Gender Transgression, Motherhood and Desire: Circumventing the Western Queer Ideology - A Post-colonial Literary Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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Abstract

The term both gender and biological sex play a significant role in determining human behaviour. The foundation for presenting the underlying power structures that have aggressively preserved the gender binary was laid by a significant shift in theoretical viewpoint. Similarly, postmodern feminist and queer theorists' lenses questioned gender as a social construction rather than a natural manifestation of biological sex. Gender nonconformity transgresses the traditionally constructed gender binary by giving traditional masculinity the primary status and enabling the power and privilege related to gender enactment. The definition of gender transgression, however, varies significantly across cultures and historical Periods. The perpetuation of the gender binary and the hierarchal power system is deeply rooted in Western cultures. These power structures are embedded in reified social norms and governmental policy. This paper focuses on identifying forms of gender transgression and its ideological impingement. Combining insights from queer and post-colonial scholarship, it emphasizes the critical importance of a two-pronged theoretical approach. Following the recent research in redefining queer discourses in the limelight of post-colonial theory and narratives, this paper argues that revisiting mythological queer fiction contests the Western prejudice in queer paradigms. Queer narratives from the South Asian sub-continent signify the importance of race, class, religion, diaspora, ethnic, and linguistic formations concerning issues surrounding the representation of non-binary gender and sexualities. Through an intense reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's Mythological text, *The Pregnant King*, this study circumvents the Western model of queer identities, tries to reposition the transformative non-Euro-American context, and gives queer its legal status as a pluralistic critical formation.

Keywords: gender transgression, desire, post-colonial, Queer, South Asian mythology

1. Introduction

Literature and Myth are inextricably linked. Both literature and Myth cannot be reduced to one another, and neither can exist in isolation: Mythology has always been "an essential component of literature." (Frye, 1989, p.21). It serves as a source of multidimensional stories for the literature world of fiction and extends, refines, or rewrites mythological elements during the creative reception process. As Aristotle's Poetics implies, Myth provides the narrative strategies from which literature evolves (Aristotle, 1996 VI. 1450a). Where "Mythos" cites plot "to a unified construct of required and probable actions" (Baumbach, 2009, p.1). In addition, Myth symbolizes the beginning of literature, which is rooted in oral tradition and the performance of literary texts, as suggested by the etymology of the word mythos. In discussing Aristotle's view on the term mythos Northrop Frye conceived Myth as "a structure organizing principle of literary form" (Frye, 1965, p.341). Despite having its roots in oral tradition, Myth depends on translating its imagery and "knowledge" into other forms of art and literature to be preserved and perpetuated so that it can be retrieved in various cultural, geographical and temporal contexts.

Literature emerges as the ideal vehicle for the transmission of mythical tales. Literature gives the comprehension of mythological elements that appear in art and ultimately necessitates their re-embedding into a literary dimension where they become "readable" and decipherable. As a result, myth communication is constituted by and fundamental to literature. Mythology and fictional stories have significantly impacted the human psyche and society across various cultures and the literature produced by society. According to renowned myth critic Robert Graves, "Myth has two main functions. The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask: Who made the world? How will it end?... the second function of Myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs" (Graves, 1968, p.5). Literary fiction, in particular, defines the legitimacy of human existence in society. Through ideas and generalization, it expounds on the recreation or representation of the social world. This article astutely examines how mythological characters still appear in contemporary literature with a vitality that belies their advanced age. The mythological stories are now being told through various mediums such as music, printed texts, cartoons, movies, computer games, television shows, etc. These enable the

ancient stories to travel faster and reach more people than ever before. However, the various themes in mythical stories have captivated readers and authors for generations. One of the popular trends in contemporary writing in the global south is rewriting mythology in a new contemporary way. Old stories are taking new forms and blending in with modern writings in the modern era. Modern writers have approached those stories differently; they have re-interpreted those traditional mythological stories from entirely new perspectives, thus subverting the rigidity of the original stories.

