

## ‘Queerness’ in Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don’t Tell*

*You*

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### Abstract

Devdutt Pattanaik through his *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don’t Tell You* explores about the queer theory, problem of gender ambiguity and other issues related to it. Pattanaik has used narratives from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Purans and other oral narratives to show that concept of queerness have its roots in the ancient tales. Pattanaik with the help of these stories points out that ‘the soul has no gender. Gender comes from flesh...’ Queer theory is not only concerned with lesbian and gay issues but cross dressing, drag, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender corrective surgery as well. Some of the stories from *Purans* and *Mahabharata* express the same. In a story entitled as ‘Vishnu who become a woman to enchant gods, demons and a hermit’ shows that in order to kill demon Bhasmasura, Lord Vishnu transformed into Mohini to enchant the demon and by mistake Bhasmasura puts his own hand on his head and turns into ash. Another tale is about Gopeshwar maharaj in Mathura (oral tradition from vraj) Pattanaik tells that in Krishna raas leela only gopis were allowed to dance with Krishna, if any male wants to do so they have to transform into a woman. A very popular tale from the Mahabharata expresses the crisis about the identity; it’s the story of Amba/Shikhandi/Shikanadini. Another tale from Mahabharata shows gender ambiguity and cross dressing. Pattanaik entitled the story as ‘Arjuna, who was temporarily castrated for showing restraint’ the curse of gender ambiguity turned into a boon. Another story is of Aruna (charioteer of sun god) who has malformed lower body and was questioned about his identity whether aruna is male or female? Aruna got a chance to take a break from his duty so he transformed as a woman Aruni, entered into celestial city of Amravati to watch dance of apsaras. As Aruni entered, Indra was charmed by her and so was the sun god and out of their union Vali and Sugriva were born. He has included many more tales to express his view.

**Key words:** Gender ambiguity, Queer theory, Oral narratives, Cross dressing

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Queer theory’s focal point involves the problem of sex, gender and desire. People think it is associated with lesbian and gay but it’s associated with more than that which is cross dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender corrective surgery. Pattanaik in his work *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don’t Tell You* deal with the same gender ambiguity. Pattanaik with other similar stories points that ‘the soul has no gender. Gender comes from flesh...’ (STDTY 11). “Butler’s theory of gender and the subject treats the subject as a process, a performative act where gender occurs only through the repetition of particular acts- and argument suggests the subject is never a stable, cogent entity.”( Nayar 190) He through many mythological tales from Puranas, Mahabharata and other oral narratives expresses that the discussion is not new but it existed from centuries.

Through one of the story from the *Purana* which he entitled as ‘Vishnu who become a woman to enchant gods, demons and a hermit’ shows in order to kill demon Bhasmasura, Lord Shiva took help of Lord Vishnu who transformed into Mohini and enchanted the demon. Bhasma sura turned to ash by putting his hand on his head but after that Shiva himself was enchanted by Mohini and together they created great warriors who chose to stay celibate and protect the world like Ayyappa, Aiyanar etc.

Another tale is about Gopeshwar maharaj in Mathura (oral tradition from vraj) Pattanaik tells that in Krishna raas leela only gopis were allowed to dance with Krishna, if any male wants to do so they have to take a dip in the holy river and allowing them to be transformed into a woman. One day radha found him dancing with another gopi whom she couldnot recognize, she questioned Krishna about the new gopi and he answered that the gopi is none other than lord of dance-Natraja (who was actually Lord Shiva). It is said that still in this temple at Mathura, gopeshwar maharaj-the shiva linga is dressed as a gopi.

