

Gender Renaissance: Uncovering Queerness in the Characters of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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Abstract

Queer studies as an interdisciplinary is gaining a status as a vogue due to its increasing relevance in this modern era. The Pregnant King (2008) written by Devdutt Pattanaik, comes under the category of LGBTQ novels and is a fictional retelling of selected episodes from the Mahabharata that challenges the heteronormative and extremely conservative approach of the Vedic society on queerness and queers. The paper titled Gender Renaissance: Uncovering Queerness in the Characters of Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King is done with a queer approach. The main intention of this paper is to prove the presence of queer theory in the selected novel The Pregnant King. It is a humble attempt to bring out the characters of the novel crawling in the whirlpool of dilemma caused by their gender identity, sexual orientation and transgender identity. The paper has also brought out androgynous and eunuch characters to the light. There is an analysis of the characters' perspectives on their gender fluidity too. Most of these characters find themselves standing in a line blurred with the breakage of binaries such as male/female and mother/father. Thus, Devdutt Pattanaik is trying to convey the point that gender and sexuality are the subjects with great relevance and scope that needs to be further researched and the binaries are something that should be remained blurred for at least the ones who need it to be blurred.

Keywords: *Queer, Sexual orientation, Gender identity, Heteronormativity, Dharma*

Article Publication

📅 Published Online: 15-Sep-2021

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🔗 [doi 10.31305/rrijm.2021.v06.i09.026](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrijm.2021.v06.i09.026)

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Introduction:

Literature is the only non-virtual source in the world which has the power to enrapture every sense of a human body as well as capable of transporting individuals to the realms they yearn to see, believe and feel. Novel being the chief constituent of literature is also widening its horizon by dealing with different themes and theories which are unfamiliar to us. It is now the literal representation of lives in the most intimate realm. Novels even though are fictional, has the power to manifest the lives which are extraordinary or unheard. They not just exhibit personal scenarios but also imply social scenarios as well. Within each novel, there comes social causes, the complications and suggestions on its solutions. It can also convey the historical, political, cultural and moral perspectives of the writer and the society which he/she belongs to. Along with the expansion of literature, new literary theories have also emerged in proportional to it. Queer Theory emerged out in 1990s under cultural studies and is still expanding its wings. This paper titled Gender Renaissance: Uncovering Queerness in the Characters of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* thus focuses on the presence of queer theory in the same.

Devdutt Pattanaik is a modern Indian novelist. Rather than being a novelist, he likes to be referred as a mythologist as he extensively focuses on mythology and religion. His first book was *Shiva: An Introduction*, was published in 1997. Pattanaik is not only an author, but an illustrator who does illustration for his own books, a speaker, television presenter and a radio show host. Even though Devdutt Pattanaik has laid his hands in these,

still he is known for his works in mythology. Interestingly, He mostly uses myths, mythology, parables, folklores, legends, ancient scriptures, religious symbols etc. in his works. He has written books focused on all of these subjects and also has written books on the relevance of sacred stories and rituals in modern times. *The Pregnant King* and *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* are his two major works which entirely focuses on queer studies and gender fluidity.

This paper is a literary analysis of the characters' gender fluidity and how it paved the way for an identity crisis among them in the light of queer theory. *The Pregnant King* has everything to assert the presence of this literary theory. Pattanaik challenges the highly conservative and traditional ancient Vedic society through the stories by disrupting their foundational structures. He also challenges the nature by breaking the natural laws and shows the consequences of the same. Almost all the major characters in this novel had to go through this phenomenon in one way or another. They can be aware of this or in most cases, unaware too. The analysis of the perspectives about queers in the Vedic-monarchical society, the explorations concerning the veracity of the novel characters' gender fluidity etc. are explicitly cited in this paper. As the LGBTQ movements are gaining stronghold day by day, the relevance of this paper will be much above than that assumed. The most debated sexual orientations like gay, bisexual and transgender, will be the center focus and everything will be analyzed within the literary context and boundaries. It is guaranteed that nothing better than the selected work *The Pregnant King* to manifest Queer Theory.

