

Beyond the Gender: Transgressive Bodies and Desires in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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Devdutt Pattanaik is a contemporary mythologist who has recreated famous mythological characters such as Ram, Sita, and Jaya among others from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in his works. Some of his works on mythology include *Shiva: An Introduction* (1997), *Vishnu: An Introduction* (1999), *Devi: An Introduction* (2000), *The Goddess in India* (2000), *Hanuman: An Introduction* (2001), *Man Who Was A Woman* (2002), *Lakshmi: An Introduction* (2003), *The Indian Mythology* (2003), *Myth= Mithya* (2006), *The Book of Ram* (2009), *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014), *Devlok with Devdutt Pattnaik* (2016), and *My Hanuman Chalisa* (2017) among others. Pattanaik has also attempted to revive the interest of young children into Indian epics and mythology by writing *Gauri and the Talking Cow* (2011), *Pashu: Animals in Hindu Mythology* (2014), *Devlok* series that includes *Devlok Omnibus* (2011) and *Fun in Devlok Omnibus* (2014), and others. Pattnaik has also recently written number of books on Management Studies exploring Indian approach to business and leadership through epics and *puranas*. His novel *The Pregnant King* was first published in 2008 and was later adapted into a play titled *Flesh* in 2013 by Kaushik Bose.

The Pregnant King offers a unique re-telling of selective episodes of *Mahabharata* with a fictional tweak to produce a counter discourse to the heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality, which reduces human beings to mere social performers of the pre-defined set of rules and expectations. Pattanaik in author's note mentions, "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... This book is a deliberate distortion of tales in the epics. History has been folded, geography crumpled... my intention is not to recreate reality but to represent thought process." (Pattanaik, 2008, pp. vi-vii) This paper argues how the dialogic voices within the novel bring forth a more subjective and fluid understanding of human bodies through its re-engagement with *Mahabharata*.

Through its various characters, the novel depicts how *manavas* struggle all their lives negotiating between sex and gender, duty and desire, and personal and social truths. Pattanaik takes the readers on a mythological journey to reveal myriad possibilities of human forms, subjectivities, and imaginations; to show the "confining nature of words" (287); to remind that "the human way is not the only way in this world" (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 33); to reinstate that truth is polymorphous, "it all depends on one's point of view" (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 144); and to present a wisdom that must look beyond the flesh to understand human existence. The characters of Yuvanashva, Shikandi, Sumedha and Somavat(i), the unnamed prince, Nabhaka, Prasenjit, Uttara and Uttari, Nara and Narayana, Aruni, Ila, Arjuna and Krishna in the novel (and *Mahabharata* as depicted in the novel) portray the fluid nature of human body and desire, and demand a wider perspective to accommodate multiple human subjectivities.

The paper would discuss those characters from the novel that depict aberration and whose personal truths were never understood. Through this extra-ordinary narrative, Pattanaik reminds us that how our limited experiences blind us in our vision and understanding; and how we fail to see beyond what is shown, to accept beyond what is casted as normal, and to understand beyond what is deemed natural. Pattanaik writes, “Careful of the word unnatural. It reeks of arrogance. You are assuming you know the boundaries of nature. You don’t. There is more to life than your eyes can see. More than you can ever imagine. Nature comes from the mind of God. It is infinite. The finite human mind can never fathom it in totality.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 190)

The novel problematizes sex and gender dichotomy from the very beginning through the characters of Shilavati, Nabhaka, and Prasenjit. Pattanaik highlights how gender is not an essentialized truth of body, but a social construct; and how a whole web of knowledge has been constructed around the human body over the time to be taken as its final truth and destiny. Shilavati, the eldest daughter of Ahuka, king of Avanti, showed signs of intelligence and desire to rule since childhood. Everyone including her father believed, she was “given a man’s head and a woman’s body.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 27) Shilavati soon realized that how she would never be allowed to learn *dharma* formally and rule as a king because of her gender. As a girl, she was destined to be a wife, a mother, but never a ruler. She was supposed to confine her talents to the women quarters and not for the maha-sabha. Her wedding to Prasenjit, prince of Vallabhi, brought a change in the course of her destiny. Prasenjit’s pre-mature death provided her that golden opportunity to rule Vallabhi, with her father-in-law already moved in the next phase of his life (*vana-prastha*) and her son was yet to be born. But Shilavati was not accepted as king by four varnas, but as a regent, a custodian of the throne for the yet to be born prince. Shilavati gained immense popularity and respect during her reign, but only as a substitute till the prince was ready to take over the throne as king. She was aware that she is tied to her body forever and the social norms would not see a king in woman’s body. But her desire for power was so strong that she would do all that is possible in order to remain as a ruler. She was not in any hurry to pass on the responsibility of the throne to Yuvanashva even after he was married. Shilavati appeared selfish to Mandhata, Vipula, Yuvanashva’s wives and others, but her agony, conflict, desire, capability, and intelligence were ignored for it was not for a woman to be the king. After her death, even Yama records about her only “as the dutiful daughter of Ahuka, loving sister of Nabhaka, obedient wife of Prasenjit and doting mother of Yuvanashva”, but nothing about “her long and glorious reign.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 321)

