

Deconstructing The Double Marginality In Psyche And Roles As A Social Construct In Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King

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Abstract

Indian mythology is full of fascinating tales reflecting the social, political, religious as well as individual incitement. From ancient times till today, the world has been perceived only in binary oppositions which consign the social structure only in hetro-normative ideal of having an adamant notion of a man or woman, their social practice, behavior and fixed identities. The contemporary Post-modernist Indian writers through their writings shamble the power hierarchy and reconsider these social practices, softening the gender distinctions. This paper is based on contemporary literary texts of gender dichotomy in terms of Non-normative sexual identities from the epic Mahabharata presented in the book namely The Pregnant King written by Devdutta Pattanik. It is as an attempt to reinterpret the gender and psychological issues which testifies unawareness of a double marginality, an inequality felt by the Protagonist both in terms of gender and psyche. It redefines the roles and parameters of these underrated characters as a challenge in the society, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. This book revisits the complex areas of mythology with a contemporary sensibility, to deconstruct the queerness, the ideas that questions fixed notions of Hetro-sexual society.

Keywords: Indian Mythology, Binary Opposition, Hetro-normative, Gender Dichotomy, Non-normative sexual identities, Power distribution

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hindu mythology is full of fascinating tales of versatility which are indeed reflections of individual impulses rather than norms of a society. They depict human struggle negotiating between sex and gender, duty, desire, personal and social truths revealing the countless possibilities of subjectivities and imaginations established in deep rooted patriarchal construction of society. The change of sex and gender reversal is a wide spread phenomena in traditional and modern era and it also has an important place in the realms of Indian mythology and society.

Generally, from ancient times till today the world has been perceived in binary opposition which relegate the social structure only in hetro-normative ideal (the rigid notion of being a man or a woman, social practices of how a woman or man should behave, act and internalize their identities.) With course of time, the Contemporary Post-modernist Indian English writers have started questioning the authority, stereotypes, and sexiest values, challenging the foundations of the social practices that reinforce the old binary model of sex or gender. These writers, through their writings, shuffle the power hierarchy and reconsider

these social practices, softening the gender distinctions.

This paper is concerned with contemporary literary texts of gender dichotomy in terms of hetero-normative and heterosexuality. *The Pregnant King*(2008) is a contemporary retelling of some tales of non-normative sexual identities from the epic of Mahabharata. It raises several questions which need to be contemplated on like -What happens if one desires to experience life regardless of his/her gender? Should a deserving female be denied to rule because of her sex? Can a man, who willingly converts himself into a woman, be accepted as normal by the society? How men, who emotionally feel more like women, are treated? How does society respond, accept, acknowledge or punish to such deviations from the normal?

The Unconventional Retellings

Devdutt Pattanik, a contemporary mythologist, in most of his books, has written on the relevance of mythology in modern times. His interaction and exposure with Queer narratives in Indian lore, led him to write the books “*Man who was a Woman and Other tales from Hindu Lore, Shikhandi and The Pregnant King*”. These books give an insight into the meaning of Queer mythology within the context of the grand Hindu tradition, with sensitivity to the popular Hindu vision. He has presented a radical and unorthodox understanding of Indian mythology that correlates complex Indian philosophy to ancient Indian art and social rituals. This book wonders to the facts that how the gender dichotomy gives importance to the social acceptance over human emotions.

According to Devdutta, while social expressions and acceptance of romantic/sexual desires and feelings matter more to our society, it raises many questions of requirement of love, approval and acknowledgement, what should be changed- the individual, the society or the objects of affection? The answers to these questions take us away from the need to dominate and actualize in the external world, to a more private and inner world of self-realization and self-containment.

Research Questions

These narratives not only present literary merit or perceived multiplicity of possible narratives but also present, many new thought-probing questions like -

- Does the popular old narrative can have any other voices?
- Do they present new spaces of empowerment?

Background and Fictional Period

In the author's note of this book, “The story of *The Pregnant King* is recounted twice in the Mahabharata. Once by Sage Lomasha during the exile of the Pandavas and the second time by poet Vyasa during the war with the Kauravas.” This book presents the non-normative sexual experiences and gender behaviour, creating new structures and disavowing the traditional structures of gender and sexuality. Through this literary work, Devdutt has tried to represent the thought process presenting forth a more subjective and fluid understanding of human bodies, beyond the flesh to understand human existence. He revisits the complex area of mythology with a contemporary sensibility, to deconstruct the queerness, the ideas that question fixed notions of heterosexual society. The term „Queerness“ analyses and conceptualizes the existing monolithic ideals of social norms and taxonomies. It also analyses the correlation between power distribution and identification while understanding the multifarious facets of oppression and privilege.