Analysis of the Queer Characters of *The Pregnant King*

The unprecedented pearl of India's most famous mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik's masterpiece- *The Pregnant King* travels through the unheard chambers beyond the realms of literary criticism. Devdutt Pattanaik is a modern Indian mythologist, author, speaker and illustrator known for his writings on legends, folklores, parables etc. The present paper is based on Devdutt Pattanaik's most acclaimed novel, *The Pregnant King*. It intends to analyze the work as an articulation of 'Queer Theory'. The whole novel is composed of characters dreading with the crisis of gender fluidity. The plot itself is a manifestation of the lives of people who find themselves in a state of identity crisis. The crisis again multiples as they have to cope up with the laws of a highly conservative Vedic society. The novel is an endeavor to reduce people's prejudicial approach to 'Queerness'. The paper is also aimed to prove the presence of androgyny in the protagonist, trans-sexuality, homosexuality, eunuchism, gender transition etc. in different minor characters along with the references in the novel itself.

The Pregnant King is the retelling of selected tales from *Mahabharata* with a fictional tint to produce a counter discourse to the heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality, which human beings to mere social performers of the pre-defined rules of set and expressions. Pattanaik tries to create a consciousness in the minds of readers regarding the subjects of gender fluidity, identity crisis and the problems of coping up with extremely conservative social norms. Every situation in *The Pregnant King* is connected in such a way that the reader comes to an effective conclusion that the myriads of problems faced by all the prime characters are related to one another.

The nuclear story of the novel is that of a king named Yuvanashva or the 'pregnant king'. There are also minor stories which caters a great plot value to the novel. Yuvanashva was the son of King Prasenjit of Turuvasu clan and Shilavati, princess of Avanti. Before moving on to Yuvanashva, there is a need to mention Shilavati. "She thinks clearly. She thinks deep. Life has spewed out a twisted fate for my daughter, given her a man's head and a woman's body" (27). This was an affirmation of Shilavati's father Ahuka. She was a gifted lady who had the calibre and brilliance to rule a kingdom. But because of having the body of a woman, she was declined the throne of Vallabhi after Prasenjit's death and was asked to remain a Regent. Being a Regent, Shilavati gave leadership to many strategies and decisions that paved the way for Vallabhi's prosperity, which were only seen exhibited by male rulers. This is how Pattanaik presents feminine-masculinity.

Yuvanashva is the perfect example of masculine-femininity in the novel. He is the one who struggles the most in identity crisis. Yuvanashva is portrayed as an epitome of manhood. The physical features, qualities and behavior are described in such a way that it is impossible to have a rival that matches him. A true cisgender man. But he was childless even though he married thrice. So, he decided to conduct a ritual under the leadership of sages Yaja and Upayaja who makes a magic potion for his wives to become pregnant. The story gets a big twist when Yuvanashva accidentally consumes that potion and becomes pregnant. With the absence of a womb, he carries the baby inside a lump that forms in his inner thighs and the baby was surgically delivered. It was Yuvanashva's first born, a son whom he names Mandhata. He even breastfeeds, sings lullabies and feels every emotion of a mother. Through this, Pattanaik is challenging the natural law of gender duty.

Gender-switch is the phenomenon that is happening to Yuvanashva, both psychologically and biologically. He does everything what a mother does and he even feels every emotion that is supposedly felt only by a mother. He even yearns to be called 'mother' by Mandhata even though dharma tells him to act like a father and king. The irony here is, a king is the upholder of dharma and manhood and the same king wants his son to call him 'mother'. Thus, Yuvanashva diverts from both dharma as well as his manhood. "I am his mother" (204), "She saw Yuvanashva's face fill with maternal tenderness" (220). These two instances show us how the manhood of the king gets dominated by motherhood. This is also an instance where Yuvanashva undergoes a partial gender transition. The rule of binary is disrupted in this moment of the novel. He is seen as an individual accepting the norms of the heteronormative society but at the same time tearing himself apart by accepting his motherly side in the inner folds of his mind.