The persistence of Myth and its retelling is a sign of knowledge of different cultures, and it helps to map those cultures' changes. Myth is a bridge, crossing and connecting the boundaries of fiction, imagination, religious practices, and social conventions. The creative engagement with Myth encompassed literature, visual culture, religion, and forums in philosophy, science, and politics. In Lorna Hardwick's analysis of Myth and its portrayal in modern literature, she states, "Different versions of particular myths moved in and out of prominence. Refiguration of myth signalled shifts and conflicts in ways of looking at the world" (Hardwick, 2017, p.12). As an invaluable source, The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, edited by Rosemary Wright, includes retold myths from ancient Greek and Roman sources. Wright notes in her preface to the Dictionary that:

> Different versions of the narratives and genealogies in this material are endemic to the study of the subject since variations were preserved in the tradition of oral culture and then adapted to the interests of family and city propaganda, the literary contexts of drama and poetry, the evolution of ritual and the expansion of knowledge of the physical and human aspects of the inhabited world…. and not only do we have the narratives preserved but also the ancient attempts to probe and interpret them through allegory, personification and euhemerism (an ancient form of reductionism), linked often with a healthy skepticism (Wright, 2012).

To influence the general public's beliefs, Myth frequently combines with legends, histories, and folklore. The West has a long history of incorporating Myth and folklore into its literary works. Every genre of English literature includes Greek Myth and Biblical tales to deepen the significance of graphical works. This custom has been in existence until the present day. The works of contemporary poets, novelists, and artists like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and William Golding heavily incorporated myths and legends. We find that myths and folklore have their history, particularly in India. Indian Myth has an extensive background, which makes Indian writers inherit and cultivate it in all forms of literature. Stories and themes from the Upanishads, Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and various Buddhist scriptures are incorporated into Indian English literature to enrich it. Numerous myths, including those found in the Puranas, Epics and Vedic texts, serve as the foundation for Hindu culture's truths. Indian mythology enhances Indian culture and distinguishes it from other cultures worldwide. The Pregnant King by Pattanaik is one of the modern retellings of liminal and gender-transgressive tales in which the author links them to mythological evidence and figures. Defining the significance of myth Mark E. Workman in his article The Role of Mythology in Modern Literature says, "If myth can be used metaphorically to juxtapose and hence stretch our categories of cognition, it can also be used metamorphically to altogether dissolve these same patterns of perception" (workman, 1981, p.43). "Myth serves literature both as a metaphor and allegory" (Raj, 2017, p.309), highlighting its significance in literature.

2. Review of Literature

Rajni Mujral, in her study, "Body on the Boundary: Figuring the Excessive Body in Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King" (2022), discusses the protagonist Yuvanashva's male body in the experience of childbirth to highlight the materiality of the body. By keeping the body at the centre of the conversation, Pattanaik's narrative maps the reversal that occurs in a non-dominant space. The author concluded that Pattanaik celebrated the excessive nature of the body in his retellings. (Mujral, 2022). Pushpendra Singh and Dhivya Joshi (2020) "Psychological Journey of Yuvanashva and Shilavathi in The Pregnant King" focuses on the psychological journey of Yuvanashva in the novel. This paper speaks on the mental trauma of Yuvanashva and Shilavati. (Singh & Joshi, 2020).

Ritu Raj Choudhary and Yashoda Verma (2020). "Deconstructing the double marginality in psyche and roles: As a social construct in Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King" analyses the gender and psychological issue from a double marginalized perspective. This paper revisits complex areas of mythology with a modern sensibility in order to deconstruct queerness, the ideas that challenge fixed notions of Hetro-sexual society. (Choudhary & Varma, 2020). Vaishnavi. P (2019) article "Veracity of Gender Power with reference to Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King" puts forth the concept of masculine and feminine gender roles through the character Yuvanashva in this article, the author not only challenges male and female dichotomy but reiterates the existence of in-between, (Vaishnavi, 2019). Sruthy Shaji and Devi. K (2019), "Uncovering the Heteronormative Sexuality: A Study of Devdutt Pattanik's The Pregnant King", investigates the transexual voices in the novel and question the heteronormative codes which do not fit into the notion of binary. This paper further talks about society's construction of gender and sex. The article concludes that Pattanaik's work blurs the distinctions conventional constitution of male and female, Masculine and Feminine dichotomies. (Shaji & Devi, 2019).

