

Veracity of Gender Power with Reference to Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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Abstract

Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian author is famous for his works in mythology and interpretations of ancient Indian scriptures, stories, rituals and symbols. . He believes that every society exists with myths as it creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties. He also believes that myths tell people how they should see the world. Devdutt in his work *The Pregnant King* makes the reader think about the predicament of LGBT in modern society. The author puts forth the concepts of masculine-femininity through Yuvanashva. The author through this work questions the limitations of dharma. The most interesting thing is that Devdutt not only challenges male female dichotomy but reiterates the existence of in-betweens. Thus, Devdutt Pattanaik makes it very clear through the examples from mythology that the issue of sexuality and gender is a very broad area much beyond the scope of the limited mindset of human beings and through his work he points out how thin a line is there between Male and Female powers.

Keywords: Devdutt Pattanaik, *The Pregnant King*, transgender, myth, mythology, gender politics

Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian author, is famous for his works in mythology and interpretations of ancient Indian scriptures, stories, rituals and symbols. He believes that every society exists with myths as it creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties. He also believes that myths tell people how they should see the world. Devdutt has written many books on mythology, fiction like *My Gita*, *Jaya*, *Sita*, *Business Sutra* and the *7 Secret Series*. He is an author of more than 41 books and has written over 1000 columns. Devdutt does not just present mythical stories but writes on the relevance of mythology in

modern times. His most famous work *The Pregnant King* is centered on the life of King Yuvanashva of Vallabhi who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son and also makes his wife pregnant. Devdutt questions the veracity of gender divisions; gender politics (female vs. male) examines “the imperfection of the human condition, and ... our stubborn refusal to make room for all those **in between.**” (Wikipedia.org)

Devdutt in his work makes the reader think about the predicament of LGBT in modern society. Many countries in the modern era have taken a lot of time to recognize and accept LGBT as part of society while it was mentioned in the ancient texts like the Mahabharata. He states through this book that the lesbian, gay, bisexual and the transgender ideologies existed from 2000 years and was mentioned by Ved Vyas. He also throws light on the division of genders into male and female watertight compartments by society. He exposes society’s shortcomings in dividing the society into male and female and equating it with masculine and feminine qualities respectively. A male is expected to lead the family, the society, the kingdom, and is expected to be powerful, physically strong and aggressive. A female is embodied with feminine qualities like fertility, subservience, physical weakness, etc. “She knew just as man’s destiny was bound to his lineage a woman is bound to her body. Both are determined at birth and are immutable.” (27) *The Pregnant King* challenges these established orders. Devdutt states through Prasenajit “The human way is not the only way in this world”. (33)

The author puts forth the concept of masculine-femininity through Yuvanashva. Yuvanashva is soft-spoken and an obedient son. He is good to his wives and exhibits his motherly attachment to his son, Mandatta. He sings lullabies to his son and feeds him. Throughout his life, Yuvanashva yearns to father a child in order to be a complete King and to carry out his dharma. However, he himself becomes pregnant as he consumes the magic portion and the rest of his life he yearns to be addressed as a mother by his son Mandatta. The author presents feminine masculinity through his mother Shilavati who has all the intelligence and passion to rule Vallabhi but is denied kingship as she is a woman. Though she cannot wage wars she strategically rules Vallabhi through an excellent set of spies and thus makes Vallabhi prosperous. Shilavati from her childhood exhibited excellent leadership qualities and governing traits while her husband Prasanejit only enjoyed hunting in the forest. In spite of her capacity to rule the kingdom, she is forced to act only as her son’s reagent. Towards the end, Yuvanashva yearns to become a mother of Mandatta while Shilavati reluctantly sacrifices her ruling powers and retires unwillingly - all for the sake of dharma (rules).

The author through this work questions the limitations of dharma. The author brings out several examples of people who were transformed from one gender to another or have been both at the same time bringing out the fluidity of the gender division. He presents this through the predicament of Shikandi who was born a woman but was brought up as a man in order to satisfy

his father and the kingdom. Finally, Shikandi becomes a man with borrowed genitals of a Yaksha.

