nature of gender roles. Dharma dictates that a king must remain unquestionably male. The idea of a "pregnant king" threatens not only his legitimacy but the stability of the kingdom. As Butler notes, gender norms are enforced through social pressures that compel individuals to conform (Butler 45). Yuvanashva's lived experience directly contradicts the philosophical and political expectations placed upon kings.

Shilavati fears that the revelation of Yuvanashva's pregnancy would render him unfit to rule, making the child a "monster" in the eyes of society (Pattanaik 195). This reaction demonstrates how societies police bodies that deviate from normative definitions.

Yuvanashva's Final Resolution

Ultimately, Yuvanashva abandons kingship and declares himself "Mandhata's mother and Jayanta's father" (Pattanaik 329). His self-understanding transcends binaries and aligns with queer theoretical claims that identity is fluid rather than fixed.

Shilavati: Feminine Masculinity and Internalized Patriarchy

Shilavati's storyline intersects with queer theory through its depiction of a woman who embodies masculine authority yet remains constrained by gender norms. Her father describes her as "a man's head and a woman's body," implying intellectual and political abilities culturally coded as masculine (Pattanaik 27).

Political Leadership and Gender Performance

Despite her competence, Shilavati is denied the throne because of her sex. Butler's argument that gender performance regulates access to power becomes evident here—a woman performing masculinity is still barred from positions reserved for men (Butler 60). Nonetheless, as regent, Shilavati performs the duties of a king, making decisions, issuing commands, and leading the kingdom.

Internalization of Patriarchal Discourse

Shilavati's insistence that Yuvanashva's pregnancy be concealed reveals how societal norms become internalized. Foucault argues that power is most effective when individuals self-regulate according to dominant discourses (Foucault 58). Although Shilavati personally defies gender roles, she upholds patriarchal norms by fearing the social implications of a male pregnancy. Her character is thus a study in the complexities of resisting and reinforcing social structures simultaneously.

Somvati and Sumedha: Trans Identity, Queer Desire, and Love Beyond Binaries

Somvat's transformation into Somvati represents a clear expression of transgender identity within mythic narrative. When the yaksha Sthunakarna offers a gender exchange, Somvat willingly trades his manhood for womanhood (Pattanaik 178). Nair observes that Somvati becomes "a transwoman… undergoing both physical and mental changes" (Nair 157).

Somvati's Affirmed Identity

Somvati's transformation is not portrayed as enchantment or punishment but as alignment with her internal truth. Her acceptance of womanhood reveals a long-suppressed identity now brought to the surface.

Sumedha's Sexual Fluidity

Sumedha's confession of love—both for Somvat before the transition and for Somvati afterward—demonstrates bisexual or fluid desire (Pattanaik 182). His love remains constant

across Somvat's gender shift, highlighting the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation. As Nair notes, Sumedha may be viewed as "a bisexual man who later becomes gay for the sake of love" (Nair 157).

Their narrative challenges the idea that queerness is modern, instead revealing a deep mythic precedent for queer relationships.

Queerness Across Myth: Shikhandi, Brihannala, Mohini, and Bahugami's Husband

Pattanaik weaves multiple mythological threads into the novel, each foregrounding queer identities.

Shikhandi

Born female but raised male, Shikhandi embodies transgender identity. He later acquires male bodily characteristics through Sthunakarna, illustrating a mythic model of gender transition (Pattanaik 243). Nair describes Shikhandi as an example of "gender-swap," complicating the binary framework of identity (Nair 158).

Arjuna as Brihannala

Arjuna's forced disguise as Brihannala reflects enforced gender performance. He refers to himself as a "false man" and "false woman," revealing the psychological toll of living between categories (Pattanaik 248).

Krishna as Mohini

Krishna's transformation into Mohini to marry Iravan underscores divine gender fluidity. His grieving widowhood after Iravan's death demonstrates that even gods experience identity beyond binary categories (Pattanaik 253).

Bahugami's Husband

Bahugami's husband reveals: "My body is that of a man, but my heart is not" (Pattanaik 212). His self-identification aligns with experiences of transgender women in Hijra communities. The priestesses of Bahugami reflect centuries-old South Asian traditions of gender variance (Nair 158).

These stories collectively demonstrate that queerness is embedded within India's mythological consciousness.

Power, Dharma, and the Regulation of Queer Bodies

Throughout the novel, systems of power attempt to regulate non-normative identities. Foucault's claim that discourse controls which identities society permits is central here (Foucault 42). Vedic society enforces strict boundaries around gender roles, lineage, and kingship.

Yuvanashva's pregnancy threatens the kingdom's legitimacy not because of practical consequences but because of symbolic and ideological ones. Shilavati's fear that a "child born of a man" would be considered monstrous reveals how society constructs deviance (Pattanaik 195). Queer bodies become sites of cultural anxiety.

Similarly, Somvati and Sumedha face imprisonment and ridicule because their love and identities violate social expectations (Pattanaik 189). Their suffering exposes how heteronormativity is enforced through violence, exclusion, and shame.

In these narratives, Pattanaik critiques the ancient systems that policed identity while also offering insight into the modern structures that continue similar forms of regulation.

CONCLUSION

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* stands as a powerful reclamation of queer narratives within Indian mythology, challenging the rigid binaries and patriarchal interpretations that have shaped cultural memory over centuries. Through deeply human and emotionally complex characters—Yuvanashva's maternal masculinity, Shilavati's feminine masculinity, Somvati's transgender identity, Sumedha's fluid desire, and the gender-changing gods and heroes—Pattanaik demonstrates that queerness is neither foreign to Indian culture nor a modern invention. Instead, it is deeply rooted in the mythic landscape.

The novel aligns with queer theory's assertion that gender is constructed, regulated, and fluid. It reveals that identity is shaped through tensions between personal truth and societal expectation. In contemporary contexts where LGBTQ+ communities continue to struggle for recognition and rights, *The Pregnant King* serves as an essential cultural text that bridges ancient stories with present-day struggles. By revisiting mythology through a queer lens, Pattanaik not only expands literary discourse but reinvigorates cultural understanding of gender, desire, and identity.

WORKS CITED

1. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

2. Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Penguin, 2006.

3. Nair, Lakshmi. "Gender Renaissance: Uncovering Queerness in the Characters of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*." *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, vol. 6, no. 9, 2021, pp. 154–159.

4. Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Pregnant King*. Penguin Books India, 2008.

5. Zavala, Melina. "Queer Theory: Background." *Illinois University Library*, 2020, guides.library.illinois.edu/queertheory/background.