2.1 Methodology

To conduct the current study, researchers combined qualitative research methodology with exploratory research techniques. Through its re-engagement with the Mahabharata, the book The Pregnant King allows the rhetorical voices to present a more subjective and fluid nature of individual bodies. The novel "problematizes sex and gender dichotomy from the very beginning through the characters of Shilavati, Nabhaka, and Prasenjit" (Khatana, 2017, p.34). The paper investigates and discusses those characters in the book who show aberration and whose innermost feelings were never acknowledged. Through this extraordinary story, Pattanaik serves as a reminder of how our limited experiences impair our ability to see and understand beyond what is shown, accept what is normal, and understand

beyond what is considered natural.

2.2 Knowledge Gap

The pre-existing knowledge of the selected work for the study has been conducted on the themes of gender and psychology. The theme of Gender transgression, Motherhood and Desire from the South Asian queer context is yet to be studied. Limited research is found on the queer and post-colonial reading of the mythical texts. The present study concentrates on the characters in The Pregnant King from the Indian context. It exemplifies the possibility of finding queer as a natural entity by defying the Western model of queer identities.

2.3 Theoretical Background

Post-colonial literature comprises works that address colonialism and its aftermath on the colonized. The Editor of The Empire Writes Back states, "The post-colonial literature and post-colonialism also deal with the consequential of colonialism across-cultural discourse and its impact on the literature developed during the post-colonial period" (Limb, 2015, p.602). For this reason, post-colonialism is regarded as a literary theory when examining the literature of formerly colonized countries, especially those colonized by European powers. Both translation and post-colonial literature are intellectual pursuits deeply ingrained in the culture as shared activities by members of a social group. Post-colonialism has recently captured the interest of many transcultural studies. Post-colonialism includes past colonial histories, research on European empires, dispute on Western ideologies, colonial power resistance, and the results of power differentials between colonized and the colonizer.

When queer theory meets post-colonial theory, new questions emerge about the association with nationality, nationalism, and sexuality, along with the relationship between citizenship and gender, sex and normativity. The consequent blending of contemporary disciplines apparent in post-colonial writings is reflected in the essays by Simon and Lefevere, highlighting "the ideological consequences of the translation of third-world literature into English and the misinterpretation it involves" (Mambrol, 2019). Both post-colonial literature and translation are intellectual pursuits that are firmly ingrained in the culture as shared social activities by members of one social group. It entails the transfer of concepts, social customs and traditions from one social setting to another. When applied to another context where different cultures are blended, this transposition functions through the appropriation of culture and expression.

In many cases, it connotes a multicultural process, "encoding, recording, and decoding" (Kehinde, 2009, p.77). For example, some post-colonial writings are classified as multicultural literature because they "reflect the customs, beliefs, and experiences of people of various nationalities and races" (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p.30). Furthermore, other interpretations of multicultural literature are "more inclusive, taking into account broader perspectives such as religious groups, disability, and gender issues" (Smolen & Oswald, 2010, p.87).

Following Michel Foucault's wording of the "homosexual" as a "species" category (Foucault, 1978), David Halperin mentions that "homosexuality and heterosexuality, as we currently understand them, are modern, Western, bourgeois productions" (Halperin, 1989, p.140). Similarly, the purpose of this paper is to defy the idea that "homosexuality" is a Western concept considered pluralistic. Instead, this study focuses on South Asian narratives and their traditional representation of sexuality in mythology. Through an intense reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's Mythological text, The Pregnant King, this study circumvents the Western model of queer identities, tries to reposition the transformative non-Euro-American context, and gives queer its legal status as a pluralistic critical formation. Combining insights from queer and post-colonial scholarship, it emphasizes the critical importance of a two-pronged theoretical approach. Following the recent research in redefining queer discourses in the limelight of post-colonial theory and narratives, this paper argues that revisiting mythological queer fiction contests the Western prejudice in queer paradigms. This essay focuses on identifying gender transgression in its various ideological manifestations. Queer narratives from the South Asian sub-continent signify the importance of race, class, religion, diaspora, ethnic, and linguistic formations concerning issues surrounding the representation of non-binary gender and sexualities.