There is another story ‘Aaravan, whose wife was a complete man’ has been extracted from Tamil *Mahabharata*. The oracles have prophesized that Pandava’s victory is possible only when a human sacrifice is made to please the goddess of war. The three men found to be worthy for sacrifice were “...Krishna, the divine guide, Arjuna the commander and Aaravan, Arjuna’s son by a serpent princess.”( STDTY 102) It was decided that Aaravan would be sacrificed but Aaravan doesnot want to die unmarried, he feels ‘what use is a life when no woman pines for you when you die?...’( STDTY 102)

He wanted a wife but no single women was ready to marry him and become a widow next day after the marriage, sensing the critical situation and its crisis Krishna transformed himself into a

beautiful woman Mohini and married Aravan, spent that night with him and after he has been sacrificed, she mourned as his wife as no widow has ever mourned. Pattanaik says

Traditionally Krishna is known as ‘purna purush’ or the complete man. Though conventionally translated as man, the purusha refers to consciousness that is gender- neutral. That is why Krishna is comfortable with his feminine side as indicated by his sporting things generally associated with women; the nose ring, the hair plait, red alta dye for lining the feet, and tri- bhanga posture where the body is bent at the neck, waist and knee. (STDTY 103)

Another tale from *Mahabharata* shows gender ambiguity and cross dressing. Pattanaik entitled the story as ‘Arjuna, who was temporarily castrated for showing restraint’. Once Urvashi a celestial beauty fell in love with Pururava of Kuru clan and after getting bored of earthly life she left him and he went mad. After hundreds of years she saw a handsome young man in Amravati which reminded him of Pururava, she approached him with the desire of love making. However the man turned down her proposal and told her that he was Arjuna, son of Pandava, descendent of Pururava. She was like a mother to him. She is also the beloved of Indra, his father. Love making to her would be incest. She said “I am Apsara, I belong to no one. I can go to whomever I please. The mortality of mortals doesnot apply to me. Come, let us make love.”(STDTY 110) Arjuna refused her proposal to which she cursed him in anger saying ‘only a eunuch refuses to a willing woman. So be one’ (STDTY 110) Arjuna was comforted by Indra who said that curses can’t be changed but they can be modified. He said Arjuna will lose his manhood as cursed by Urvashi but it will be for one year of his own choice. This curse turned to a boon during the last year of the exile of Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. All the five Pandavas disguised themselves and took refuge in the court of King Virata. Arjuna disguised himself as a eunuch-transvestite Brihanalla or brihanada and she was employed as the dance teacher of princess Uttara in the royal women quarters. When Brihanalla’s identity was revealed king Virata offered his daughter’s hand to Arjuna, however Arjuna accepted Uttara’s hand for his son Abhimanyu, as he was his teacher, mentor or as brihanalla a mother figure.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* said “...that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a ‘one’ who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today.”

A very popular tale from the *Mahabharata* expresses the same thought; it’s the story of Amba/Shikhandi/Shikanadini. Princess Amba wants to marry Shalva but Amba and her sisters were abducted by Bhisma- the warrior from Hastinapur in order to get them married to his brother Vichitravirya. When Amba expressed her love for Shalva, she was set free but when she reached her lover, he refused to marry her as she is considered as a tainted woman now. Then she returned to Vichitravirya but he too refused to accept her as his wife because a gift given away can’t be taken back. Amba requested Bhisma to marry her but Bhisma refused as he has taken the vow of celibacy. This infuriated Amba and she went to Drupada and Parshuram to put an end to Bhisma’s life but this couldnot be done as the vow of celibacy granted him the power to choose the time of his death. She then invoked Lord Shiva and requested him to punish Bhisma

who ruined her life. Lord Shiva told her that she will be the cause of Bhisma's death but in next life. Amba leaps into the fire to hasten next life.

