

Exploring Non-Binary Identities in ‘The Pregnant King’

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Abstract: The paper addresses the possibility of re-constructing the gender roles through a reading of queer narratives in Devdutt Pattanaik's novel, *The Pregnant King*. The tales also expose treatment of the marginalized sexualities that “are neither this nor that”, are seen as disruptive and are meted out with negativity, disdain and powerlessness. This paper attempts to respond to the challenges before the sexual minorities in India within the context of the traditional Indian myths. The most recent theories on gender will address the fluidity of gender and examine the quickly growing field of gender and transgender studies through the critical analysis of the relevant novel, reflecting on Judith Butler's claim that gender is “performed” upon the surface of the body rather than innate. It makes it possible to base claims that gender is a highly erratic category on individual experiences [1].

Keywords: Gender roles, Gender theories, Queer, Marginal sexuality

I. Introduction

‘I am not sure that I am a man, ‘ said Yuvanashva. ‘I have created life outside me as men do. But I have also created life inside me, as women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetter or free me?’[2]

Reverberating along the lines of Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik's "The Pregnant King," Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us by male-to-female transsexual Kate Bornstein is one of the writings that has gained the most notoriety, oscillating between personal disclosure and theory. A significant discussion concerning identity, both individual and societal, is at the center of it all. As a heterosexual male who became a lesbian, Bornstein believes that gender identity is a polymorphous, infinitely malleable concept [3]. As she is comfortable of an idea of having no identity because it allows the individual with a lot of freedom.

As a true posttranssexual, Bornstein claims that identity is not permanent nor innate and that it poses variety of questions of one's identity synced to emotions. The author advocates for a flexible understanding of gender, which is the refusal to stick to one gender or another. The capacity to freely and consciously adopt one or more of the infinite genders for any amount of time and at any rate of change is known as gender fluidity. [4]

Fitting to the Indian context, Pattanaik has compiled such subversive stories related to sex and gender from Hindu lore. In his path breaking novel, *The Pregnant King*, Pattanaik attempts to explain the presence of such ‘queer’ narratives within the grand religious canvas. The term ‘queer’ has become a political and theoretical label designed to challenge the bourgeois pre-eminence of a

binary heterosexual/homosexual order. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word queer is of ‘doubtful’ and ‘obscure’ origin. Another sense given is ‘homosexual’, usually a male, is a word of American origin which is quoted for the first time in 1922 in *Practical Value of Scientific Study of Juvenile Delinquents by the Children's Bureau* US Department of Labor. As deconstruction has shown, the various connotations of a word disseminate into one another, making it impossible to separate these connotations when the word is used, regardless of the intention of the user. Thus, ‘queer’ meaning ‘odd’ and ‘suspicious’ endows the meaning ‘homosexual’ invades phrases containing the adjective [5]. *The Pregnant King* deflates the demand of sex/gender and exposes the category of sex/gender roles as signifiers without a signified.

In the story in question, Yuvanashva, the king of Vallabhi, unintentionally consumes a potion intended for his infertile queens, causing them to conceive and give birth to a son. The LGBT themes make us examine how gender roles are changing and how the distinction between dharma and parental responsibilities is becoming hazier.

Akin to Yuvanashva's story, today medically and biologically, for men, they can go off the tangent, resulting in male pregnancy. Theoretically this has been made achievable by scientific revolutions. On a cultural level, while reading mythological stories on gender metamorphosis and sexual transformation, one usually does not experience any discomfort. It is unrealistic and difficult to accept that a monarch, or a man, might become pregnant. Pattanaik disputes this, stating, that identity and gender are based on the pseudo perception, on the superficial limitations of natural forces [6].

Such ideas of gender variance in mythology are also generally accepted by mainstream Hinduism as well as scholarly studies. However, there is a gap between the reality of a social culture that is, for the most part, extremely uncomfortable with queer identities and the legend that appears to accept themes of sexual ambiguities. In our folklore, homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgenderism are frequently used as symbols for sacred or legendary occurrences. Yet a general disdainful response to these 'ambiguous' men, like the legend of *The Pregnant King*-Yuvanashva provides a prominent contrast in Indian society.