In their ground-breaking book *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000), Indian queer historians Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai reconstruct an informative archive. Vanitha in her preface to Same-Sex Love in India says,

> Despite vast differences among regions, linguistic communities and religious and social groups, there was and is enough commonality in literature and intellectual traditions to justify studying this part of the world as a unit. The cultural continuity between many texts, including those we have chosen, supports this claim. We do not agree with those social scientists who argue that this commonality was an invention of Western orientalists. In one sense, all commonality is an invention, but this particular invention pre-dates the advent of the British by centuries (Vanitha & Kidwai, 2021, p.15).

Like Vanita's reconstruction, this article emphasizes the necessity of questioning the "tendency of queer theorists to avoid using terms like homosexual to refer to persons or relationships in earlier periods of Euro-American history or places other than the first world today" (Vanitha, 2001, p.1). This study focuses on the gender narratives in ancient and medieval stories and strengthens the visibility of third-world voices and their border knowledge of gendering and sexualities in India. In terms of India, this body of literature includes Suparna Bhaskaran's Made in India (2004) analysis of queer illustration in media and press, Vanita's work on *same-sex marriage in Love's Rite* (2005), and Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan's revolutionary collection of queer social movements in India, *Because I Have a Voice* (2005).

The Book *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik concentrates on the lesser-known stories in Mahabharata. Pattanaik writes, "The story of the pregnant king is recounted twice in the Mahabharata, once by the sage Lomasha during the exile of the Pandavas and the

second time by the poet Vyasa during the war with the Kauravas" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.6). *The pregnant king*'s story is primarily from an earlier era, "Pre-dating the battle at Kuru-Kshetra1 by many generations. Not so in my book" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.6). The author Pattanaik's Pregnant King is a deliberate distortion of the story in the epics. Pattanaik's protagonist Yuvanashva, the King of Vallabhi, appears to be challenging and subverting socially prescribed gender roles. The author imagined Yuvanashva as a "Contemporary of the Pandavas who engages Arjuna in a dialogue" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.7). The book gives an impression of a revolutionary book and appears to be a counter-discourse to social constructions of gender and sex. However, a thorough analysis would uncover the latent and concealed gender discourse intricately woven into the book's fabric. Pattanaik, in his author's note, says, "The Book is full of hymns, chants, rituals, spells, speculations, philosophies and ancient codes of conduct. These must not be taken as authentic as the intention is not to recreate reality but to represent it through processes" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.7).

The Novel, *The Pregnant King*, is written in ten sections, with eight sections representing from book one to book eight, plus a prologue and an epilogue. Pattanaik introduces the reader to his characters and the chronology of events before he starts to tell the story. "As an omniscient narrator, Pattanaik has aptly utilized his knowledge of mythology and blended it with his fictitious work" (Dowerah, 2021, p.226). Pattanaik, as an Indian Mythologist, has "wrapped his perception of ancient Hindu myths into a fictional realm which provides an expository diagnosis of gender fluidity" (Dowerah, 2021, p.225). The Pregnant King's depiction of queerness questions the spectrum that constantly bends between gender binary categories. The title The Pregnant King "evokes contestation relating to the positioning of gender" (Dowerah, 2021, p. 225).

3. Discussion

3.1 Western Prejudice in Queer Paradigm: Contextualizing Queer Pluralism in the Pregnant King

The novel The Pregnant King is an intriguing masterwork in revealing the distinct spectrums of epistemological perceptions of various genders. The issues of LGBTQ communities during the Mahabharata era are examined in light of contemporary sensibilities. In light of Devdutt Pattanaik's novel, the concept of Dharma, interpreted as "duty" in the Indian context, is thoroughly examined. The novel presents a utopian worldview of a hypothetical society in which gender discrimination does not exist.

Following these post-colonial gender views in the works of contemporary writers' queer critical literature in recent years has discussed the issue of sexual behaviour. That falls under the extremely restrictive definition of the heteronorm. Shramana Das Purkayastha, in her article, says, "The possibility/viability of developing a habit of creative skepticism, necessary for deconstructing existing paradigms and imagining alternative forms of identity-based on counter-normative sexual practices, has occupied the centre stage in the recent development of queer critical literature" (Purkayastha, 2014, p.120). Through this, it becomes crucial to have a political understanding of gender after the colonial invasion.

