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Research Article

Queering Dharma: Gender Fluidity and the Politics of Desire in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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ABSTRACT

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) reimagines an obscure episode from the *Mahabharata* to interrogate the intersections of gender, dharma, and desire in Indian cultural consciousness. Through the story of King Yuvanashva, who accidentally becomes pregnant, Pattanaik reconfigures myth as a dynamic site for negotiating questions of identity, power, and moral order. Drawing on queer theory and feminist thought; particularly Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's understanding of queer subjectivity, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the subaltern and this paper argues that *The Pregnant King* queers both kingship and dharma. It exposes how patriarchal epistemologies shape the limits of recognition, while myth itself becomes a space of resistance and fluidity. By queering cultural memory, Pattanaik recovers suppressed voices and destabilizes binary constructions of masculinity and femininity. Ultimately, the novel reveals the radical potential of mythic retelling to question normative moral frameworks and to contribute to contemporary discourses of gender justice and inclusivity.

KEYWORDS: gender fluidity, queer theory, dharma, mythology

FULL PAPER

"Myths are simply truths that are repeated, whether they happened or not" (Pattanaik xv). With this assertion in the preface to *The Pregnant King*, Devdutt Pattanaik foregrounds his project of reclaiming myth as a living discourse rather than a static relic. In Indian tradition, myth has always been epistemologically active as it constructs ethical paradigms, legitimizes political power, and naturalizes social hierarchies. From the *Ramayana* to the *Mahabharata*, myths define duty (*dharma*), enshrine ideals of kingship and motherhood, and inscribe gendered moral codes. Yet, within these same texts exist fissures which exhibits moments of ambiguity that challenge essentialist interpretations.

The Pregnant King emerges from one such fissure. It recounts the tale of Yuvanashva, a ruler who accidentally drinks a potion meant for his queens and consequently conceives a child. His predicament unsettles the rigid binaries that govern masculinity, kingship, and kinship. As Yuvanashva laments, "No one will call me mother. That is my curse" (Pattanaik 152). This lament is not merely emotional; it marks a philosophical disruption of the dharmic order, which dictates that fatherhood and motherhood are mutually exclusive.

This paper explores how Pattanaik's novel queers the categories of gender, dharma, and desire by dramatizing the embodied contradictions of Yuvanashva's pregnancy. It argues that the narrative functions as a site where gender becomes performative and provisional rather than biological and fixed. Drawing upon Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), the analysis positions *The Pregnant King* as both a literary and cultural intervention. Pattanaik's mythmaking reveals how Indian myth, when reread through a queer lens, becomes a reservoir of radical inclusivity, where the boundaries between male and female, self and other, are porous and negotiable.

I. Queering Masculinity and Kingship

Indian mythology constructs kingship as a performance of masculine virtue: the king must be protector, progenitor, and patriarch. His virility guarantees both political stability and cosmic order. In *The Pregnant King*, this paradigm collapses when Yuvanashva conceives a child. The event dismantles the conventional hierarchy of gendered roles, producing what Butler would call a "displacement of the founding norms of gender" (*Gender Trouble* 45).

When his counselors insist, "You gave birth to him, but you are still his father," Yuvanashva's protest and says, "But I feel like his mother. Why will no one allow me

to be what I feel?" (Pattanaik 173) This reveals the tension between biological experience and cultural recognition. His statement mirrors Butler's observation that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body" (33). Yuvanashva's body performs maternity, yet society's linguistic and moral systems compel him to perform fatherhood.

Kingship, once the ultimate emblem of patriarchal authority, becomes in Pattanaik's retelling a site of epistemic crisis. The king who embodies both maternal tenderness and masculine power exposes the artificiality of gender distinctions. As Eve Sedgwick writes, queerness emerges in the "spaces of incoherence" where normative identity fails to cohere (*Epistemology* 45). Yuvanashva inhabits precisely such a space, and through him, Pattanaik redefines sovereignty not as domination but as self-knowledge that embraces ambiguity**.**

II. Desire, Dharma, and Embodied Contradictions

Yuvanashva's dilemma foregrounds the conflict between *dharma* which is the moral law that upholds social order and *kama*, or personal desire. His yearning to be acknowledged as "mother" is dismissed by his advisors, one of whom admonishes, "A king is always a father, never a mother" (Pattanaik 180). The rigidity of this injunction reflects how patriarchal *dharma* polices not only behaviour but also ontology , the very being of the subject. Yet Pattanaik's narrative insists that *dharma* is fluid and context-dependent. Yuvanashva's inner turmoil echoes the *Mahabharata*'s recurring line: "Dharma is subtle" (*sukshma dharma*). His experience exposes what Butler calls the "abjection of the body" that refuses intelligibility within normative discourse (*Bodies That Matter* 30). By embodying maternity within masculinity, Yuvanashva becomes an "abject subject", at once central and marginalized, sovereign and silenced.

The novel humanizes this conflict through deeply emotional scenes. When Mandhata, his son, is told that his father bore him, the child asks innocently, "If my father gave birth to me, does that make me strange?" (Pattanaik 212). The question encapsulates the generational anxiety around legitimacy and identity, suggesting that heteronormativity reproduces itself through narrative control. As Sedgwick observes, "the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (*Epistemology* 71); in Yuvanashva's case, the "closet" is dharma itself and it is a structure that disciplines deviation under the guise of morality. Through this tension, Pattanaik offers what can be termed a "queer dharma" , an ethical system rooted in empathy rather than conformity, where identity is affirmed through self-recognition rather than social validation.