Devdutt wonderfully connects this to the story of the poor Brahmin, Somvat who comes to Vallabhi as the wife of his friend Sumedha. Somvat and Sumedha were thick friends and they visit Vallabhi to receive a cow as a gift from the king's wives. Somvat is caught for acting like a female and is imprisoned along with his friend. He is transformed into a woman with the help of a yaksha but is beheaded for cheating. He is responsible for Yuvanshva drinking the magic potion that was meant to impregnate his wives. Somvat and his friend share a very close relationship with each other that they finally prefer to live with each other than to marry different women and get separated. Devdutt speaks about a different kind of love that exists between the two men connecting it to LGBT relations.

The most interesting thing is that Devdutt not only challenges male-female dichotomy but reiterates the existence of in-betweens. Yuvanashva and Somvat, were both males, were potent and could impregnate (sow their seed in) females. They both bore sons, but Yuvanashva becomes pregnant because of his consumption of a magical potion. The King bears a son in his thigh, and even lactates him. He sings lullabies and yearns to be addressed as mother.

Somvat a young man at the request of an impotent Brahmin impregnates his wife through niyoga marriage. Somvat has a very close relationship with his friend Sumedha. Although he is potent, he prefers to spend the rest of his life as his friend's wife than marry another woman. Thus, he is transformed into a woman but loses his life.

The temple of Illeshwara has the attributes of God and Goddess. The temple is visited by males when he is Illeshwara or male and is visited by females when the idol is dressed as Illeshwari or a goddess, stating the fluidity of the genders. Shilavati's husband states that Illeshwara is presented as both male and female deity in different days because "I think he loves his wife so much they merge into each other... They are not two, but one, as man and wife should be." (33), the Vishnu Lakshmi and the Shiva-Shakti concept.

The story of Sikhandi, and the predicament of Arjuna (as Bruhanalla for one year, due to the curse of a nymph), reveal the fluidity and the existence of one within the other.

Devdutt speaks of different types of marriages and the discriminatory status attributed to women in Indian mythology. He speaks of different types of marriages like anuloma, pratiloma, gandharva, rakshasa, asura, and niyoga. All these types of marriages reduced the position of a woman to a commodity that could be sold or bought to fulfill man's needs. An anuloma wedding was one in which a man from a higher varna (caste) could marry a woman of a lower caste.

Yayati married an asura wife and fathered Yadus, Kurus and Turuvasus. Yuvanashva married Keshini, a potter's daughter through anuloma marriage. If the woman of a higher caste married a man of a lower caste, then it was pratiloma marriage and is forbidden. In an asura marriage, the bride is bought in exchange of cows and other costly gifts. Shilavati bought Pulomi, the daughter of Vanga for seven hundred cows, three hundred bullocks, and a dozen bulls. In gandharva marriage the bride chooses the best man among the suitors. Yuvanashva impresses Simantini and marries her through gandharva marriage. An asura marriage is one in which the man abducts a woman and marries her. Bhisma abducts the princess of Kashi for his brother Vichitra-virya and also Madri for Pandu, Vichitra-virya's son. Somavat at an invitation of Trigarta an impotent horse-herder, has an intercourse with his wife for the sake of an heir. This was known as niyoga marriage.

Pulomi of Vanga is sold by her father to the highest bidder because she was prophesied to bear a son. The Vallabhi king is unable to impregnate his wife Simantini, but he is not found guilty and even his wife does not blame him. On the other hand, Yuvanashva buys Pulomi in exchange of costly gifts as she could bear him a son. Once Pulomi does not become pregnant the king goes for the third marriage and marries Keshini, a potter's daughter as the women of lower caste were considered to be more fertile. The wife's feelings are never given importance. Somvat is invited by Trigarta, an impotent horse-herder to impregnate his wife through niyoga marriage. Somvat describes the controlled feelings of the potter's wife as he impregnates her through the watchful eyes of Trigarta. The wife was regarded as the field and the husband as the sower of the seed (the sperm) and the lawful owner of the childlike the wives of Vichitravirya who offered their wombs to Ved Vyasa, after the death of their husband, for want of an heir.