In the area of literary theories and criticisms, there has been a growing interest by the theorists of gender and sexuality in finding a greater acceptance of sexually deviant themes in myths and legends. Modern academics and queer activists have brought attention to gender deviant themes in lesser-known literature, with the marginalized personalities hidden by heteronormative gender standards, in addition to stories of gender and sexual diversity in mainstream Hinduism.

A more thorough examination and analysis of *The Pregnant King* reveals that this field of research is extremely complicated because different critical schools have different perspectives on gender and sex. Yuvanashva wants to know if he is the child's mother or father. Yuvanashva's role as Mandhata's mother and father has created additional opportunities to use the widely influential set of gender theories known as "queer theories."

Gender Trouble by Judith Butler, one of the most important queer theorists of this century, has been regarded as a "foundation book of queer theory" and a "provocative 'intervention' in feminist theory." Butler argues that "there is determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically diverse bodies where those bodies are seen as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural rule" [7] when discussing how gender is constructed. One can find the plight of king Yuvanashva occupying a culturally marginalized position thus highlighting a crucial view stated by Butler on corporeal bodies, that 'it is not biology, but culture, becomes destiny' [8].

Yuvanashva's tale is remarkably narrated which involves his mother Shilavati who possesses all the qualities to be a king, but cannot, only because she is a woman [9]. The ritual and symbolic role of men and women is highlighted in a traditional society. There are several themes running through the book. The importance of women as only being able to bear and rear children and ensures about the comforts of the king. One can find these patriarchal privileges wherein the men consistently imply power and authority. Such texts that deal with gender ambiguity set out to assess how the text invites its readers, as members of a specific culture, to understand what it means to be a

woman or a man, and so encourages them to reaffirm or to challenge existing cultural norms.

The author offers us with a gender deviance, with each new character like a drag, slipping in a new gender, a new state of mind and a new state of body. There are plots with the man with a vagina, a woman with a penis, a homo gender, a hetero gender, a mother without a womb, a woman with a man's head and scores of endless possibilities. In the introduction to their book *Genders*, writers David Glover and Cora Kaplan make the same claim that as a neologism based on an existing contentious term, 'transgender' is doubly problematic because gender is a greatly debated concept, as elusive as it is indispensable, but a site of disquiet rather than agreement (Glover and Kaplan, 2000, ix). According to Jay Prosser, who explains the word's etymology, 'transgender' has both a specific and a general use, referring to a person who crossed the borders of gender but not of sex [10].

Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik's unique exploration of the various queer sub-themes in *The Pregnant King* provides some useful insights into the roles that myths may serve in the concerned culture. On the pivotal role of myths in society. Pattanaik on the broader impact of mythology states that myths are said to capture the collective unconsciousness of a people and to represent ingrained ideas about different sexual orientations that may conflict with oppressive societal Indian customs [11].

By introducing a number of characters, such as Shikhandi/ni, who is born a girl but transforms into a man by using a Yaksha's masculinity; Arjuna, who, as a result of Urvashi's curse, lives for a year in the court of King Virat as a eunuch Brihanalla; Ileshwara/i, whose gender changes according to the cycles of the moon; and Adi-natha, who is regarded as a hermit and a nymph of Arun/i, the god of dawn, who poses as a woman and is seduced by both Indra and Surya. In addition to illustrating the nature of gender roles, the author offers insightful viewpoints on dharma, including its flexibility and rigidity, the dynamic and static nature of matter and the soul, its numerous symbolic meanings, and "the imperfection of the human state" [12].