III. Myth as a Space for Non-Binary Bodies

Pattanaik situates Yuvanashva within a mythological continuum of gender ambiguity that predates modern identity politics. Hindu mythology has always

contained figures that challenge binary gender logic like Shikhandi, who transitions from female to male to avenge past wrongs; Arjuna, who lives as the eunuch dancer Brihannala; and Ardhanarishvara, the composite deity of Shiva and Parvati, symbolizing the unity of opposites. As Wendy Doniger writes, Hindu myth "does not deny contradictions; it thrives on them" (*The Hindus* 187).

By reclaiming these mythic precedents, Pattanaik demonstrates that queerness is indigenous to Indian cultural imagination. Yuvanashva's pregnancy, rather than an anomaly, becomes a continuation of this ancient narrative of fluid embodiment. He joins the lineage of mythic figures who "occupy the thresholds of being," representing what Butler describes as "the failure of coherence as the condition of possibility for identity itself" (*Undoing Gender* 19). Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory illuminates this process. Cultural memory, he argues, is selective, it "organizes the past in forms meaningful to the present" (*Cultural Memory* 72). Yuvanashva's forgotten story, resurrected by Pattanaik, operates as what Assmann would call a "counter-memory," challenging the dominant patriarchal archive. The act of retelling is therefore an act of reclamation: the restoration of erased histories of fluidity and hybridity.

IV. Myth, Memory, and Cultural Negotiation

Unlike history, which privileges linear causality, myth functions as cyclical meaning and there by its truth lies in repetition and reinterpretation. Pattanaik harnesses this plasticity to negotiate between antiquity and modernity. His retelling transforms myth into a dialogic space where ancient cultural codes engage with contemporary discourses of gender and selfhood.

Gayatri Spivak's formulation of the subaltern is crucial here. The subaltern, she writes, is "the one who cannot be heard within the epistemic violence of representation" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287). Although Yuvanashva is a king, his pregnancy renders him subaltern; he is denied recognition within the semiotics of power. Pattanaik gives this silenced subject voice, thereby queering both *dharma* and cultural memory.

Wendy Doniger's observation that "there is no single Hindu myth, but many tellings" (*The Hindus* 223) underscores Pattanaik's method. By multiplying perspectives-through sages, queens, gods, and even jesters- the novel democratizes mythic knowledge. Each retelling becomes an act of resistance against singular authority. In this sense, *The Pregnant King* participates in what Spivak terms "strategic essentialism," using mythic structures to subvert their own ideological foundations.

V. Contemporary Resonance: Queer Mythmaking as Activism

The power of *The Pregnant King* lies not only in its engagement with myth but in its resonance with contemporary struggles for gender justice in India. When

Yuvanashva laments, "Perhaps the gods themselves do not know what to make of me" (Pattanaik 201), his uncertainty mirrors the marginalization faced by queer and non-binary individuals within both religious and legal frameworks. By invoking mythological precedent, Pattanaik dismantles the colonial and nationalist claim that queerness is a "Western import." He writes elsewhere, "Indian mythology is full of characters who defy gender norms- our discomfort with them is a modern anxiety" (*Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* 7). Through Yuvanashva, Pattanaik thus reclaims precolonial epistemologies of gender fluidity suppressed by Victorian moral codes and modern patriarchy alike. As literary activism, *The Pregnant King* performs what José Esteban Muñoz calls "disidentification"- a strategy through which marginalized subjects negotiate and transform dominant discourses (*Disidentifications* 12). Pattanaik's narrative neither rejects tradition nor submits to it; instead, it queers it from within, exposing its contradictions while retaining its moral depth. In the wake of India's decriminalization of homosexuality (Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, 2018), the novel acquires renewed significance. It serves as cultural evidence that queerness is not an imported discourse but a reawakened memory. Literature, in this context, becomes an instrument of ethical reimagination, a means of expanding the moral vocabulary of *dharma* to include empathy, plurality, and self-definition.

Conclusion

The Pregnant King exemplifies the transformative potential of myth to articulate non-normative subjectivities and reframe moral paradigms. Through Yuvanashva's embodied contradiction; male yet pregnant, king yet mother, Pattanaik dismantles the binary logic that underpins both patriarchy and dharma. His retelling enacts what Butler terms the "resignification of the symbolic order," turning the language of myth into a tool of resistance (*Bodies That Matter* 30). By situating Yuvanashva within the broader continuum of Indian myth, Pattanaik recovers a history of fluidity that predates colonial and heteronormative epistemologies. He wishes to challenge the cultural amnesia that erases queer genealogies from collective memory. Pattanaik remarks, "The world remains confused about who is a man and who is a woman, and perhaps always will" (Pattanaik 310). The statement affirms ambiguity not as failure but as wisdom , the essence of a dharma that is perpetually in flux.

Thus, *The Pregnant King* is both a literary and political act. Its queers' dharma by redefining ethics through empathy, queers' myth by reactivating forgotten narratives, and queers' identity by celebrating fluidity as truth. Pattanaik's reimagining demonstrates that mythology, far from fossilized tradition, remains a living epistemology—a mirror through which society can confront its deepest anxieties and rediscover its capacity for inclusivity. In bridging the sacred and the secular, the ancient and the modern, *The Pregnant King* transforms myth into a discourse of liberation, reminding us that to retell is, inevitably, to resist.

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