On the other hand, Nabhaka, the younger brother of Shilavati, was destined to be king since he was a male child. However, Nabhaka did not have any interest in becoming a king. He wanted to “be a poet, play the flute and make music on the banks of the Saraswati.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 25) But his angry father told him “making music is for Shudras...You must be king because I, your father, am king. All men are bound to their lineage.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 25) Perplexed by his conflict of duty and desire, Nabhaka felt “pain of his dreams crushed on the altar of *dharma*,” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 27); and he asks, “If my whole has been decided for me, then why did Prajapati give me a heart? Why did he make me dream? Why does he bring music into my heart?...When would I live my own life?” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 26) There was no convincing answer to such questions other than blaming it on one’s *dharma*, determined at birth through lineage and body. Nabhaka wanted to pursue music and arts, but was forced to learn *dharam shastra* and other forms of art meant for a crown prince. Similar was the story of Prasenjit, the crown prince of Vallabhi and the husband of Shilavati. Prasenjit was not interested in taking on the responsibilities of a king. His passion lied in hunting. He never liked the confined walls and rules of palace, rather found happiness in the beautiful world of nature where “desire reigns supreme.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 33) Both Nabhaka and Prasenjit were forced to live a compromised life, for their personal self was sacrificed for the collective social order.

Shilvati's son Yuvanashva, the central character of the novel, presents the further complexity and fluidity of human body and desires. Yuvanashva, born as a man, has created a life inside him as well as outside of him; he is both a father (to Jayanta) and a mother (to Mandhata); and he is the king of Vallabhi and an aberration. Tricked by the ghosts of Sumedha and Somavati, Yuvanashva unknowingly drinks the magical potion created by Yaja and Upayaja, the two siddhas, meant to impregnate his three queens, Simantini, Pulomi, and Keshni. As a result, he happens to conceive the child and gives birth to Mandhata from one of his thighs. Yuvanashva experiences motherhood after creating a life from his own body. He now wishes to nurse his child and be called his mother; but would not be allowed so by the royal family. From this point, the novel depicts the poignant journey of Yuvanashva, who is torn between his personal truth and the social order. After giving birth to Mandhata, he is unable to make sense of the rigid knowledge constructed around the human body in the form of two genders, man and woman. He fails to understand how should he be perceived now, a man or a woman, a mother or a father? Being a man, he cannot be a mother; and being a mother, he cannot be a man. His first queen Simantini asks him to choose to be a "king or mother?" (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 258) She tells him, "To be a mother you must be a woman. Are you saying you are a woman, Arya? If you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 258) Forcing him to follow his *dharma*, she says, "The world must not know that you are an aberration." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 259)

Yuvanashva submits to his *dharma* and accepts his duty as a king over his motherly affections for Mandhata. Yuvanashva was forced to live a dual life, one as he knew himself (a man who is a mother), and other as the world knew him (as a son, husband, king, a man). His mother, wives, friends, no one ever accepted him for his present reality. He had to sacrifice his personal self for the collective purpose of kingdom, to maintain the order of *dharma*. Even Mandhata did not accept Yuvanashva as his mother. This truth was too bitter and complicated for Mandhata to accept, as it would make him also an aberration, a boy born out of a man! He refuses to acknowledge such a truth, as for him "social truths matter over personal truths." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 286, 293)

