



MYTH, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY: A STUDY OF QUEER REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY MYTHOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract: Myths serve as the building blocks of our society, culture, and traditions. Devdutt Pattanaik explores a wide range of queer stories from Buddhist literature, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, Jainism, and folklore. He highlights the under-represented voices within the expansive tales of Indian mythology by analyzing myths from different parts of the country. He opposes the traditional heteronormative norms that are common in Indian society and reveals the flexibility of gender via his investigation. By presenting characters like gays, lesbians, and hijras whose queer behaviors, such as cross-dressing and same-sex relationships, are portrayed as normal, Pattanaik illuminates the queer representations in Indian folklore. Indian civilization mostly maintains heterosexual gender standards, even if temple sculptures, iconography, and religious texts contain queer themes. The legal system and society must both strive for the social empowerment and advancement of India's LGBT population.

Index Terms - Queer Narrative, Mythology, Gender Roles, Heteronormativity, Stereotyping, Indian folklore

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "queer," which originally meant "strange" or "peculiar," was subsequently used disparagingly in the late 19th century to describe those who had same-sex relationships. Queer Nation launched a campaign to reclaim the word by the late 1980s, seeing it as a purposefully provocative and politically radical break from the more assimilationist LGBT groups. The term has come to refer to a wide range of non-conforming gender and sexual identities and beliefs in 21st century. Although some members of the LGBTQ community consider this to be appropriative, the term "queer" can refer to any type of non-conforming sexuality, including cisgender queer heterosexuality. Academic fields such as queer theory and queer studies are fundamentally opposed to normative norms, and binary classifications.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Myth tells stories about gods or people who are involved in situations that are beyond the realm of human comprehension. Mythology, the study of myths within a specific religious context, addresses timeless inquiries and guide individuals on their moral and spiritual journeys. Within Indian mythology, numerous stories feature deities, heroes, and characters with queer identities that transcend traditional heteronormativity in Vedas, Puranas, and the renowned epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Explorations of Indian mythology unveil instances of deities undergoing gender transformations, engaging in cross-dressing, and encountering homosexual relationships. According to the Vedas, there is a third gender

called Tiritiya Prakriti. Analyzing these legendary tales can help us understand a more accepting India where different gender identities and sexual orientations were not frowned upon. To further explore these topics, the study focusses on a few of Devdutt Pattanaik's works.

III. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

A multi-talented person, Devdutt Pattanaik is a mythologist, lecturer, author, and illustrator with a focus on Hindu holy scriptures, folklore, stories, fables, and parables. The subjects of religion, mythology, and administration are the main topics of his body of work. Pattanaik is skilled at analyzing mythology outside of religious contexts. By means of his investigation, he unearths several queer stories drawn from ancient writings such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Jain, Buddhist literature, and folklore, illuminating the fluidity of gender and the non-conforming gender norms that are common in Indian society. His 2014 book *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* is a noteworthy collection of mythical tales from various parts of India. The first part of the book, titled 'Appreciating Queerness,' presents readers with the idea of queerness and the variety of identities that are portrayed in world mythology that defy traditional heterosexual narratives. The second portion explores reinterpretations from a variety of sources, including oral traditions from Bengal and the Gangetic plains, mythology, folklore, epics, Tamil Temple Lore, and old Tamil poetry. The concept of queerness is explored by Pattanaik in *Shikhandi*, which traces its origins to Indian mythology and includes stories from civilizations such as Aztec, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Viking, Persian, and Japanese Shinto.

In the *Mahabharata*, Shikhandi was a vital point in the Kurukshetra conflict. Shikhandi was formerly Amba, the King of Kashi's eldest daughter. In an attempt to exact revenge on the Kashi monarch for a transgression, Bhishma kidnapped Amba and her sisters from their wedding. The princesses were presented for marriage to Vichitravirya, the prince of Hastinapur, after Bhishma defeated Shalva of Saubala and other monarchs. But when Amba admitted her love for Shalva, only two of the sisters married Vichitravirya. Shamed by his loss by Bhishma, Amba sought Shalva's hand but was turned down. Amba then pleaded with Bhishma to wed her, but he refused because of his vow of celibacy. Amba, who was enraged and sought retribution, made a serious penance offering to Lord Shiva, asking for the ability to kill Bhishma. Amba questioned her ability to fight as a woman, even after getting supernatural assurance. According to the heavenly answer, she would bring Bhishma to ruin in a subsequent incarnation. She reincarnated as Shikhandini, the child of King Drupada of Panchala, when Amba committed suicide because she was determined to fulfil her purpose.