The story of The Pregnant King opens in Vallabhi, a small but flourishing kingdom on the banks of the Kalindi River between Hastinapura and Panchala. King Ila long ago built the Ileshwara temple. The temple is lauded for granting wishes for childbirth to childless couples. The Illeshwara's divine power is explained as

> They poured in each month, men on full moon days and women on new moon nights, men dressed in white, women in red, men with garlands of white dhatura flowers and women with a garland of red jabakusuma flowers. Each returned without excepting a year later, with daughters on the eighth day of the waning moon or sons on the eighth night of the waxing moon (Pattanaik, 2014, p.13).

Pruthalashva rules over Vallabhi. When Drupada, King of Panchala, visits Illeshvar temple, Pruthalashva greets him and makes arrangements for Drupad and his wife Soudamini's visit. Ten moons later, "Panchala had awoken to the sound of a child. A girl" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.18). Draupada introduced the child to the world "This is the son that Shiva promised me, the son who will kill Drona and Bhisma. I name him, Shikhandi, the peacock" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.18). When Drupada approached Drona for wealth, he humiliated his childhood friend. This event turns Drupada and Drona into fierce rivals, and Drupada wants to have a child who will kill Drona. When Mandhata marries Amba, the daughter of Shikhandi, this plot thread is finally brought together at the book's conclusion. In the novel, Devdutt Pattanaik interweaves many tales that give rise to queer or transgender characters. Shikhandi, a character introduced in the novel's first chapter, is born a girl but is raised as a boy because of his gender identity.

Pattanaik's version of the story raises questions about the gender binary and provides an impression of gender-fluid characters. In the case of Shilavati (Yuvanashva's mother), a widowed queen takes over the kingdom of Vallabhi after her husband's demise. She is willing to hold the kingship and continue to rule the kingdom. Unfortunately, according to the law of Dharma, she has to give up the kingship when her son ascent the throne. In this sense, the kingship does not rest on her shoulders as long as she would like. In the concluding section of the story, she confessed her desire to her grandson Mandhatha when he refused his kingship that

> I see in you the soul of a king. That is all matters. Vallabhi needs you. Imperfect or not, you must be king. I too have the soul of a king. The Angirasa saw that. But my body came in the way. I will not let these silly, superficial rules hold you back. You deserve to be king (Pattanaik, 2014, p.302).

Shilavati's birth as a subordinate sex prevented her from retaining the throne. Her interactions with other characters show she is well aware of her abilities. "The female body is the source of contention, and she accepts her shortcomings, which she projects towards a patriarchal structure" (Sabala & Gopal, 2010, p.47). Shilavati being a woman, has been deprived of her throne due to the patriarchal

structure. Since her will to power was denied, it created a conflict within her. Shilavati is the embodiment of motherhood and rules over Vallabhi. Pattanaik's words visually construct the scene as,

> Yuvanashva's cradle was placed in Shilavati's audience chamber. This initially disturbed the Brahmana and Kshatriya elders as they were not used to a leader who nursed a child while discussing matters of Dharma (Pattanaik, 2014, p.42).

Fathering an heir was a requirement for a king, but Yuvanashva was unable to conceive an heir to the throne despite three wives and thirteen years. Only a few options were left to him to acquire the throne. He organizes a "Yagna to brew a powerful magic potion that will make his wives pregnant" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.109). Yuvanashva, the king of Vallabhi, accidentally consumes a portion intended to help his wife become pregnant and gives birth to his first child, Mandhata. Shilavati is ordered to kill the child, as it is feared that Yuvanashva's gender will be questioned, posing a threat to his kingship. Shilavati gets worried.

> Yuvanashva, after he gives birth, then what will survive 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 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 (Pattanaik, 2014, p.195).

