

**Falsity of Fixity: Querying Queerness in Devdutt Pattanaik's  
*The Man Who Was a Woman and Other  
Queer Tales from Hindu Lore***

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**Abstract –**

*This article uncovers queer theory's core concept of falsity of fixity of gender by swimming through the pages of Devdutt Pattanaik's book *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. Queer theory, which highlights the fluidity of sexuality and gender, tries to destabilise the fixedness of sexuality into the constructed gender-binary of masculine and feminine. This idea of indeterminacy of gender and sexuality in queer theory can be excavated by making an in-depth analysis of the lores that Devdutt Pattanaik narrates in his book titled *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. This book is an ocean of queer myths which presents the fluid stories of women who turned out to be man, emperors who became pregnant, people who have cross-dressed, wo/men who were castrated and the genderless people. As Pattanaik's book is as vast as a sea, the researcher dives into it and picks out a few oysters-like myths and break it open to expose the pearls-like queer concept of fluidity it contains. The myths of Avikshita, son of King Karandhama, who thinks of himself as a woman, Shikhandini who becomes a man, Hindu King's daughter who became his son, Queen Cudala who transformed herself into a young male priest named Kumbhaka, Sariputra who turned to be a woman, Two queens who conceived a child and Followers of Rama who were neither men nor women are chosen from this book to show the fluidity of gender and sexuality as propounded by queer theory. Most of the beliefs in the society are formed from the mythology. If that is the case, the myths told in this book invite the audience to broaden their mind to accept fluidity of gender and embrace queer people without discrimination.*

**Key Words:** Mythology, Queer Theory, Fluidity, Fixity, Destabilisation

This paper unearths the concept of fluidity of gender and sexuality in the light of Devdutt Pattanaik's book *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. Pattanaik's book successfully draws the picture of characters in the myths who are examples of queers. In the words of David Halperin, "queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (62). Queer people or non-heterosexuals are at odds with the normal as they do not stick to the gender binary constructed by the society. The characters Avikshita, son of King Karandhama, Shikhandini, Hindu King's daughter, Queen Cudala, Sariputra, Two queens and Followers of Rama in Pattanaik's book are queer or is at odds with the 'normal'. The faith of most of the societies are deduced from the myths prevailed. So, the researcher, by proving the existence of queerness in the myths, appeals to the consciousness of the people to accept the queer people as 'normal' and to let them to have a dignified life in the society.

An Indian doctor who became a best-selling author and mythologist, Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik (born 1970) focuses his work on mythology, religious traditions and contemporary society. He is also a speaker, artist, and illustrator who specialises in mythology. He focuses on

the current social importance of mythology. *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*, and *The Book of Ram* are only a few of his well-known publications. According to him, myths are an important part of society and help to unite people. His critical, inventive, insightful, and motivating perspectives on mythology, commerce, politics, and sexuality are a source of inspiration. Queer aspects may be found in all of the stories in this collection.

According to Morrison “The term (queer) is inclusive of the myriad of sexualities without being essentialist...allows for seeing sexuality, especially gender, as socially constructed and therefore capable of being “deconstructed” and “reconstructed”” (132). Queer theory tries to destabilise gender binary system. Zianne Cuff states that “Western culture has come to view gender as a binary concept, with only two fixed options: male or female. Because of this, gender fluidity is quite possibly one of the most controversial topics in present society” (18). The acceptance of fluidity of gender and sexuality will help the deconstruction of gender binary. Lisa M. Diamond is of the view that “Sexual fluidity has been defined as a capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire across both short-term and long-term time periods”(1). Sexuality is one of the central claims of queer theory. Linn Sandberg states that “Sexuality as well as age is not static but changes over the life course, which could be seen as a central claim of queer theory” (118). The notion of fluidity opens up possibilities. Arka Chattopadhyay holds the view that “This notion of sexual indifference opens up the field of gender as a performative playground where there are only possibilities and no fixed anchoring points” (190). Seven tales from Pattanaik’s book are analysed to exhibit the falsity of fixity of gender and sexuality.

