



Affirming Queerness: A Study of *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*

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Abstract

Sexual identities like cross dressing, homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenerness, hermaphroditism, and more have always been mysteries in any society at any point in time, but mythology acts as a lens through which one can get to the bottom of these mysteries. Mythology always presents a picture of ancient times, and we get to know the society through tales from various sources like the Puranas, Vedas, Jainism, Buddhism, Mahabharat, Ramayana, and oral traditions of Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Vraj, etc. All these sources throw light on the existence of queerness in India, and they also validate how acceptable and normal it was during those ancient eras. This research paper is an attempt to enunciate how retellings of stories by Devdutt Pattanaik in *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) can be more thought provoking and how they refresh one's ideals on such queer relations. Every tale in the novella suggests that this kind of transition not only existed with mortals, but that even gods, goddesses, devas, asuras, angels, demons, and more were the forerunners of queer relations. These stories present great noble causes behind every transformation, and this proves the valuable position of queerness in ancient India.

Keywords: queer, mythology, sexuality, identity, patriarchy.

Introduction

Queerness and mythology are both integral components of the collective mind. Queerness has existed in our civilization since ancient times, and if we look back to our ancient myths and tales affirming queerness, we can witness a way more tolerant India celebrating every individual under the same roof. Queerness challenges the established idea of sexuality as heteronormative and accepts sexuality as *fluid* or *beyond*. Indian literature in English has always been very innovative and receptive to writing on various issues. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Pattnaik, and so on followed this trend of writing and retelling mythological stories to show relevance of past in the contemporary era. These Indian writers have restored the past through their retellings. Devdutt Pattanaik, in spite of writing on many themes, didn't ignore

queerness: *The Man Who Was A Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* (2002), *The Pregnant King* (2008), and *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014). There are theoreticians and academicians who laid the overall understanding of these studies. Amara Das Wilhelm's *Tritiya-Prakriti, People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity, and Intersex Conditions Through Hinduism* (2008) and "Queering India: :Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society (2001) by Ruth Vanita, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* helps us understand the dynamics of sexuality and focuses on the normality of being any sexual identity unlike the segregated sexual identities that are considered normal in our society. Pattanaik stresses that mythology is nothing but the "study of people's subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols, and rituals." (Pattanaik, pg.35). His book *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) is divided into two parts where the first segment deals with the relevance of mythology worldwide. He begins by tracing back the origin of queerness in Indian mythology and comparing queerness in other ancient mythologies such as Mesopotamian, Viking, Japanese, Shinto, Persian, etc. The second segment is a retelling of stories from various sources such as mythology, epics, folklore, the Puranas, Tamil temple lore, the oral traditions of Bengal, etc. He doesn't just tell mythical stories; he also writes about how mythology holds its relevance in contemporary society.

Queerness Questions Patriarchy

Our society decides the codes of behaviour that are expected from everyone to perform, and this conditioning of society is based majorly on heteronormative gender roles, so the rest are kept at the margins. Therefore, this systematisation strangulates the unheard voices that fail to talk about their sexual identities and desires. Consequently, the minority still must deal with the constant pressures of discrimination, humiliation, and apathy in everyday life. The issue now is educating people about the space between gender boundaries. Devdutt Pattanaik aptly says, "Queerness questions what constitutes male and female." (Pattanaik,12) Mythological and folkloric writings from all around the world, including India, emphasise inclusion rather than exclusion. Queerness has existed in our civilization since ancient times, and if we look back to our ancient myths and tales affirming queerness, we can witness a way more tolerant India celebrating every individual under the same roof. Queerness challenges the established idea of sexuality as heteronormative and accepts sexuality as *fluid* or *beyond*. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* helps us understand the dynamics of sexuality and focuses on the normality of being any sexual identity, unlike the segregated sexual identities that are normal in our society. Devdutt Pattanaik retells the story of Chudala, who transforms herself as a man to enlighten her husband. After Lord Rama completed his education at an ashram, his guru Vasishtha told him stories to make him understand that it is possible to be a hermit while fulfilling all the duties of a householder, and Chudala's story is one of them. King Shikhidhvaja, who was seeking wisdom, had a wife named Chudala, who was a knowledgeable Yogini and well-versed in ancient mystic practises, including the ability to change herself at will. However, because she was a woman, the sovereign did not value her much. He thought she was a wonderful mother and wife, but not a teacher and King left his kingdom to forest in search of enlightenment. She followed the king into the wilderness as a man named Kumbhaka and imparted her wisdom as well as opportunities to live in society as a wise person. Kumbhaka also revealed that