In contrast to Yuvanashva, Shilavati was capable enough to hold the role of being a mother and fulfil her role as a king. Shilavati used to attend royal meetings with her child's cradle close by, but Yuvanashva was not permitted to hold or feed his child. Due to the blurred gender binaries at this time, motherhood and fatherhood are being contested. Thus, being a "real" man requires more than just acting in ways that conform to biological sex norms; it also requires a man to be able to fulfil the social expectations that go along with it. The central concept of manhood is the "othering" of women (Strayer, 2018). As Sharon Bird (1996) in the article astutely claims, "Being masculine… means being not female" (Bird, 1996, p.124).

Whereas Bourdieu's observation of social constraints of traditional masculinity as “manliness, understood as sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and to exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a duty” (Bourdieu, 2001, p.75). Shilavati raised her son Yuvanashva with utmost affection and discipline. Rejecting her son's claim to be Mandhatha's mother and emphasizing his paternal role depicts Shilavati's "patriarchal standards in her decision" (Dowerah, 2021, p.228). Pattanaik's pragmatic view of Shilavati "reflects masculinity rather than femininity" (Dowerah, 2021, p.228). Yuvanashva might be regarded as queer due to his accidental motherhood because his role shifts when he fathers his second son Jayantha and mothers his first son Mandhatha.

In addition to the main plot of Shilavati and Yuvanashva, there are secondary characters to be examined through a queer lens. The tale of Sumedha and Somvat provides one such example. The story develops in a way where Sumedha and Somvat are two Brahmana boys from the village who camouflage as a couple to solicit donations for cows from the queens as part of a ritual in the holy fire worship. The novel's twist emanates from the two boys' experiences with the consequences. The reason for their execution can be viewed as a social stigma against same-sex relationships. Yuvanashva upholds matriarchal constructed notions, and fear of emasculation will occupy the people's minds in his kingdom, and this will destroy the year-old Ill- Vritha's foundation. Therefore, he obeys the words of Kshatriyas, "exile is not appropriate. These boys who have abandoned dharma are vessels of profanity to other lands. And for the Vallabhi and its king will earn demerit" (Pattanaik,2014, p.161). Followed by this, Yuvanashva ordered, "Let fire, not man, claim the lives of those who reject dharma" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.161).

The author makes a distinction between a conflict of gender transgression that is personal and one that is socially unacceptable. Personal conflict is connected to the internal struggles the couple underwent before the incident and later when they were "imprisoned and have to choose Somvat's sex change through the Yaksha" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.128). Sumedha and Somvat were unaware of the negative effects of transgender behaviour. They were encouraged to do so by Kaveri, a village widow. The widow in Tarinipur's village was the only one willing to get her daughters married to the two boys Sumedha and Somvath because they were orphans, but with a condition: "…they must secure at least one cow for themselves before marriage, thus proving their capability to provide for their wives" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.142). In this context, getting married was important to the boys because "Without wives by their side, Sumedha and Somvat were not allowed to perform yagnas, and pujas, or serve as Acharyas" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.141).

Ann Stoler defines how colonial societies were normalizing sexuality in the historical colonies; Colonial institutions, in her phrase, were based on an "education of desire" (Morgensen, 2010, p.110). In this sense, colonial power served as a separating force for people's "normative subjects of a life" (Morgensen, 2010, p.110) from "Subject populations" (Morgensen, 2010, p.110). These colonial practices on "sexual education" are felt even today. According to Giti Thadani's argument with Shah (1998), in the South Asian context, "Indian middle-class acceptance of "Homophobia" is a legacy of British colonialism, with its enforcement of heterosexuality and sexual prudishness" (Shan, 1998, p.147). In fact, research into pre-colonial South Asia reveals a sexual landscape that appears to be very different from the one we have today. As various excavations show,

> Within the history of the subcontinent, there has always been homosexuality. Sex between those of the same gender is discussed in many Hindu texts and sex manuals. Homosexual activity was also depicted in religious statues...; ...Tantric initiation rites, Hindu festivals and sects ...celebrated homosexual acts; there are descriptions of sodomy in the Kama Sutra...; ...there are references to women loving women in the Mahabharata and Ramayana...; and there is evidence of a pre-1500 B.C. feminine world where sexuality was based on pleasure and fertility (Shah, 1998, pp.146-147).