Throughout, Yuvanashva is incessantly tormented to know the truth of his body, to validate his personal experience, and to disprove the social knowledge as the final truth. All his life, he "yearned for accommodation and validation" asking

"When will my son Mandhata accept that I am his mother? When will my family accept the truth of my life? When will Vallabhi stop laughing? (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 341)

His family and people declared Yuvanashva mad when he uttered out the truth of his life by publicly declaring himself as Mandhata's mother. But everyone simply laughed away the matter. He says, "Vallabhi gags my truth with the lies of my mother. My people laugh and see only what they want to see. They don't see me. The real me." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 305) Feeling rejected by everyone, Yuvanashva finally renounces the world seeking "freedom from all lies." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 307) His pursuit of truth leads him to seek references for someone who has also gone through such a unique experience (of being a man who has created life both within as well as outside of him) across time and space. Within this context, the author weaves into the novel various references through the characters of Shikhandi, Arjuna, and Krishna from the *Mahabharata*, and the stories of Nara and Narayana, Aruni, and Bhargava through the bards of Vallabhi to present mythological truths of bodies.

The novel presents another possibility of gender and sexuality through the characters of Sumedha and Somavat. These two Brahmin boys from Tarini-pur were burnt alive on the orders of Yuvanashva for transgressing the boundaries of *dharma* by marrying each other. Sumedha and Somvat appear as married couple in the yagna, organized in Vallabhi to bless the queens of Yuvanashva with sons, to receive a cow as gift. Their plan turned awry when

queens recognized Somvat as a man dressed in a sari, pretending to be the bride of Sumedha. Both the boys were beaten and thrown in the prison for bringing such a disgrace to the yagna. By the trick of Sthunakarna, the Yaksha, Somavat was turned into Somvati; an action that would restore the lost manhood of Yaksha and also save the boy's life. Though unbelievable, Sumedha and Somavati were happy, as their love would now not threaten the social order. The change in Sumedha's body did not matter to both of them; their soul was still the same. They pronounced each other as husband and wife, a newly married couple, the soul mates. But Yuvanashva, the king, did not accept them as man and wife, since Somvat was born as a man. He asked them to give up their relationship and follow their *dharma* of being Brahmins and sons. Vipula asked them on behalf of King,

“Accommodating your feelings is out of the question... By demanding that the rules of social conduct be modified for your feelings, you challenge the very foundations of civilization, foundations that have served Ila-vrita well since time immemorial. Your feelings threaten everyone's order. Give up your feelings and embrace dharma or suffer the consequences.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 160)

Sumedha and Somvat(i) both chose their feelings for each other and announced, “we will not live a lie because it is convenient to *your* dharma.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 160) The boys were burnt alive to death, which they accepted with fortitude. Both of them did not protest even once before submitting their bodies to fire, “as if life outside the flames was even more painful.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 163)

Sumedha and Somvati could not cross the *Vaitarni* since Yama would not allow them to go the other world as a man and wife, and they would not go with any other identity. Thus, the boys returned as ghosts-Brahma-Rakshasas- to Yuvanashva declaring him as their creator. They tricked the king to drink the magical potion and become pregnant. They later tell Yuvanashva,

“It was not vengeance, father. It was the only way to make you part of our truth. Vallabhi rejected us for wanting to be husband and wife. You reject Vallabhi because you want to be mother. You feel our feelings. You understand.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 323)

Neither for the boys nor for Yuvanashva, the personal truth was accommodated.

Another possibility of human body and subjectivity is highlighted through the bard's narration about the shrine of Bahugami. Bahugami was married to a handsome prince, but their marriage was never consummated even after many years. Determined to know truth of the matter, Bahugami one night finds out “her husband dressed in a sari, complete with the sixteen love-charms of a married woman.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 212) Feeling disgusted with the sight of her husband in woman's robe, she threatens him to tell the truth of his body. The panic stricken prince in a painful voice 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. I have tried to change my mind. Spoken to Rishis and Yogis and Siddhas. But none have helped me.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 212) The plight of prince also came from the fact that his family did not accept his reality. He says, “You think my father does not know? You think my mother does not know? They know. They all do. They all know that I feel like a woman and that I only pretend to be a man... They do not, they cannot, understand the truth about me.” (Pattanaik, 2008, pp. 212-213) Feeling duped, Bahugami killed herself after cutting the genitals of the prince and cursing him. Bahugami turned into the 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.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 209) Concerned for the king, Simantini asked the chief priestess of Bahugami temple whether Yuvanashva is also a woman in man's body. The old

priestess replied, "... he is not one of us. We desire no women. Our flesh is that of a man but our hearts are that of a woman. Your husband's heart is that of a man but his flesh seems to have turned into a woman's." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 214)