Sage Durasa had cursed him to transform into a woman at night. As a result, at dawn, Kumbhaka became a woman with the name of Madanika. The king behaved somewhat like a hermit throughout the day since he was unaffected by the presence of a woman next to him. One day, Shikhidhvaya consented and agreed with Madanika's wish to have a woman's pleasure. The King became a hermit during the day and a householder at night. This tells us something about the definition of a hermit, which is not found in the life of an eremite in the woods but rather in the triumph over jealousy and want in any given situation. (Pattanaik, p. 55–56). This is how Pattanaik shows the relevance of queerness in ancient times, when wisdom was thought to be man's possession. Chudala is neither a man nor a woman; she is in between these two still helped her husband to get enlightenment and impressed by her intelligence King Shikhidhvaya and Chudala both equally took the charge of Kingdom.

Negotiating an Identity Crisis

Indian hijras or kinnars relate their identities through mythological tales such as the Ramayana, Mahabharat, Puranas, and other oral tradition stories. The explanation and legitimization of hijra-specific behavioural patterns, ritual practises, and anatomical shapes, as well as the dispelling of part of the stigma associated with this identity, are important functions of mythological and literary narratives. There is a story in Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (2008) about Bahuchara, whose husband was an incomplete man. This has been taken from the oral tradition of hijras. Bahuchara Mata is the subject of numerous myths. In one of the numerous folktales, the Goddess, who is connected to Bahuchara Mata, was once a princess who castrated her husband because he chose to behave like a woman in the forest. In another tale, an impotent curse was placed upon a man who tried to molest Bahuchara Mata, and only after giving up his masculinity, dressing as a woman, and worshipping the Goddess did he receive forgiveness. Bahuchara declared, "Men like you should castrate themselves, dress as women, and worship me as a goddess." (Pattanaik,pg.106) Castration is the most challenging and important part of being transgender; they usually name it Nirvana, which means salvation. A. Revathi's autobiography *The Truth About Me*, validates the idea of salvation, and she uses the term "Nirvaana" (Revathi, 65). For Revathi, her surgery was a spiritual accomplishment like nirvana. Concurrently, Manobi Bandopadhyay calls her change a "metamorphosis" (Pandey,6,) and she declares that the goal of her life was to establish my sexual identity" (Pandey, 566). After her sex reassignment surgery, she shares her ecstasy. "Inside, I was at peace. It was a huge relief. I was now a woman, mine was a woman's body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted and had yearned for. This pain would obliterate all earlier pains" (Pandey, 8).

Noble Themes

Every tale in the novella suggests that these kinds of transitions not only existed with mortals, but that even gods, goddesses, devas, asuras, angels, demons, and more were the forerunners of queer relations. Moreover, such transformations always had a great and noble purpose: for enlightenment, for justice, to punish, to conquer, to establish peace, love, marriage, friendship, laughter, etc. In Chudalas's story, she transformed herself into Kumbhaka and followed her husband, King Shikhidhvaja, in order to enlighten him. In Bhima's

story, one day during his exile in the court of King Virata, he dressed himself up as Draupadi because she asked him to punish Kichaka, the queen's brother and commander-in-chief, who made "sexual overtures" towards her. (Pattanaik, p. 130). In another story of Krishna and Radha, Krishna in order to pacify Radha about his love he decided that one night they should exchange roles, but eventually Radha realises that simply changing clothes does not change who a person really is. Thus, we can see how mythological tales and lore serve the noble purposes by adopting queerness.

Conclusion

Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You (2008) by Pattanaik describes the LGBT community with one or two stories for each category. In the tale of Ratnavalli, homosexuality is discussed; in the tales of Somavan and Aravan, gayness is explained; in the tale of Mohini (Vishnu's avatar in female form), bisexuality is explained; and in the tales of Shikhandi and Arjuna, transgender identity is explained. In addition, the stories of Krishna and Samba provide an explanation of cross-dressing. The grand narratives of the Indian epics sometimes conceal these legendary figures. This submerged notion of queerness in mythology is introduced by Devdutt Pattanaik in his mythological works. He has attempted to dispel any confusion regarding the concept of queerness by demonstrating its inclusion in mythology. Now is the right time to talk about and share the untold or unheard queer stories from our rich mythology.

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