Shikhandini, who had been brought up as a man and trained in combat, was engaged to a woman. The truth was revealed to Shikhandini's wife, who made fun of her on their wedding night. Shikhandini was able to express his masculinity when a yaksha named Sthuna, moved by Shikhandini's predicament, offered his manhood for one night. As a result of his chastity vow, Bhishma was unbeatable during the Kurukshetra war—that is, until he decided to die. By telling Bhishma to bow before a lady instead of a man, Krishna disclosed his dharma. Because women were not allowed to fight on the battlefield, Bhishma, who saw Shikhandini as a lady despite his metamorphosis, did not attack or hurt him. This story throws light on society's expectation of women to take on male roles in order to demonstrate their skills and contradicts the patriarchal idea.

An important gender shift is exemplified by Arjuna's transformation into Brihannala which resulted from a curse placed on her by Urvashi, a well-known apsara from Indra's heavenly court known for her eternal beauty and charm. The sight of the attractive Arjuna standing by the Amaravati River enchanted Urvashi, who declared her love for him and her desire for him to be her friend. But Arjuna, who acknowledged Urvashi as his father Indra's favorite, compared her position to his mother's and politely turned down her advances. Arjuna refused to back down, despite Urvashi's claim that apsaras are free to pick their lovers and are not bound by anybody. Urvashi felt betrayed by being rejected by a mortal.

Urvashi condemned Arjuna for rejecting him, saying that only a eunuch would turn away a willing woman, turning Arjuna into one. Urvashi later lessened the curse to endure for a year at Indra's request, giving Arjuna the ability to choose when it would take effect. Originally intended as a punishment, this curse ended up being fortunate for Arjuna during his time of covert exile. Arjuna travelled to King Virata's Matsya realm in the guise of Brihannala, the eunuch, and taught Princess Uttara music and dance. Brihannala was the charioteer of Prince Uttara Kumara during the Kauravas' attack on Virata's kingdom.

At the end of the exile, Arjuna returned to his former form on the last day and defeated the Kaurava soldiers, demonstrating his strength and taking back his identity. As seen by the story of Vishnu taking on the persona of the enchantress Mohini, the Puranas also examine the issue of gender alteration and reincarnation. In order to entice the asuras and allow the gods to partake of 'Amrita,' the nectar of

immortality, Vishnu took on the form of Mohini. Her shrewdness also helped her fight the ash-demon Bhasmasura. His intense penance impressed Shiva, who gave him the ability to turn anybody into ashes with a single fingertip touch. When Shiva pleaded with Vishnu for help, Bhasmasura was outwitted and tried to test this newfound talent on Shiva himself. The asura was captivated by Vishnu's beauty and offered marriage once she changed into Mohini. Bhasmasura had to imitate Mohini's dancing moves in order for her to consent. The asura was instantly burned as Mohini deftly fooled him into touching his own forehead during the dance.

In "Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent" (2003), Devdutt recalls a narrative called "The Birth of Ayappa," also called Manikantha, from the Sabarimalai Sthala Purana. This story tells of Shiva, the holy ascetic, being enchanted by Mohini's beauty, and their union results in the birth of the god Ayyappa (151). This story depicts two male gods having children, a notion that did not cause unease among followers until outsiders, especially the Western eye, emphasized how unusual it was. In order to marry Aravan, the son of Pandava warrior Arjuna and Naga princess Uloopi, Vishnu also assumed the identity of Mohini. Aravan offered to do the divine-human sacrifice that was required to win the Kurukshetra battle. But since only married people are eligible for a proper cremation, and since no lady on the planet would marry a guy who would die the next day, Vishnu took the initiative to wed Aravan. Following their wedding night together, Aravan was sacrificed the following day, and Vishnu lamented. Every year, the story of Aravan is reenacted in the village of Koovagam, which is close to Pondicherry. During the celebration, a massive parade bearing an image of Aravan that represents his sacrifice is preceded by its destruction. Aravan is linked to a local divinity called Koothandavar and several Hijras dress as Mohini, marry Aravan, and then mourn his death (*Shikhandi* 101-104).

