

Inspecting Myth, Queer, and Contemporaneity in Devdutt Pattanaik's selected stories from the work Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You

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Abstract

Mythology plays an important role in the progression of society. It has a direct impact on the readers as well as civilization. Indian literature is diverse. It is a collection of literature from other languages such as Tamil, Marathi, Odiya, Bengali, Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Gujarati, etc. All these writings somehow explore the merits and the demerits of a specific region's decorum. Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik is a writer, illustrator, mythologist and lecturer, who is very much absorbed in transmitting the pertinence of past and mythology in the modern era. He uses mythology as a tool to estimate society. His work Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You is a collection of short stories from different Indian mythologies that exposes queer elements. This paper attempts to make an analysis of queerness in today's society with the support of Pattanaik's this prominent work. Also, social issues like gender parity, feminism, patriarchy, queerness, etc. are vividly discussed with the aid of mythology. The book creates a broad spectrum for the reader with the kaleidoscopic eyes of Pattanaik.

Keywords: Mythology, Mythopoeia, Queerness, Feminism, Individualism, Gender Parity, Patriarchy.

Indian literature is a storehouse of Vedas, scriptures, and Puranas. These encompass different kinds of literature like Vir-Gatha, Bhakthi, Riti, Oral retellings, Puranas, etc. These texts offer a bundle of mythologies that are deep-rooted in Indian consciousness. Through legends, one gets to know about their forgotten culture, traditions, and beliefs. These tales built moral and metaphysical ideas in culture. Thus, it is evident that culture is deeply influenced by mythologies.

According to Hinduism, there are four yugas - Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga and Kali Yuga. Each Yuga has its distinctive qualities, as in Satya Yuga - the idea of patriarchy was originated and was much celebrated; in Treta Yuga - the idea of morality was given more prominence, in Kali Yuga - every structure would collapse and queerness would come into the light. Every shift of yugas will be marked by a mind that loses faith, filled with insecurities, and a mind that seeks more attention to power. With this, everything will be on the verge of destruction. The arrival of Pralaya notes the ultimate end of the world, as portrayed in scriptures. With the arrival of Pralaya, the world would replenish, and the cycles of yugas will restart from the first that is from Satya Yuga.

Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik (1970 -) is an Indian physician who turned to a speaker, illustrator, mythologist, best-selling Indian author and theorist whose works mainly centres on mythology, religion, contemporaneity, myth, rituals, practices, and culture. He concentrates on the relevance of mythology in the present society. He is particularly keen on the innovation in fields of governance, leadership, and management. He is renowned for incorporating the epic Mahabharata and Ramayana in Human Resource Management. Some of his popular works include "Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata", "Ramayana versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison", "Shikhandi: And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You", "Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Indian Mythology", "The Book of Ram". According to him myths contribute to and integrate society. His views on Myths, mythology, business, politics, and sexuality are critical, innovative, forethought, and inspiring.

In the light of the book Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you, Devdutt Pattanaik tries to show a new perception of some selected myths. The book concerns more about Hindu stories from different regions. There are references to mythological stories of Jains as well as early Buddhists as these two pay more attention to the two prominent ideas of Hinduism - 'samsara' (the wheel of death and rebirth) and 'karma' (action). The work, Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You is divided into two parts. In the first part, the author brilliantly portrays his estimations on queerness with references to quoted myths from around the world. All these myths provide a guarantee to the fables that are presented in the second half. The other part comprises chosen narratives from Indian mythology. Pattanaik describes the unseen queerness of ancient India. Legends go further with topics like feminism, gender parity, patriarchy, the idea of Individualism, etc. According to Pattanaik:

Humanity's discoveries and innovations are shared by history, signs, and practices over centuries. These are linked to both the conscious mind and the subconscious mind. The study of the stories, symbols, and traditions is mythology. Religion is formed as certain stories and practices become static and are followed by a body that demands access to divine authority. (Shikhandi 9)