3.2 Restoring Queer Subjectivity: Gender Transgressive Mythical Paragons in the Pregnant King

The Novel deconstructs many secondary tales of gender transgressive stories like the priestess of Bahugami, Nara and Narayana, Two children of Aruni, Bhangashvana, Brihanala and Iravan. The story of Bhangashvana is briefly mentioned in Book Six and fully explained in Book Eight. The bards in Book Six perform at King Yuvanashva's court knowing that "There was a man named Bhangashvana, and he had two sets of children: some referred to him as their father, while the others called him their mother" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.239) Yuvanashva is interested in learning more this story and "He started to believe that in the story of Bhangeshvana, he would find that which would calm his restless heart. what sounds sweeter, father or mother" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.239).

The story is resumed in book eight when Angirasa7 reveals to Yuvanashva after his renunciation that "Bhangeashvana is also known as Ila, who was more male when the moon waxed and more female when the moon waned" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.313). The two sets of children that Ila fathered and mothered had their reasons for conflict "He thought he was being fair. But the children did not think so. They envied each other, the ones receiving attention wanted the inheritance and the ones getting the inheritance wanted attention" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.314). The reason for this was "Ila gave the children who called him 'father' his kingdom but reserved all his attention for the children who called him 'mother'" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.314).

The story ends with Ila losing his children in a conflict over envy but later reviving them by sacrificing himself. While hearing the story, Yuvanashva questions, "Why is this story never told?" and to this, Angirasa replied, "Because no one ever saw this as history" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.317). Angirasa added, "They said it was poet's imagination. Men cannot be mother, and mother cannot be king" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.317). In addition to Ila and Yuvanashva's gender fluidity, this story implies the social norms associated with the gender roles assigned to the respective binaries. Pattanaik does not elaborate on the intensity of the consequences encountered by Bhangashvana or Ila. Nonetheless, the author creates an impression of clear restrictions caused by a body that includes both male and female eccentricities through his protagonist.

The novel can be interpreted from different perspectives. For example, three queer characters from Mahabharata – Krishna, Arjuna and Shikhandi take centre stage in various roles. The Pregnant King includes a story of Krishna appearing as Iravan's wife in the war field and "Arjuna's cross-dressed as Brihanalla" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.234).

In Pattanaik's plot, Arjuna is introduced to Yuvanashva to express his emotions about transgender transformation. Arjuna clarifies the fluidity as "I did not have a manhood but I still desired women" (Pattanaik, 2014 p.245).

Krishna and Shikhandi are not primarily spoken in the plot, but they are mentioned in a meaningful way by the Yaksha. Pattanaik depicts Shikhandi's gender as follows "Was it a woman he saved or a man? For the girl thought like a man and felt like a man and had always been treated as a man. But that body of hers was certainly not a man's" (Pattanaik, 2002, p.38).

Book four discloses Yuvanashva's pregnancy as, "one night…(he) ran his figure over his left inner thigh and discover a lump, the size of a lemon. It quivered under his fingers" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.186). The king's left inner thigh bore the consequences of the magical potion, not his belly. Asanga Yuvanashva's doctor felt the pulse of the second month of pregnancy in the lump of Yuvanashvas thigh. "Its pulse had a familiar rhythm. A tempo of life yet to come. It could not be. Only women had such a pulse in the second month of pregnancy" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.188). In this chapter, Asanga's father, Matanga's words are sagacious, "All that happens in this world has a cause…Ideally, we should let things be…But we don't let things be. We want to change our fate. Heal wounds…We challenge destiny every time we contact an astrologer, a geomancer, a doctor, a sorcerer" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.189).

Pattanaik's ambiguous implication invites complex layers of gender in-betweenness in four different characteristics – "of what one is, what one aspires to be, what one is assigned to be externally, and, consequently, what one becomes" (Pattanaik, 2014, pp.188-190). To quote Chris Beasley's words, "through the critical lens of sexuality studies, to critical analyses of the existing organization and social meaning of sexuality and sexual identities, rather than merely descriptive accounts of doing sex" (Beasley, 2005, p.117). The author has imagined the results of practising against the laws of nature in light of Matanga's words, so sexuality has no place in the context of the king's pregnancy. In particular, the idea is that "Yuvanashva was neither assigned to be pregnant nor he had a prior notion. Besides, his sexuality remains heteronormative. Contradictorily, it's not Yuvanashva who challenged the natural order of childbirth" (Dowerah, 2021, p.230). The king's pregnancy is portrayed as an accident, and the two Brahmana boys who were slain on his orders are depicted as ghosts. As a result, rather than being a man or a woman, the king's personality alternates between being a mother and a father.