Shilavati has all the attributes of a ruler but acts as a regent throughout her life only because she is a woman. This echo Simone De Beauvoir's "One is not born a woman but is made a woman." Shilavati is forced to lead a retired life although she brims with energy and interest as a ruler "while everyone in Vallabhi treated her as a worthy ruler for the rest of Illa-vrita she was just a king's widow. Inauspicious" (51). Vallabhi is saved several times due to the wise counsel of Shilavati and Yuvanashva falls as he fails to listen to Shilavati's sagacious advice. Women were married off only to bear the seed of their husbands. We find that in many instances an impotent husband is not blamed but his childless wife is considered inauspicious. Yuvanashva marries three women as he is not able to bear a son. Moreover, the birth of a son was supposed to relieve the forefathers across Vikarini, otherwise, they were believed to stay midway as crows. Devdutt invalidates gender divisions through a conversation between Yuvanashva, Yaja, and Upajaya. Yuvanashva is initially confused when he is asked to describe AdiNatha whom Yaja worships as a god and Upjaya worships as a goddess. He later attains wisdom and states "Neither husband and wife nor brother and sister. Something else. Symbolic man and symbolic woman.

That's what they were. Vehicles of an idea. Two ideas. No. One idea, two expressions. Two halves of the same idea. Mutually interdependent." (335)

Devdutt through the conversation between Somvat and the Yaksha brings out enlightening truths that speak about nature's intricacies and diverse possibilities and the limitations of human conception. "My son. Anything is possible in this world. Even Somvat can become Somvati.... 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" (190) These words seem to reiterate the feminist theory of the French psychoanalysts like Simon de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray to understand the concept of gender. They principally state that individuals only perceive themselves as having constant gender identities. They make a choice that either confirms or violates the gender roles of a particular group. This classification deprives one of one's individuality and negates the in-betweens. Yuvanashva's attachment to his son Mandatta and his mother Shilavati can be equated with the object relations theory. According to this theory infant's relationship with his mother primarily determines the formation of his personality. "Shilavati told her son, "If you want Lakshmi to follow you, be a Vishnu. Do your duty. Don't run after glory." Yuvanashva obeyed." (45) The kingdom Vallabhi prospered without wars and bloodshed and Yuvanashva was never aggressive due to his relationship with his mother.

Shikandi embodies all queer people-from gays to lesbian to Hijras to transgendered people to hermaphrodites to bisexuals. The story of Bhangashvana told by Bhisma is the story of bisexuals. The birth of King Bagiradha was through the union of two queens. AdiNatha was worshipped as both male and female god and goddess respectively at the same time. Tirupathi Lord Venkateswara and Gopeshwarji of Vrindavan are worshipped as Mohini incarnations during specific festivals. The worship of Bahucharji, the patron goddess of the Hijras, reveals the existence of various groups in society from time immemorial. "Homosexuals have always existed in God's world but more often than not manmade society has chosen to ignore, suppress, ridicule, label them aberrant, diseased, to be swept under carpets and gagged by laws such as 377. They have been equated with rapists and molesters, simply because they can only love differently." (quora.com)

Thus, Devdutt Pattanaik through his work *The Pregnant King* aptly points out how thin a line there is between Male and Female powers. He also makes it very clear through the examples from mythology that the issue of sexuality and gender is a very broad area much beyond the scope of the limited mindset of human beings. Devdutt wonderfully draws a leaf from Mahabharata, the story of a King named Yuvanashva, King of Vallabhi, who accidentally gets pregnant as told by sage Lomasa to the Pandavas and loads it with food for thought that would

go a long way in establishing a broad-minded, tolerant society. He also wonderfully brings out the battle between the mind and heart, facts and feelings, duty and desire through the portrayal of the conflict between Yama (duty) and Kama (desire). Devdutt urges the reader to understand the pointless gender politics and attain the purpose of life through the words of Yagnavalkya “We are all trapped in the world of changes, where we feel trapped by destiny and propelled by desire. The point of life is to find that which does not change the freedom from it all. Moksha.” (337)

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