As far as Hinduism is concerned, some myths are ignored as they are regarded as something degrading and intolerable. On many occasions, these stories are not even told nor re-told to others. Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik

throws light on all these stories with a different perception that appreciates and acknowledges everything by seeing it as 'natural' and 'normal'. One could see how he opines on various things using the existing myths along with the history of the civilization. Thus, he creates or recreates the meanings of myths with his creative ability. He opens a new world of innovative impressions. Thus, he imbibes mythopoeia for delivering the harsh and hidden truths. Mythopoeia is a technique adopted by writers to portray myths using their creative ability. The use of this technique is observable in the second part of the text where Pattanaik brings out magic and supernatural factors in the stories along with his distinctive school of thoughts.

Even though the book is more about queerness yet the author does not neglect other involved features of the public. It is admirable, how Pattanaik links everything with the Indian community. Every story is an eye-opener. The initial part of the text deals with his exposure to world mythology and knowledge on "queerness". The second half of the text deals with Indian Myths that have queer elements. With a closure view, mythologies possess a significant role in human's life. In Mahabharata, there is a reference to a time when the very notion of marriage was considered irrelevant. It was the idea of fatherhood that made fidelity of women and the idea of ownership more important, which in turn changed the views on marriage. From the idea of fatherhood other ideas like property, inheritance, all were founded.

The idea of feminism, the view that men and women are equal, was originated from the Hindu scriptures. According to it, the soul has no gender while the flesh had. It was considered that only the unenlightened beings would focus more on the flesh than the soul. In the modern world, everything revolves around outer appearance. People give importance to physical aspects like sex, color, language, culture, etc. Even after accepting the queer, still, they are facing all sorts of prejudices against them. Some people are exploited even in workplaces, at home, etc.

Later through the identity of flesh, everything was divided. This changed the relationship between men and women in the past, and it further resulted in more divisions during the monastic period. Females were even categorized into different groups like devadasi, sanyasi, good women, evil, temptress, deemed women, widow. The idea of chastity is given more prominence even in this era. The division that was made in the past reflects even now in society. As Devdutt Pattanaik is strongly relying on facts, especially tracing the roots of certain beliefs from the histories, his perceptions indirectly prick the human consciousness with his unbiased comments on different characters from mythology such as Shikhandi, Chudala, Lord Vishnu's Mohini Avatar, Lord Krishna's different forms, etc. Thus, he compares the queerness in the past with that of queerness in the present. The author interprets the stories while keeping today's society in his mind.

According to the Vedas, human beings are categorized according to their sex as 'Purusha' (male) and 'Prakriti' (female) but apart from these, there is also another category called 'Tritiya Prakriti' (third gender). Pattanaik adds that "Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness" (Shikhandi 12). Pattanaik also highlights certain words from Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil that suggests queer thoughts and behaviours – Kliba (neuter), Napumsaka (Eunuch or impotent man), Mukhabhaga, Sanda, Panda, Pandaka (homosexual), Pedi, Hijra, etc. The words expose the way all the divisions categorized the queer.

Using various references from other mythologies like the beliefs of North American tribes about 'two-spirits' (people who have both female and male qualities), Aztec mythology – the myth of flower prince Xochipilli, Cuban Santeria mythology – the myth sea-goddess and her son, Vikings mythology – the myth of Odin, Ancient Egyptian Mythology – the myth of Osiris and Horus, Japanese Shinto mythology – the myth of Inari, Chinese Taoist mythology – the myth of Lan Caihe, Mesopotamian mythology – the myth of Enki, Persian mythology – the myth of devil Ahriman, etc. Pattanaik presents his perceptions of queerness. By comparing his views with different mythologies, he also creates universality in his perception. His cognizance can be applied not only to Hindu mythology but also to other mythologies as well. It is this universality that makes the work more relevant in modern time.