The novel takes liberty with the time-period and makes Pandavas and Turuvasus as contemporaries to bring out multiple references of gender fluidity from Mahabharata. The character of Shikhandi, Arjuna, and Krishna are highlighted to portray myriad possibilities of human subjectivities. Born as a girl, Shikhandi was declared and raised as a son by Drupada, the impatient King of Panchala, who desperately wanted a son in order to take revenge from Kurus and Bhishma. Having a female body, Shikhandi learned all the skills expected of a warrior and prince. Draupda was so blind in his ambition that he gets Shikhandi married to Hiranyavarni, the daughter of the king of Dasharna. It was only at her wedding night that Shikhandi faced the stark truth of her body. Hiranyavarni did not accept Shikhandi as her husband as she saw his (her) woman body. Before a warring situation could occur between the kings of Panchala and Dasharna; Sthunakarna, the Yaksha, came to the rescue of Shikhandi and lends him his manhood to be returned later. Though she was now turned to a man and had proved the newly acquired manhood, no one really accepted Shikhandi as a man. Even Draupada, who raised her as a man, refuses to accept her/him as a man enough to go to battlefield. Therefore, he creates two more children Draupdai and Dhristradhyumna to fulfill his revenge. Hiranyavarni also could not accept Shikhandi as man for she says, "My truth remains my truth." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 270)

In the battlefield of Kurukshetra, when Bhishma proved an unfathomable force for the Pandavas, Krishna calls Shikhandi to kill him. Only Shikhandi could kill Bhishma, not by the merit of his/her strength and capability, but because Bhishma would never raise arms on a woman. Thus, Shikhandi says, "I have become a man of convenience with a weapon called womanhood." Shikhandi accepts this opportunity to prove his manhood, only to be received as a woman by Bhishma and others in the battle. The ambiguity of Shikhandi's gender continued to be discussed even after his/her death. Before going for the war, Shikhandi, on Hiranyavarni's request and persuasion, made love to her. A beautiful girl Amba was born out of this union "ten moons after the battle of Kurukshetra..." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 264). But Amba was considered as an aberration by the society as others would say her father was not a man, and that she is an offspring of two women. No prince participated in Amba's *gandharva*, as no one deemed her fit to be a queen. Mandhata says, "Shikhandi's daughter embodies an aberration, a disruption of order. She has therefore been rejected by all the kings of Ill-vrita." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 290) It was only after Yuvanashava confronted Mandhata to accept the truth of his own birth, and later coaxed by his grandmother Shilvati to take over the throne, he marries Amba.

The other references from Mahabharata are of Arjuna and Krishna, where Pattanaik tells how Arjuna and Krishna had to change their bodies from a man to a woman. During the last year of Pandava's exile, Arjuna disguised himself as Brihanalla, a eunuch, to stay at the palace of Virata, King of Matsya. Arjuna says, "I was neither. I was a eunuch. False man. False woman." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 248) On asking how he felt living as a woman in man's body, Arjuna replies, "liberating actually. I could get away with anything. I could dance and sing as I pleased. I had to answer to no woman or man. I was no one's husband or wife." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 246) But *kama* did not leave Arjuna at peace. The matter became complicated when on one side Arjuna fell in love with Uttari (princess of Matsya) and on the other side Uttara (prince of Matsya) fell in love with Arjuna (taking him as a woman). At the end of the exile period when Arjuna's manhood was restored, Uttara was heartbroken. Uttara's love for Arjuna was so strong that he tells him,

"I cannot stop loving you just because your body has changed. My love is true, unfettered by flesh." (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 249)

Uttara's feelings were never reciprocated by Arjuna. As Ruth Hubbard puts it,

“Each of us writes our own sexual script out of the range of our experiences. None of this script is biologically given. We construct it out of our diverse situations, limited by what we are taught or imagine what can be permissible and correct. There is no unique female sexual experience, no male sexual experience, no unique heterosexual, lesbian, or gay male experience. We take the experiences of different people and sort and lump them according to socially significant categories.” (Hubbard, 2001, p.65)