When the novel proceeds further, we can see how Yuvanashva finds himself in a great dilemma about his own gender. He feels like a father and a mother at the same time. It is an extraordinary feeling where he yearns to be a mother without abandoning his identity of a male. There is an occasion in the novel where he reveals his true feeling concerning his parenthood. "I feel, while there is sweetness when your son calls you 'father', there is more sweetness when he calls you 'mother'" (257). Yuvanashva couldn't help it more, and he even begs in front of his son Mandhata and requests "Will you, just once, just this once, call me 'mother'? I so long to hear it" (294). This is the extreme peak of the plot where Yuvanashva evince his motherhood. The most sentimental scene of the whole story didn't give him the result he hoped and he had to denounce his kingship, palace, wives, children, the worldly life and had to accept hermitage where he at last discover his real identity. After confronting some hermits and conversing with them, Yuvanashva declared, "I am Mandhata's mother and Jayanta's father" (329). This is an indication where he accepts the fact that he is an amalgamation of both motherhood and fatherhood. Even then in the case of Mandhata, Yuvanashva takes the liberty to prefer motherhood than fatherhood. This narrative is not only the performative capacity of the gender, but also recognizing the bodily connection with the child which is different for a father and a mother.

Yuvanashva can be seen trying to get a clear solution regarding his gender and identity. He tries to make sense out of the usages of 'man' and 'woman'; 'mother' and 'father' regarding his gender. This made him think about his transgender identity but again, he fails at getting a clear answer. "I look like a man but I am not sure that I am a man. 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?" (331-332).

It can be seen Yuvanashva's psyche being torn apart by the rational paternal role that a heteronormative society demands from him and emotional maternal feelings with which his heart pulsates. Most of the time, he can be seen accepting those rough paternal duties and hiding his sensitive maternal side. This is the clear case of 'performativity' explained by Judith Butler, where Yuvanashva tries to exhibit the expected gender behaviors in order to fit into a heteronormative society.

Yuvanashva is then exalted as the teacher of the hermits and they named him 'Nilakantha Bhairavi', which in turn is a blend of both male and female name. An indicator that Yuvanashva is the rare processor of both masculinity and femininity. The God of Ila Vrita named Ileshwara is another character in the novel that should be mentioned in the same context along with Yuvanashva. Ileshwara is the masculine form of the God and Ileshwari is his feminine form. "On new moon nights the deity in the temple is an enchantress displaying fourteen symbols of womanhood. As the moon starts to wax, each symbol of womanhood is replaced by a symbol of manhood, one each day. The deity is an ascetic displaying fourteen symbols of manhood" (15). Thus, it can be concluded that both Yuvanashva and Ileshwara are the clear epitomes of androgyny.

It is necessary to look on another two important characters in the story: Somvati and Sumedha. Somvati was first a Brahmin boy named Somvat who comes to the yagna held by Yuvanashva, along with his friend Sumedha, another Brahmin boy. But due to a serious circumstance, both Somvat and Sumedha are sent to prison. Inside the prison, Somvat confronts a yaksha named Sthunakarna, who asks his manhood in exchange for Sthunakarna's womanhood. It is in that situation which reveals Somvat's love for Sumedha. This is a beautiful part of the story which presents gay love. But Somvat can also be considered as a bisexual man too, as he had impregnated a woman before. Sthunakarna gets a deal from Somvat and he gives his womanhood to him after taking Somvat's manhood. Somvat becomes a woman named Somvati and Sumedha confesses his love for her.

Somvati is a perfect example of transwoman, a man who had undergone both physical and mental changes to become a woman. A strong tint of homosexuality is visible in this part. Even though Somvat became a woman, Sumedha couldn't easily accept the truth that he actually became one. Still, he confesses his love, which is clear evidence of his queerness. It can be deduced that Somvat was initially a transgender, having a man's body and a woman's instinct. He suppressed it for the sake of the gender norms created by the society and when he got a chance to express his true sexual orientation and identity, he chooses to become a woman. Thus, becoming a transwoman at last. Sumedha could only be seen as a bisexual man who has feelings for both man and woman but chooses to go with his homosexual side. It is now apparent that Somvati is a transsexual woman who is very clear about her sexual orientation but unclear about her gender identity most of the time. Sumedha is very clear about his gender identity. But often has a confusion regarding his sexual orientation. But both of them express their gender identity and sexual orientation at the end of their story. This is also a classic instance where gender and sex identification become a complex challenge for individuals who don't have an obvious choice concerning it. Thus, Pattanaik gave us this wonderful story of Somvat and Sumedha connecting it to LGBTQ relations.