Through a thorough briefing about the history and past, the author questions the demarcation, benightedness, and severity that is prevailing in Indian society. To show the actual essence of these ideas, he resorts to stories from Indian Mythology with a new approach. According to Pattanaik "Hindu mythology focuses on how we see the world: what is seen and unseen and why some things are seen and others unseen" (Shikhandi 30). The author acknowledges that the rules, rituals, and other practices have their significance. All these traditions and practices integrated diverse people into society. It also generated awareness regarding diversity. But the actual essence of these are lost in the modern biased mentality of society. Pattanaik sternly interrogates how queer elements from the mythology are always constructed and established in a different level of metaphysical terms other than humane. It is the metaphysical elucidation that makes the idea of queerness invalid and inconspicuous. To accentuate the idea of queerness, one could take the case of hijras, who claps around the crowds seeking attention. Like the hijras, through this book, Pattanaik is seeking the attention of the readers to the discreet, abandoned, and distorted facts.

Most of the mythologies are spread through oral ways. The versions of mythologies that exist now in society are warped. The people who spread or write about mythological stories play a significant role. It is their idea that is delivered through their writings or stories. The views or beliefs of each storyteller or writer are different. This results in the formation of many versions of a particular story. For example, there are many

renditions of Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Veda, Purana, etc. The writers or the storyteller indirectly influence the ideas, point of views, or opinions of others. In this biased society, it is impossible to accept a version of these epics through the perception of hidden voices such as queer people.

The book exposes the harsh realities of today's society using ancient mythology. It somehow delivers the fact that even after achieving great progress and wisdom, society cannot consider everyone as equal and competent. The book uses mythology as a medium to mirror the biased nature of society. Many characters in the book resemble people around us.

Pattanaik's view on mythology is that "it is the exploration of mankind's subjective truths as they are expressed through stories, traditions, symbols, rituals, practices, and beliefs. The sanity and coherence of mankind have little bearing on subjective reality" (Shikhandi 35). In one of the interviews, Pattanaik revealed the relevance of fact in mythologies. He opines that "Facts are everybody's truth. Fiction is nobody's truth. Myths are somebody's truth" (Pattanaik).

The book also discusses the idea of 'the truth' and 'one law' that is compulsively followed by mythologies along with scientific and critical thinking. But the idea of truth could be distinct for different people. This always leads to disagreements and often the judgments of these arguments are made upon human prejudices, ideologies, and preconceived notions. It was the case in the past but modern academic discourses encourage the idea that 'truth shall prevail' and that all truths should be treated equally.

As myths are significant for folk's life, in the second part of the book Pattanaik brings another explanation to the same legends that are common to the community. The undertaking involves a ground-breaking impact on literature. Queer literature flourished with this one trial in Indian literature. He again illustrates with most debatable topics like gender parity, feminism, and patriarchy with the help of mythology.

Mahabharata and Ramayana are the two oldest and the sacred epics of India, and the fables are about elite warriors and role models of Bharath. Bhagavad-Gita is the crucial part of Mahabharata written in the Sanskrit language. Shikhandi is a character from Mahabharata who turned into a motive for the death of Bhishma. Shikhandi who is born as a girl child but brought up as a boy, on the day of the wedding night his wife realizes the femininity of her spouse. With the grip up of Sthuna, Shikhandi deals the matter with flexibility by lending the manhood of Sthuna. The text accords with Gender neutrality by burrowing the supporting descriptions of leading proponents like Lord Krishna, Lord Vishnu, Lord Mahadev, and Goddess Parvathi.