In reference to Indian mythology, Pattaniak quotes, “There are stories of men, of man who become woman and women who become men, of men who create children without men and of creatures who are neither this nor that but a little bit of both. It is common to either

deny existence of such fluidity in our stories, or point to law books that, besides endorsing patriarchy and castes, also frown upon queer behavior.”

Challenging the Heterosexuality

By challenging seemingly fixed notions like sexuality and gender, queer theory demonstrates a radical new way of analyzing human identity itself. Through the works of intellectual theories like post-structuralism and the theorists like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, the queer theory challenges Heterosexuality and the fixed notions of sexuality and gender, analysis the human identity in a radical way.

“There is no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex where by gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it, “Judith Butler 1993 (Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity).

In my study, this reference is related to the Gender aspect rather than the sexual perspective in reference to gender construct. Gender is the identity which is classified by society. Thus, this work focuses on the challenging gender dichotomous understandings in Indian Mythologies and discusses them in relation to wider writing on queer theory and Hetero-normative.

Hetero-normative refers to a worldview that perceives heterosexuality as the normal/acceptable or preferred sexual orientation. Dichotomy is the division of one thing into two parts, normally differing or opposing; the state of being two-fold, having two different components. The gender binary, also referred to as gender binaries is the classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine (Gender Dichotomy). Hetero-normativity describes how social institutions and policies reinforce the presumption that people are heterosexual and that gender and sex are natural binaries. Adding the fictional time period, Devdutt takes liberty in presenting the Pandavas and Yagnavasus (Turuvasus clain) as contemporaries to show the multiple references of gender fluidity.

What should be the Gender of a King?

The novel raises the questions of sex gender dichotomy through the character of Shilavati “given a man’s head and a woman’s body” the eldest daughter of Ahuka, king of Avanti, had a desire and signs of intelligence to become a ruler. But being a girl, she was destined to be a wife, a mother but not a ruler.

Her parents acknowledge her potential but know that a girl could not own the throne. She was supposed to restrict her talents to the women quarters and not too the ruling a kingdom. Her husband Prasenjit, prince of Vallabhi died early and she got an opportunity to rule the kingdom. Her agony, desire, capability and intelligence were ignored and even after her death her life was recorded by Yama as a dutiful daughter, obedient wife and mother of Yuvanasva without considering her long and peaceful reign as a ruler. Vallabhi never accepts her as the queen and waits for her son Yuvanshava to claim the throne. Another character Prasenjit, husband of Shilvati was not interested in becoming a king and wanted to become a hunter, roaming freely outside the confined walls of palace.

The character of Nabhaka, the younger brother of Shilavati, was destined to become a king but he also was least interested in becoming a king. He wanted to pursue music and arts instead of learning dharma shastra. His conflict of duty and desire is expressed by the questions he has raised, "If my whole has been decided for me, then why did Prajapati give me a heart? Why did he make me dream? Why does he bring music into my heart? When would I live my own life?"(Pattanik, 2008, p. 26).

The Conflict of the King

King Yuvanashva on whom the title of this book is named, is the son of Shilvati. The time period of this story is shown during the Mahabharata war between Kauravas and Pandavas. Yuvanashva is the king of Vallabhi at that time. Every king of that time is going to participate in war between these cousins. The story begins with a discussion between Yuvanashva and his mother, Shilavati. Yuvanashva wants to fight for Pandavas in the battle of Kurukshetra while Shilavati dissuades him claiming that he cannot go before fulfilling his responsibility of producing a son. But Yuvanashva willing to go, cannot attend it, because he doesn't have a son or daughter even after so many years of marriage.

But none of his three marriages with queens Simantani, Poulami and Keshni, yield him a child, making people question his virility. The kingdom of Vallabhi worships a deity who spends fourteen days as a male and another fourteen days as a female. The king plans to organize a yagna, to get his queens pregnant. For this Yuvanashva requests two Siddhis (Brahmin couple) Sumedha and Somavat, to conduct the yagna and to prepare a magic potion.