The first myth is of King Karandhama’s son Avikshita whom many women wanted to marry. He rejected them all since he believed himself to be a woman. Princess Vaishalini wanted to kill herself as Avikshitha rejected her, but a celestial figure promised her that she would give birth to a magnificent monarch. She went to the jungle to fast till her luck changed. Vira, Avikshita's mother, fasted and vowed to get her wish (the marriage of her son). Avikshita, on his journey to the jungle, boasted that he would grant anyone's wishes. Father said, "Give me a grandson, please." Avikshita heard a lady screaming in the jungle as a monster snatched her. He saved her. It was Vaishalini and she gave birth to Marutta. Pattanaik states that “Avikshita believes himself to be a woman. Nevertheless, his mother wants him to marry and his father wants him to produce a child. Even the woman who wants to marry him is unconcerned about his self-identification” (23). This is how the society responds to queer people. Instead of letting them to be what they are, heteronormative society forces them to follow heterosexuality.

In the second myth, Drupada has a daughter. Believing in Shiva’s promise, Drupada raised his daughter Shikhandini as a boy. Shikhandini learned all skills set apart for men. She was married. The bride went to her father in horror when she found her spouse was a woman on the wedding night. King Hiranyavarna of Dasarna promised to attack Panchala to revenge his daughter's insult. Drupada knew he had to show his “son” was a man to rescue his kingdom. It was impossible, he realised. Shikhandini felt guilty for the disaster when she discovered her womanhood. She went to the wilderness to kill herself and encountered yaksha Sthuna. This woodland ghost felt bad for Shikhandini and offered to swap sexes for one night. Shikhandini seized the yaksha's manhood and returned to Panchala to establish her masculinity. Hiranyavarna's courtesans gave a good report. Hiranyavarna apologised to Drupada for his daughter's mistake and sent her home. Shikhandini, now Shikhandi, fulfilled his wife’s husbandly obligations. The obedient yaksha was chastised by his ruler Kubera for changing his

sex and doomed to remain female. Kubera was so impressed with Shikhandi's honesty that he let him stay a man for life. Because the yaksha gave up his sex for a good purpose, Kubera said he'd receive it back after Shikhandi died. Pattanaik indicates that "The sexual transformation of Shikhandini to Shikhandi is a motif common in many Indian folk tales that deal with female to male transformation" (28). It is an affirmation of the presence of gender and sexual fluidity in individuals

The third legend concerns the transformation of a Hindu Raja's daughter into a male. A Hindu monarch disobeyed tradition by refusing to give his daughter to the seraglio of his feudal master, the Sultan of Delhi. The king's daughter sought sanctuary in a temple dedicated to a goddess when the sultan's army was dispatched to fetch her by force. The temple door was shattered by the sultan. His biggest shock came when he entered and saw that the female had changed into a male. He left her and went back to Delhi. The Hindu king was so appreciative and ecstatic that he had several temples constructed in the honour of the goddess. In this story, "the honour of the princess, and by extension, that of her father's family, is protected when the goddess changes the sex of the child" (Pattanaik 28). Here, gender change is seen as an honour for which people are to grateful.