Feminism, a theory not purely for women's empowerment but is for every individual's impartiality, thus he is a devoted feminist who spoke for everyone. Pattanaik brings the conception of Feminism into his work by raising "queerness". That shows Feminism is not a foreign material to the primitive practice. The sketched reminiscences verify feminism has already planted in Hinduism. He drives a resemblance to today's public with underpinning Hindu scriptures and epics to warn the treatment of individual then and now- gender is not a matter which determines an individual's intelligence, temperament, or capability. Pattanaik says, "The celebration of queer ideas in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals is in stark contrast to the ignorance and rigidity that we see in Indian society" (Shikhandi 27). He openly discusses the mindset of communities around the world, how discrimination prevails in this 21st century based on mere gender. He opines a fundamental reason that the flesh reveals gender status, but everybody receives a universal component known as the soul. Without the soul, a mortal becomes just "a body"- whatever might be the gender. Indian doctrines and teachings always gave an interest to the soul rather than the physical body because of "Maya", the view and vision are the two distinctive degrees. In the end, nobody remembers a person as a beautiful "so-called gender" but a beautiful soul.

Not only Devdutt Pattanaik focuses on "queerness" with the care of mythologies, yet he indirectly points out prevalent patriarchy. The record of Chudala, an astute wife who became a man to enlighten her partner, through this story the writer sharply pins the women's capabilities to assist everything. He proves that Patriarchy is a pre-assumption that men are superior to women. Nobody is born as perfect, the flaws in them represent their authenticity and nothing is superior or bellow but equal. Chudala is just one character in the book- he portrays many such female characters like Pramila, two wives of King Dilip, Draupadi, and Kali, etc. These mythological characters confirm India is the land of women and the abilities of women are incredible. If a woman marries, that does not mean she has to sacrifice or withdraw her interest from her life. She has the right to accomplish all her desires and dreams about her life.

In this 21st Century, India witnesses' people look at the LGBT community as 'indifferent'. It reflects the desideratum to return to the gone period of ancient mythos and legends, which again assert the ideas of "queerness" tolerably. The book makes up what is 'normal' and 'abnormal' or 'male' and 'female'. The society we live in has a standard that 'men' or 'women' should behave in a certain way. This conditioning of society frightens the unheard voices about their sexual desires and identities. Pattanaik explores various legends of different countries to show that it is natural to vary one's interest. Since mythologies transmit orally, they are open to change. History proves queerness has been enclosed in culture but, now evaluated as unfamiliar. The book celebrates the normality of sexual identities. Unlike the world, the book dismantles the boundaries of femininity and masculinity. He staunchly criticises the marginalisation of society based on Gender. His valid arguments locate the former generation, where heterosexual relationships synchronize with the queer rapports, relatively complacent beyond the severity of embarrassments and stereotypes. "Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You" inaugurates a new genre where many writers were afraid to explore. It is noticeable that

the walls of the Indian temples in Kanchipuram, Thiruvanthapuram, Konark, and Khajuraho, expose the images of same-sex intercourse and companionship. This could be the mutual love between the same gender or the temple dancers or good friends. The tales of “Ratnavali, who became the companion of her female friend” and “Pramila, who knew no man” proves the temple sculptures are true.

In the Puranas, Lord Vishnu disguises himself to transform into avatar Mohini to unify rivalry. First to distribute celestial manna between the celestial beings called devas and asuras. Next is to help Lord Shiva from Bhasmasura that event results in the creation of Lord Ayyappa and Hanuman. The semen of this Shiva drove by the wind god settled in the womb of a female monkey Anjana. These narratives of two male gods never embarrass the devotees. They recognize it as gods’ ‘Leela’ to restore dharma on the earth. Lord Vishnu has many admirers on earth and in paradise, and when he switches to Mohini, she is the epitome of femininity. Even Lord Shiva could not hold back the presence of her delicacy and gentleness. These myths give glimpses of gender fluidity.

Krishna's legend is sufficient enough to disclose the disguises and mischief of Krishna. Solely a few devotees follow the fables in sensual terms. He pulled tricks on the Gopis by stealing their attires while bathing. So, they punish Krishna by cross-dressing him. The reaction was unpredictable that he was comfortable in cross-dressing and appreciated it to the edge. The description of Krishna lore mingles with the Kama, but these romantic images suppress and reconstruct into the form of passion. Pattanaik points out one such lore where “Krishna, who wore women’s clothes in love” to explain the miseries and yearnings of Radha. Hence, they choose to alter dress appropriately and supplant each other. This anecdote reports that the costume does not conclude the individualism of somebody- wearing different attire never means Radha is Krishna or vice versa.