Similarly, Krishna becomes the wife of Iravan, son of Arjuna and Uloopi, a Naga princess, for one night. Iravan joined Pandavas in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. However, when the situation demanded a “human sacrifice” (251), Iravan, being the perfect man with “thirty six sacred marks on his body” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 251), was considered the best option unanimously. Feeling hurt with the heartlessness of his father Arjuna, Iravan demanded a wife as his last wish, a woman who can weep for him after his death. Since no woman would have married a man for a night and accept widowhood for the rest of life, Krishna “became a woman. A perfect woman. Mohini, the enchantress.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 252) Krishna said, “Let me do tonight what must be done. Few will understand this. Fewer still will accept this. A temple needs to be built in memory of this event. For no society will ever enshrine it.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 252) After Iravan was offered to gods as sacrifice, Mohini wept and mourned as a widow. Arjuna said, “I have seen many widows cry. But none like Krishna.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 253)

The novel also mentions about the two sages, Nara and Narayana, who created a beautiful woman, Uru-vashi, from their thighs to teach Indra a lesson. But nobody knows whether the sages felt or desired motherhood, whether Uru-vashi called them father or mother? Similarly, Aruni, the dawn-god, who disguised himself as a woman to see the dance of Apsaras in Indra's palace, was chased by Indra who then made love to him/her resulting into Aruni's pregnancy. When Surya witnessed Aruni's feminine form, he also felt strong attraction towards her resulting into another lovemaking and pregnancy. Aruni gave birth to two sons (one for Indra and other for Surya), and later gave them away “to the childless Riksha, King of Kishkinda, lord of the monkeys.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 217) When enquired why Aruni gave away his children to monkeys, Bard replies to the annoyance of Yuvanashva, “Maybe children born of a man are fit only to be raised as monkeys.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 218)

However, Yuvanashava's truth was different from Somvat(i), the unnamed prince, Shikhandi, Arjuna, Krishna and others, as he experienced motherhood in a man's body. He had given birth to a child from his own body, had fed milk to the baby from his bosom, and had a strong yearning to be called mother by his son. He was both a man and a mother. His quest to know such a reference from the past was finally quenched by the bards when they told him the story of Bhangasvana/ Sudyumna/Illa, a rarely known and yet rarely believed story. Illa, a young prince who had many wives and children, was once turned into a female under the spell of Lord Shiva and the goddess while hunting in a deep forest. When asked for mercy, the goddess modified the curse so that “Ila's masculinity would wax and wane with the moon. He would be all male on full-moon days and all female on new-moon nights.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 313) As a woman, Illa fell in love with Budh and had many children from him who called Illa their mother. Thus, “Illa came to be both son and daughter, man and woman, husband and wife, father and mother.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 314) The fluidity of Ila's body created chaos to his family and everyone around. And when all his children, who called him father and all those who called him mother, fought with each other to claim Illa's property and love and eventually died; Illa sacrificed his life to restore the lives of his/her children. However, only by making Illa (the man) as Ileswara (the god) could this strange truth be accommodated. When asked by Yuvanashva that why the story of Bhangashvana/Illa is never told, bards reply,

“because no one ever saw this as history. They said it was a poet’s imagination. Men cannot be mothers, and mothers cannot be kings.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 317)

The novel ends with Yauvanashva gaining new wisdom about Adi-natha through Yaja and Upayaja, and he realizes, “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 soul wrapped in 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, 2008, p. 339) Yuvanashva’s search for the truth of self reached its final stage when he met Agnirasa, who offered to worship him as Nilakhantha Bhairavi. They tell 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, 2008, p. 343)

Becoming Yuvaneshwar, the pregnant king realizes,

“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, 2008, p. 343)

To conclude, through a deliberate attempt of blending history and mythology, fact and fiction, real and imaginary, Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Pregnant King* problematizes the essentialized notions of human body and desire and unsettles the socio-culturally constructed truths (myths) about human existence. It addresses the current debates on gender and sexuality in queer studies and other disciplines, and asserts, “There is a world beyond the flesh, a vision greater than anything that is shown and seen.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p. 333)

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