The distinctions between men and women, fathers and mothers, and husbands and wives are continually blurred in these cases of gender metamorphosis, and one begins to wonder about the peculiar ways that nature manifests itself. Butler specifically advocates for every gendered combination and possibility that could exist: In what ways do non-normative sexual behaviors challenge the validity of gender as an analytical category? In what ways do specific sexual behaviors force the question, "What is a woman, what is a man?" [13].

Since the narrative in all of these stories seldom focuses on the protagonist's fantasies and desires, one can only conjecture on the characters' gender identity and sexual orientation. Additionally, heterosexual language is typically

used to describe sexual attraction between characters: a guy is never attracted to another male unless one of them "becomes a woman." It is similar to Simone de Beauvoir's theory that gender is constructed in part by volition or agency. After evaluating her work, Butler concludes that "the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture are presupposed and preempted by the boundaries of the discursive analysis of gender" [14].

Alongside the tale, the sub-theme of Sumedha and Somvati's story merits special mention. In the Yuvanashva charity ceremony, Somvati, who was originally Somvat, pretended to be Brahmin couples in order to receive a free cow for their marriages. Yuvanashva exposes their deceit and condemns them for pretending to be a "married pair of the same biological sex." At that point, a yaksha named Sthunakarna saves Somvat and removes his manhood. Somvat is further denigrated when his transformation is revealed. "The dharma-shastra say that a Manava's functions and responsibilities are decided at birth by his biology," declares Yuvanashva. You are a male by birth. You will always be a man. [15] In light of the human rights violation, it may be said that the most detrimental outcome is the indifference and alienation of such sexually aberrant individuals as Somvat. It calls for expanding the radical and conventional knowledge in traditional culture and implies that heteronormative sexual codes must be changed and resisted.

Within the framework of the heterosexual matrix, one might find their own problems, challenges, and experiences of gender identity crisis handled through such novel and thought-provoking fiction as *The Pregnant King*. "What are the categories through which one sees?" Butler asks in a fitting manner. What we consider to be "real," what we refer to as the naturalized understanding of gender, is actually a reality that can be altered and revised. The naturalized understanding of gender functions as a violent and preemptive circumscription of reality [16].

The distinctions between husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and men and women become hazy, and one begins to wonder about the peculiar ways that nature manifests itself. At last, Devdutt discusses how everyone possesses both Shiva and Shakti and that neither men nor women are more superior. And the majority of individuals struggle to grasp this fundamental reality [17].

In the end, Pattanaik has effectively and compassionately shown Yuvanashva's essential character. Yes, he has a son. However, he wishes to be a mother rather than a father to his son. However, Yuvanashva's maternal quest is unfinished because his son never refers to him as "mother." Butler argues that "it becomes difficult to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is constantly formed and perpetuated" [18].

Such gender fluid storylines are presented to the readers, who can relate to them. Pattanaik's skill as a storyteller is to help us see that, despite our haste to categorize things as either black or white, there is a great lot of gray that must also be recognized and addressed. A cautionary tale for our own times is "The imperfection of the human condition and our stubborn refusal to create place for all those in between" [19]. Readers are forced to consider these never-ending questions repeatedly as a result of this book. There are countless questions with no clear answers. The disadvantaged characters' struggles and hidden desires, together with their disappointments and rejections, resemble a tightrope walk between dharma and desire.

II. Conclusion

Pattanaik's novel *The pregnant king* rightfully evaluates the queer characters marginalized in the heteronormative gender code. He does so by subtle investigation of the hierarchal oppositions which have structured and dominated a traditional society. It also calls for us to reexamine the past writings, the myths and the 'forgotten' narratives and concerns from the present day beliefs that aim to have a new perspective of gender formation and gender change and that seems to call attention to the fact that the gender is unstable [20]. Such courageous approach will also open up unexplored vistas of critical appreciation for the ritual and symbolic role of men and women and the existence of nonconventional gender constructs in traditional Indian society. It will offer a basis for greater acceptance of gender diversity. It is imaginable that perhaps such writings may one day give way to a mode of analysis that acknowledges and celebrates a plurality of gender differences!

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