The story of Shikhandi and Arjuna, the two most popular *Mahabharata* characters are also told in the novel. Shikhandi was born as a woman but brought up a man. She was even married to a woman who discovered her womanhood during their consummation that leads to further complication and identity crisis in Shikhandi's life. It was Sthunakarna who made her a man by giving his manhood. In most stories, Shikhandi is portrayed as a eunuch. But in Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*, Shikhandi is a product of gender-swap. Moreover, Shikhandi is a transgender character in the novel which gives us a further comfortability in queer reading. He accepts another gender which is different from the one assigned at his birth. Arjuna disguised himself as a woman named Brihannala and served as a dancer in King Virata's court. Arjuna finds that transition as the most arduous moment in his life ever. But he identifies himself as a eunuch, man stripped of manhood. "I was a eunuch. False man. False woman" (248). A conflict arises in the life of Brihannala when a love triangle happens between him, Uttara and Uttari, the son and daughter of King Virata, respectively. He loved Uttari, and Uttara loved Brihannala. When Arjuna's manhood got restored, Uttara was heartbroken and told him, "I cannot stop loving you just because your body has changed. My love is true, unfettered by flesh" (249). Uttara's feelings were never reciprocated by Arjuna. Krishna is another minor character in the novel that undergoes a gender transition. Krishna becomes Mohini, an enchantress to marry Iravan. When Iravan is killed for a sacrifice, Krishna exposes his inner female self which even amazes the Pandavas. "It was the only time I had seen Krishna cry. I have seen many widows cry. But none like Krishna" (253). For Arjuna, Krishna was the only man who had experienced the emotions of a woman.

Perhaps Krishna had a hidden female form inside him which he concealed from the world which gave great importance to the rules of Dharma and heteronormativity.

The legend of Bahuchari (Bahugami in the novel) is part of Hijra traditions of Tamil Nadu. Bahugami was a woman married to a prince who never wanted to consummate their marriage. One day, Bahugami finds her husband dressed as a woman and asks him to reveal the truth of his body. He tells her, “My body is that of a man. But my heart is not. I think like a woman. I feel like a woman. That is the way it is” (212). This was how the young prince explained his transgender identity. Bahugami chopped her husband’s genitals and cursed him for destroying his former wives’ and her life before committing suicide. Bahugami turned into a goddess and the prince became her priestess. Since then, “The priestesses of this goddess were men who lived their lives as women. They castrated themselves, offered their genitals to the goddess, wore women’s clothes and adopted women’s mannerisms” (209). The priestesses of Bahugami were people with man’s flesh and woman’s heart. They are the best example for queerness in the whole novel. Even though they are also eunuchs, they consider themselves as transgenders. They don’t want a whole gender transition but only a consideration as a normal group. Here, eunuchism is not a subject with high relevance to deal with. Which in turn, means physical changes does not affect one’s sexuality to an extent. It is the psychological element that mostly contribute towards the notions of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Power has an eminent role to play when it comes to the subject of sexuality. It is undoubtedly the work of power structures which categorized sexuality and normalized heterosexuality. At most of the time, it acted in the form of sacred books or religious codes which considered homosexuality as a sin. Then different types of governments came to the scene and none could make it normal nor legal as they moreover considered these religious codes as the base of such sensitive issues. It is evident that Shilavati is the symbol of power structure who wanted to kill Mandhata when he was still in the womb in order to protect the natural order and their royal dignity. “Women carry children in their bodies. Not men. What men carry can only be monsters. Kill it” (194). She asks the royal doctor Asanga to operate that infant out of Yuvanashva’s body.