The fourth myth is about Cudala, who assumed male and female forms. King Shikhidhvaja loved his wife Cudala but never praised her knowledge. She was an enlightened woman with magical talents, including the ability to change her form. The king renounced his empire to seek true wisdom in the jungle. Cudala was not invited by king. She ruled the country. Cudala saw her husband 18 years later taking the form of a monk named Kumbhaka. Shikhidhvaja became friends with Kumbhaka. Shikhidhvaja listened to Kumbhaka's advice. Kumbhaka wanted to make love to Shikhidhvaja without revealing his identity. Kumbhaka told the king that a sage has cursed him to become a woman every night. Kumbhaka transformed into Madanika before the king that night. The king let Madanika sleep in his hermitage but didn't seduce her. Every day, the monarch listened to Kumbhaka's wisdom and slept with Madanika. Kumbhaka, who lacked sexual attraction, replied, "I sleep with you as a lady every night. I want female pleasure. Please make love to me like a husband. You've overcome desire, so this won't invalidate your austerity." Shikhidhvaja agreed and married Madanika. He listened to Kumbhaka's wisdom every day and made love to Madanika every night. Kumbhaka tested the king's dispassion one night. His wizardry created an illusion of Madanika making passionate love to a handsome stranger. The king ignored them and told Madanika to find a lover. Madanika evolved into Cudala after learning the king was immune to lust and rage. Shikhidhvaja was so enthralled that he returned to his kingdom with his teacher-lover Madanika and ruled the kingdom for ten thousand years with Cudala. "Cudala is capable of taking both male and female forms". Pattanaik is of the understanding that "Shikhidhvaja does not mind having sex with Madanika even though he is fully aware that Madanika is in essence male. The homosexual drift here is pretty obvious" (36). It can be seen as an example of homosexuality.

The fifth myth concerns Sariputra, who accepts his gender transitions. Sariputra was changed into a lady by a goddess. He didn't employ magic to change back into his manly form. What happened to your female form, the goddess inquired after changing him back into a man. The knowledgeable Sariputra said, "What occurred to the male form before, happened to the female form later—it changed." I didn't create it or alter it. "Reality is thus viewed as a series of transformations. Nothing is static. Truth is illusory" (Pattanaik 39). There is no such thing as male or female in anything. All identities, including gender and sex, are thus indeterminate.

Sixth myth is of Rama's neither-men-nor-women followers. King Dasharatha crowned his eldest son Rama king and retired to the jungle. On the night of the coronation, Dasharatha's

young wife Kaikeyi called him to her chambers and sought two boons he'd promised her years before, when she saved his life on the battlefield. Let Bharata be king and Rama remain a recluse for 14 years. Dasharatha exiled Rama on his promise. Ayodhyans were devastated when they learned about the incident. They followed him into exile. Rama turned back as he reached the river separating his father's realm from the forest "Men and women, wipe your tears and return to my brother's land, if you love me. After fourteen years, we'll reunite." Ayodhyans obeyed Rama and returned home. Non-heterosexuals didn't know what to do. Neither Rama nor Ayodhya could be reached. They waited on the riverbanks for Rama for fourteen years. Rama rewarded them and made them rulers in Kali Yuga. Pattanaik substantiates the point that "By remaining true to the spirit of the epic, the retelling empowers the Hijra community" (122). Rama approves the existence of genders other than gender binary too.

The tale of King Dilip's two queens makes up the seventh myth. Dilip, the King, had two wives but no offspring. In order to get his wives pregnant, he thus asked sages to create a mystical elixir. Sadly, he passed away before the potion could be used. The two widows devised a scheme since they didn't want to squander the mystical fluid. The elixir was consumed by one queen, while the other made masculine-style love to her. Planning paid off. Nine months after becoming pregnant, the queen merely gave birth to a lump of meat. The sages ascribed this to the lack of males in the conception ritual. The sages then used their abilities to correct the error. In this story "same-sex intercourse serves as a poor substitute to cross-sex intercourse" (Pattanaik 117). It can be cited as an example of lesbianism.

This research looked for queer themes and tried to disprove the idea that gender and sexuality are unchangeable in Devdutt Pattanaik's book *The Man Who Was A Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. Pattanaik's book offers a voice for the silenced queer community. Queerness has been there from the dawn of time, which is why myths include it. Queer characteristics may be seen even mythical gods. Beauty is made of differences. It is time to stop treating people differently based on their sexual orientation and start treating everyone as human beings with dignity.

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