Madurai temple tales explain the history of three-breasted Meenakshi who craves to conquer the province but falls in love with Lord Shiva in Kashi, which contributes to the loss of her extra breast. Yet, people idolize the goddess as an outstanding personality. The portrait of attire is the woman wearing trousers/ animal skin, to show up her masculine trait. Chidambaram Shiva is the deity of Nataraj, the Lord of Dance, who has the feminine trait. The contrast is female produces the nature of masculinity and male takes up nurturing and love. The narrative proves every individual includes both of the varieties in them- it signifies according to the partner.

The “Laws of Manu or Manu-smriti”, an ancient legal document that speaks Dharmasastras of Hinduism, registered from 200 BCE-300 BCE. The Scriptures allude to the fields such as duties, rights, laws, virtues, and punishments. In “Laws of Manu”, chapter-8, verses 175 and 369- 370, mentions homosexuality. The punishments for Homosexuality are particularly better when matched to other violations. The former texts neither encourage nor oppose homosexual activities. It is mandatory to commemorate that the last chapter of Pattanaik’s work announces the tale of “Ram, who included all in his Kingdom”- on the departure to Forest, Ram asked his subjects to move back to the land by acknowledging them as ‘Men and Women of Ayodhya’ but this created trouble on the division of ‘in-between’(queer) and they did not know what to undertake, thus they remained for 14 years to Lord to come back. On discovering their information, it overwhelmed Ram. He welcomes with a heartfelt hug. This illustrates how radical was India and Rulers of the time.

And now, debarring and disregard of LGBT results in dropping of school, exiled from home and family, could not get steady careers, evaluated against from the community, their mental health has deteriorated and inequality in their life. Because of their identification, society criminalises them. Hence, they bury the identities for the worry of elimination by clan and public. By the declaration of Section 377 shoots out many provocations and brutality against LGBT populations. It concentrates not on the individual but on the community. Queerness is typical around the world, it is the time of reform but what about the responsibility of an individual. Rather than staying for the acceptance of the people, one should acknowledge one’s own self first, hence growth arises in and out. Just like Lord Krishna, the atmosphere never disturbed him. He realises the intensity within him. The primary focuses must be on the internal, that is the certainty than the external world. The Almighty incarnates into male and female for the devotee. These customs are not sexual but to confirm the god’s love for his subjects. Queerness is even a social and sexual taboo in Indian society. Archaic scriptures deal with an immense range of transsexual characters and disguises. But Pattanaik is undertaking a fresh gender perspective on the ambiguity. Queerness is not necessarily an obscenity, but it could be empowerment as well. Arjuna and Krishna cross-dress up as women, Arjuna lived as a eunuch to slip away from torments, Shikandi becomes a man to arrive to accomplish the vow to kill Bhishma and Lord Vishnu to Mohini to save Lord Shiva. These are the undiscovered factors in the accepted myths. Gender Transformation is tougher to overlook. The factual part is they never ask others to defend but regard them as humans who have feelings, sentiments, and grief. The abusive surroundings imbibe traumas in the mind and body. They still long for affections and care from the cherished ones and family. In the name of Prestige and God, it forces them out of the household, without assuming that they too have a spirit.

This study pursued an analogy with today’s world to history in the light of Pattanaik’s work Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales they don’t tell you. Pattanaik speaks for the subdued voices in the Grand narratives of Indian Mythology. With this publication, he launched a unique genre. Gender flexibility is obvious in antediluvian narratives and queerness is not offshore. The prominent part is Indian Supreme Court declared transgender as the Third sex in late April 2014. Nobody is perfect in life, everybody is born with flaws, nobody is complete or incomplete, and it is reasonable.

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