What will Yuvanashva be after he gives birth to it, that is if he survives the childbirth? A woman? A half-woman? What? Who will accept such a man as a king? It will be the end of his kingship. And that child, a man born of a man. Everybody will consider it as a monster. Nobody will accept him as a king. If this child survives, I will have a son and a grandson but Vallabhi will have no king. I cannot let that happen. Kill that thing in my son’s thigh. Do it, Asanga, or I will do it myself. (195)

Shilavati is worried about her family’s dignity. Even being the bearer of Vallabhi’s supreme power, she could not help it. She could’ve hidden the dark truth behind the royal chambers. Still, she doesn’t have any choice but to submit to the so-called natural orders, Dharma and the norms of a highly heteronormative society. This proves that power structure is subordinate to the religious and societal norms. Natural order itself is a predefined set of orders driven by the same religious codes. This is where queer theory takes a role in making people conscious about the relation between the so-called natural laws and the ancient religious codes and derive from them the actual fact that queerness is also a natural phenomenon. As Michel Foucault opines in his essay *The Order of Discourse*, “In every society the production of discourses at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (52).

Foucault through this opinion states about how the discourse is regulated by power structures. Shilavati, who is the symbol of power structure should consider the public perception and protect the dynamics of the kingdom by prohibiting Yuvanashva from delivering the baby. If not, Yuvanashva would never ever rule Vallabhi as the change of gender role took place. Because, according to the royal conducts, a woman is never allowed to rule. But this conduct as said before was previously breached by Shilavati herself, after the death of her husband Prasenajit.

Even though she was a regent, she was the one who ruled the kingdom. Thus, it is conspicuous that Shilavati and Yuvanashva are equal but at the same time two extreme poles when it comes to gender-based roles. If Shilavati is the paragon of feminine-masculinity, Yuvanashva on the other hand, is the paragon of masculine-femininity. This is how cleverly Pattanaik weaved the ideal mother and son together.

Various topics of sexuality like gender identity, transgender identity, sexual orientation etc. were discussed to uncover and analyze the queerness of the characters in the novel. All these researches show us that gender politics is not a neo-noir subject. The notions of queer theory match up with every society independent of time and culture. The characters and their background that were analyzed in *The Pregnant King* are corresponding to the queer theory. Modern literature is expanding its valiant, thought-provoking wing by intertwining queer subjects with much sensitive backgrounds like mythology and religion. This further confirms the expansion of literature in every field with its creative and thought-provoking wings.

Conclusion

Devdutt Pattanaik through *The Pregnant King* has valiantly thrown light into many sensitive topics of sexuality without defaming the Vedic concepts at the same time enlightening the readers through the same. In the core story of king Yuvanashva, we can see the elements of masculine-femininity as he becomes pregnant. The state of gender-swap is another element that must be mentioned. Yuvanashva not only became pregnant and delivered, but had also done all the motherly duties such as breastfeeding, singing lullabies etc. Gender-swap comes to play when he does all these actions instead of his three wives. The after effect of this swap brought out the motherly instincts inside Yuvanashva both biologically as well as psychologically. He yearned to be called as 'Mother' by Mandhata, the son whom he carried. This undoubtedly proves his masculine-femininity. He is also drowned in the dilemma regarding his gender and sexual identity. He only gets stable after his transition into Nilakantha Bhairavi, the embodiment of both genders. Hence, Yuvanashva can also be considered as androgenous. His mother Shilavati is the extreme opposite of him as she is an embodiment of feminine-masculinity. She was the one who ruled Vallabhi just like a king and made it prosperous.

In the peripheral stories, the story of Somvati and Sumedha is the one that is worth mentioning as it is packed with queerness. Somvati was at first a man named Somvat who cross-dressed as a woman and who also longs to be one. This indicates his transgender identity. With the help of Sthunakarna, he becomes a woman. With this gender transition, he became a trans-sexual woman. Sumedha, on the other hand was a bisexual man who later became gay for the sake of his love for Somvati. The stories of Arjuna as Brihannala, Krishna as Mohini, Ileshwara as Ileshwari, Bahugami's husband etc. also have different types of queer elements in it. Thus, *The Pregnant King* is an exemplary work that comes under the category of queer/LGBTQ literature.

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