Devdutt attempts to explore the modern meaning of Shiva devotion in *Shiva: An Introduction* by looking at many visual depictions of Shiva's imagery. In order to shed light on this respected divinity, he traverses Shaivite philosophy, beliefs, historical settings, folklore, and mythology. Devdutt explains the idea of Ardhanarishvara, the male form of Shiva, and his wife Parvathi. In the Puranic stories, Bhiringi is portrayed as refusing to go around Parvathi in spite of Shiva's request. This action causes an angry Parvathi to fuse her body with Shiva's, becoming Ardhanarishvara, a representation of a dual-natured celestial being. This metamorphosis contradicts the traditional representation of Shiva as the embodiment of masculinity, now exhibiting a combination of masculine and feminine qualities.

According to Devdutt's *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine*, the story of Chitrangada comes from the Bengali *Mahabharata*. Due to the lack of male successors, Chitavahana, the monarch of Manipura, reared his only daughter, Chitrangada, as a boy. Chitrangada fell in love with Arjuna as she grew up. Fearing that Arjuna would not like her manly qualities, she prayed to the gods and changed into a lovely woman. But Arjuna was so enthralled by her masculinity that she returned to her former shape. In this story, women are portrayed as powerful, self-assured, and able to defend themselves rather than as helpless objects waiting to be saved by a valiant hero. In his book, Devdutt illustrates how Kali is mythically portrayed in the Shiva and Linga Puranic texts. In this story, Goddess Parvathi becomes the violent Goddess Kali in order to defeat Daruka. With a gift from Brahma that made him impervious to attack from any deity, animal, or man, Daruka caused mayhem that even the gods dreaded. Since only a woman could defeat him, the gods prayed to Goddess Parvathi for help. After immersing herself in the poison that was in Shiva's throat, she transformed into the powerful Kali. After that, Kali killed Daruka and drank his blood. In other representations, she is even seen perched on Lord Shiva's chest with an angry expression. Because she embodies strength, fierceness, and independence, Kali challenges the conventional subservient picture of women and represents divine feminine power.

Queer themes are frequently expressed in mythical narratives, symbols, and rituals in a metaphysical manner without additional investigation or analysis, making queer identities invisible. Beyond mythology and folklore, LGBT aspects are also shown in Indian temple paintings and sculptures. The goddess Meenakshi, for example, defies gender stereotypes at the Madurai temple by being shown with masculine characteristics, including as pants and a blade. In Chidambaram, on the other hand, Shiva is revered as Nataraj, the Lord of Dance, who performs dances, a traditionally feminine position. Images of same-sex love may be found in the Khajuraho temple, while the Ajantha cave's Bodhisattva artwork depicts a man in a delicate feminine pose, signifying a fusion of masculine and feminine traits. The cultural relevance and inclusion of these depictions go beyond simple creative expression, as they demonstrate acceptance and tolerance towards a range of sexual orientations and gender identities in Indian mythology and art.

The impact of Western interaction led to the marginalization and stereotyping of those who identify as gender queer. Rooted in the Christian Bible, European culture, laws, and ideology were imposed on the world through colonial control, ignoring other cultures and values. In the past, European civilizations persecuted and killed LGBT people, a practice that is uncommon in India, where such actions were considered abnormal. With the enactment of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1860, homosexuality became illegal under British colonial control. The Indian constitution's repeal of section 377 on September 6, 2018, marked a major milestone for marginalized sexualities, despite ongoing efforts for recognition of their identities in the modern period. For the LGBT community, this historic event, which took place 70 years after independence, signaled a positive change that allowed people to freely express who they are and take part in Pride Marches, which are represented by the rainbow flag.

IV. CONCLUSION

Society frequently views queerness as an illness, which fuels a homophobic and transphobic atmosphere that has a substantial negative influence on people's mental health in the community. The LGBT population in India is still dealing with a number of upsetting issues, including sexism, poverty, abuse, and molestation. In many cases, family members mistreat and neglect them, which forces them to leave their homes. Outside of their family setting, individuals are susceptible to persecution and violence, which can lead to mental health problems including sadness and suicidal thoughts. In order to create a more welcoming and encouraging atmosphere for everyone, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity, society and the legal system must place a high priority on the social advancement and defence of the LGBT community.

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