During the yagna a secret is revealed that the wife in the couple is male, not a female. They were arrested and beaten, where they confess that they are best friends and poor Brahmin boys who are searching for wives and for it they needed two cows. The Brahmin Somavat dressed as a woman performed "niyoga" and got an infertile man's wife pregnant and for this service got a cow. They required another cow and for that they planned that masquerade. While the magic potion is being prepared, a disorder erupts and amidst confusion, Yuvanashva, instead of his queens, drinks the magic potion. Yuvanashva realizes his mistake few months later, when his body shows the signs of pregnancy. Shilvati first tries to kill the child but then accepts it but decides to keep his son, Mandhata, inside queens' chambers and distance him from Yuvanashva. After giving birth to his son, Yuvanashva starts feeling a profound flow of maternal emotions in him. His body craved for his son's touch and he longed to nurse him. Whenever his son cried, the king used to sing lullaby from his chambers, loud enough for Mandhata to hear him.

In spite of his craving to become a mother, Yuvanashva never showed the courage to break this secret to the people. He shares his desire for Mandhata to call him „mother“ with his mother and queens. But they requested him to leave this madness for the sake of his reputation as a king. As a result Yuvanashva painfully distances himself from his child. His entire life becomes a quandary of whether he should act like the mother or father of his child. Society and dharma tells him to act like a father and king, while his heart tells him that he has given birth to his son. The irony of the story is that the king who tried to be the epitome of manhood and upholder of Dharma longed till his last breath to be called „mother“ by his son. He fails to make sense of the rigid social constructions and norms spread around the human body in the form of only two gender roles- man or woman. Swinging in the two directions of perceiving himself as man or a woman, mother or a father or be a king. He had to submit to his duties as a king over his emotions and affections. He had to live a dual life between himself and the world. No one ever accepted his present reality or his personal self for the society and dharma.

Even when Mandhata came to know about this fact, he rejected Yuvanashva as a mother and brutally criticized him for this act. Yuvanashva publicly declared his life's truth but people simply laughed away his matter. He says, "Vallabhi gags my truth with the lies of my mother. My people laugh and see only what they want to see. They don't see me. The real me." (Pattanaik, 2008, p.305). This rejection makes him renounce the world and he makes

himself free from all the lies.

The other character Sumedha and Somvat when were in a prison, a Yaksha visited them there. This Yaksha Sthunakarna had given his manhood to Shikhandi, who never returned it back. Yaksha exchanged his womanhood with manhood with Somvat. Somvat became Somvati and married his friend Sumedha and started living as a couple. But Yuvanashva did not accepted them and asked them to behave like a real Brahmin. But Sumedha and Somvati choose their love instead of social order. They were burnt alive by the king without any protest. Their problems did not end with their death. Even after their death Yama did not allow them to enter in his loak as a couple. There also they refused to enter with any other identities other than of a husband and wife. As a result they returned back to the earth in form of Brahmarakshasha. To make the king understand that how they felt, they tricked the king to drink the magical potion and become pregnant.

Along with the characters like Yuvanashva, Shikandhi, Sumedha and Somvat/i, Nabhaka other characters like Prasenjit, Uttara, Nara and Narayana, Aruni, Ila, Arjuna and Krishna are also presented as an example of gender dichotomy. Other than presenting the dharma and sex, Pattanaik also explores another difficult emotion connected to sexuality — a person's discomfort in accepting gender based restrictions imposed by the society. What happens if one desires to experience life regardless of his gender? Should a deserving female be denied to rule because of her sex? Can a man, who willingly converts himself into a woman, is accepted as normal by the society? How men, who emotionally feel more like women, are treated? How does society respond, accepted, acknowledged or punished to such deviations from the normal?

2. CONCLUSION

Through these gender bending characters the instances of transsexual transformation of a man to a woman or from a woman to a man are placed forth. According to Foucault, "Sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather biological origins".

Devdutt has re-narrated the past through his book not as the traditional tussle between dharma and adharma but in a new perspective as demolishing authority and stereotypes. He has tried to touch the overlooked disturbed tales which celebrate queerness concluding that gender is not an essence or a stable identity but is provisional and can never be demonstrate once and for all; they exist, as Judith Butler emphasis in her Gender Trouble, only so far as they are performed and re-performed.

He has presented a radical and unorthodox understanding of Indian mythology that correlates complex Indian philosophy to ancient Indian art and social rituals. This book wonders to the facts that how the gender dichotomy gives importance to the social acceptance over human emotions. According to Devdutta, social expressions and acceptance of romantic/sexual desires and feelings matter more to our society. It raises many questions of requirement of love, approval and acknowledgement, what should be changed- the individual, the society or the objects of affection. The answers to these questions take us away from the need to dominate and actualize in the external world, to a more private and inner world of self-realization, self-containment and self-contentment, serving the ultimate purpose of life.

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