In the next life she was born as Drupada's daughter Shikhandini, and believing on Lord Shiva's promise that he will be father of a son, he brought her up as a son, a warrior and was given a wife. Shikhandini's wife ran away to her father as real identity of Shikhandini was revealed. The bride's father king Hiranyavarna of Dasarna raised an army to threaten Draupada. Shikhandini felt she was responsible for the calamity so she went to the forest to end her life, there a yaksha Sthuna saved her. "Was it a woman he saved or a man? For the girl thought like man and felt like a man and has always been treated like a man. But that body of hers was certainly not of a man's." (STDTY 42). Hearing the story, Sthuna lent Shikhandini his manhood for a night; Shikhandi proved his masculinity to everyone who cared to test it proving Hiranyavarna and his daughter wrong. On the other hand Kubera the king of yakshas was angry by this act of Sthuna however nothing could be done. Shikhandi keeping his words returned to the Yaksha, Kubera was so pleased with his integrity that he allowed Shikhandi to use yakshas manhood as long as he lives. Drupada also performed a yajna and got a son and daughter from it- Dhristadhyumna and Draupadi. As the time passed by the enmity of Kauravas and Pandavas increased leading to the battle of the Mahabharata. Krishna came to the conclusion that Bhisma will not fight against a woman and at that moment he could be pinned to the ground by arrows as he cannot be killed. For this task they choose Shikhandi who was born as a woman but had become a man. On the tenth day of the battle Shikhandi rode on Krishna's chariot with Arjuna. Bhisma obviously refused to raise his bow against a woman saying 'born as a woman you are always a woman' (45). Taking the advantage of the situation Arjuna released his arrows to pin Bhisma down. Eventually all the Kuravas died and Pandava's won the battle.

Pattanaik says:

Shikhandini, who became Shikhandi, is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. But retellers avoid such details and tend to portray him/her as a eunuch (castrated male), a male-to-female transsexual (a man who rejects his male biology), a male to female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Amba) in his past life. It reveals a patriarchal bias even in the queer space. (STDTY 46)

"The highly rigid regulatory framework is the set of cultural codes that circumscribe what roles you can perform" (nayar 191) even the name of the child identify the role they have to play; it constructs an identity of a male/ female. Cross dressing and drag (men in women's clothes and vice versa) shows 'how another gender is being mimicked and performed.' (nayar 191)

Pattanaik narrates another story regarding the birth of Bhagirath whose severe penance brought Goddess Ganga on earth in form of river Ganges and gave salvation to his 60,000 ancestral uncles from the curse of saint Kapila. The narrative is probably taken from the Bengali Rampanchali of Krittivasa which says King Dilip had many wives but he was childless. He requested some sages to prepare a magic potion so that his wives could give him a child but before the potion could be prepared, he died. The sages advised the queens that:

One of the queens to drink the potion and the other queen to approach her as a husband approaches a wife, by this action a child was born who was named bhagirath as he was born by the union of two bhagas or vulvas. ( STDTY 92)

He was born as a lump of flesh without bones, once a deformed sage Ashtavakra saw misshapen Bhagiratha and felt sorry for him. He later blessed him with bones and Bhagirath's body became normal.

There is another story of indeterminate sex of god aruna, charioteer of Sun god (Suryadev). The story is taken from the *Puranas*. Kashyapa's wife Vinita laid two eggs once and when they did not hatch for a long time, out of eagerness she broke one of the eggs. The child that emerged from the egg had malformed lower body, the child was named Aruna, and the identity was questioned whether the child is male or female. One day sage Mandavya cursed a man that he would die before the sun arises, but the man's wife used her power of chastity to prevent sun from rising. As a result Aruna got a chance to take a break, transformed as a woman Aruni, entered into celestial city of Amravati to watch dance of Apsaras. As Aruni entered, Indra was charmed by her and made love to her 'and together they created a child called vali.'(122) when next day surya asked him the reason for reporting late, Aruna told him about his transformation. Surya too got curious and expressed his desire to see Aruna as a woman, Aruna obeyed Surya and transformed into Aruni. Surya too fell in love with Aruni, made love to her and created a child named Sugriva. Both Vali and Sugriva were given to Ahilya wife of sage Gautama, once he cursed the boys to be monkeys and later monkey ruler of Kishikinda adopted them.

Devadutt Pattanaik through his narratives from the Puranas, Mahabharata and other stories explained that the concept of queerness is not modern but it had its roots in the ancient tales. It's just that these topics are treated as taboo in modern society and are brushed under the carpet. In fact these topics need their own space, a liberal mindset and should be dealt sensitively.

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