The Pregnant King focuses on Yuvanashva rather than the barren queens of Yuvanashva. The novel revolves around reimagining traditional gender roles and the representation of the fear of Emasculinity. Yuvanashva's mother and three wives are personifications of such social orders. The concept of a man's "manhood" is critical to comprehend the relationship "between gender and power inequality" (Kimmel, 2004, p.182). Manhood or manliness has been equated with power in Western society, and a man's ability to effectively enact the mandated behaviours of "traditional masculinity determines his privileged social status" (Kimmel, 2004, p.182). "For men… their category symbolizes their power; and everything which defines them as 'masculine' is valorizing, even to the extent that men do not generally see themselves as a separate group, but rather as a reference for the species" (Reynaud, 2004, p.139).

Yuvanashva's unresolved identity as both father and mother resulted in Pattanaik's distorted notion, which further questions binaries and natural laws in the final book of this novel. King Yuvanashva comes across the sorcerers Yaja and Upayaja in the forest, who had earlier prepared the magical potion for his queens. They educate him on the "significance of the presence of Shiva and Shakti in one being"

(Pattanaik, 2014, p.334). From the words of Yaja and Upayaja, "One idea, two expressions. Two halves of the same idea. Mutually interdependent" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.335). This shows that, besides a Manava or a man's mindset, none of the binaries can be positioned as superior or inferior "It is Manava's mind that creates such hierarchies and prevents women from becoming Rishis" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.335).

Pattanaik concludes the novel with Yuvanashva learning more about Adi-Natha from Yaja and Upayaja. Yuvanashva realizes that "men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are ultimately nothing but souls wrapped in different types of matter. He was nothing but a soul wrapped in the flesh; an unusual flesh that had created life within itself and outside. Flesh nevertheless. Mortal flesh that enjoyed suffered age and would one day be ash. Within was the soul" (Pattanaik, 2014, pp. 338-39). Yuvanashva's quest for self-knowledge culminated "when he met Agnirasa, who offered to worship him as Nilakhantha Bhairavi" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.343). They inform him,

> "… you are the pregnant king. The greatest of the sixty-four Yoginis. … You confound us. You confuse us. You remind us that what is impossible in the mind of man is possible in the mind of God… You terrify us with the infinite possibilities of the world. Tell us there is always something that we do not know. You demand that we widen our vision and our vocabulary, so that we make room for all, and are frightened of nothing" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.343).

The Pregnant King, Yuvanashva realized, "I am both. I am the terrifying embodiment of society's unspoken truth. I am also yet another of nature's delightful surprises. I am the soul. I am also the flesh. This is who I am." (Pattanaik, 2014, p.343).

4. Conclusion

The novel The Pregnant King unsettled ruptures emphasize gender over sexuality. Diane Richardson investigates the relationship between gender and sexuality: "Gender categories would not exist if social divisions did not exist. In this conceptual framework, the binary divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality is seen to derive from gender" (Richardson, 2007, p.461). Richardson further states that gender is "constitutive of sexuality, at the same time as sexuality can be seen as expressive of gender" (Richardson, 2007, p.461). The author constructs the character Yuvanashva in order to deconstruct the socially constructed notion of gender and opens up possibilities by moving beyond binaries. This article responds to the academic call for "renewed queer studies" (Bakshi, 2011, p.233) that is more contemporary and reflective of contemporary issues by drawing on critical insights from the growing fields of queer in post-colonial perspectives. Halberstam says, "The contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity – as a mass-mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled legal category – demands a renewed queer study every vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference" (Halberstam, 2005, p.1). The study on The Pregnant King emphasizes third-world perspectives, and its discussion of gender and sexuality has brought to light the significance of reconsidering queer parameters in the ongoing "renewal" of queer studies.

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