

# AFFIRMING QUEER IDENTITIES IN DEVDUTT PATTANAİK'S SHIKHANDI AND OTHER TALES THEY DON'T TELL YOU

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## Abstract

Queer study is an extremely dynamic field that is expanding almost every day to include new histories, new cultures of intimacy and kinship, and new ways of being queer. The reclamation of the 'Queer Theory' happened almost simultaneously in the United States, at the beginning of the 1990s, a time when there was a shift from Gay and Lesbian studies to Queer studies. Although over time, the world is making headway in science technology, intellect, and being more accommodative towards innovations. Ironical but true we still see people continue to look upon the LGBT community with denial. The notion of LGBT predominantly tilts towards the construction idea of sexualities and sexual desires. Therefore, it's paramount to rewind to the previous epoch of prehistoric myths and anecdotes, which reaffirm the notion of a more tolerant India. It shall help to comparatively understand the queer space then and now. The 'puranic' Hindu literature like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Kamasutra, etc suggests that society before the Anno Domini was more liberal than the contemporary society. To explore more on this Devdutt Pattanaik's Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales they don't tell you have been selected, which in a way tells us about many other hidden queer tales from our own most old literature.

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**Key Words:** Queer, heteronormativity, transgender, mythology

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## INTRODUCTION

The term 'Queer' has been historically and repeatedly used umpteen numbers times; in different ways and references. The earliest recorded connotation of the term Queer, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'strange', odd, or peculiar. One of the best examples of it is cited in *Robert Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods in a Snowy Evening'* when the poet remarks "My little horse must think nit queer, to stop without a farmhouse near. Even Wordsworth spoke about the androgynous mind, which was further discussed by Virginia Woolf's essay 'A Room of once own' on why the best mind is the androgynous mind. The word androgyny comes from the Greek word 'andro' meaning 'man' and 'gyny' meaning woman, overall it means having both male and female characteristics. It's interesting to observe that the term 'Queer' was earlier insulting, used to defame the same sex. It was only in 1990 that the gay, lesbian themselves used to identify a way of life. According to *Annamarie Jagose in her book Queer Theory: An Introduction (1996)* 'Queer Theory aims to disrupt the gender binary of male/female showing that these categories are socially constructed. Queer is a classification in the procedure of realization and formation. It is considered to be a canopy term collating the culturally marginal sexual self-gratification. In academic Queer studies has emerged only very recently with the term 'Queer' gaining a positive political currency, even amid much opposition to it. The term has its appropriateness by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement worldwide, to make sense of the long struggle involved in reclaiming the term and infusing it with a political change.

Queer Theory enables deconstructive, often disruptive, reading of canonical texts. It began to be institutionalized widely around the time Teresa de Lauretis's special issue of difference (1991) was published, although Gay and Lesbian studies had already entered the First World University curricula after the Stonewall Inn revolution in 1969. Interesting to note that while choosing other kinds of critical theory spawned such as Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, postmodernism, psychoanalytic, Ecocriticism, postcolonial theories, the Indian academy has, almost, eluded Queer Theory. When we peek into our society, we find that a majority of them neglect or avoid talking about something that can directly or indirectly infer heteronormativity. So, it becomes very important to look back into our mythology and get answers to the existing dilemma in this regard.

## SEX CHANGE IS NOT CONTEMPORARY, NOR ADOPTED FROM THE WEST

To understand and trace the queerness in mythology, the works selected is *Devdutt Pattanaik's 'Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You'*. Conceivably the most recognized sex change in ancient Indian writings is of Amba into Shikhandi. The 'Puranic Hindu' literature like Mahabharat, Ramayan, Kamasutra, etc suggests that the society before Anno Domini was more liberal than the general public of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As mentioned by eminent mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, "Hindu mythology makes constant reference to queerness". Hindu mythology constantly reflects various examples of queerness. 'Shikhandi And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You' is an assortment of short stories from numerous myths across India. Devdutt's acquaintance with Queer histories in Hindu Tradition and gays, lesbians, and hijras of Indian society headed him to write the book 'The man who was a woman and other Queer Tales'. There are narratives of men becoming women and women who became men. Even we get the instance of childbirth without the opposite partner. Shikhandi, king Draupad's daughter, who was raised like a man and even got a wife, is known to most of us. But, on the night of the wedding, the moment Shikhandi's bride uncovered that her spouse was a woman, she was in utmost shock. The situation was salvaged when Sthuna, a Yaksha lent Shikhandi his manhood for one night, and Shikhandi then accomplished his husbandly responsibilities to the fullest gratification of his newly wedded consort. Shikhandini, who converted Shikhandi is what contemporary queer lexis would appeal to a female-to-male transsexual, as her body trans goes through a very unambiguous transformation genitally. When a woman modifies into a man, she largely desires to endure a man. Of course, Bhishma declines to acknowledge that Shikhandi is a male, but it is vibrant that Shikhandi has all the characteristics of a man- he produces offspring with his spouse, is a praised warrior, and so on.

## PATRIARCHY CAN BE ERADICATED THROUGH QUEERNESS

The society in epics was not completely utopian but way more adaptable and wide in thought process, still, the story of Chudala is an example that adapting Queer can break patriarchal thought process from society. Lord Rama's Guru Vasistha, narrates his stories that validate it's conceivable to be a hermit even while accomplishing all responsibilities of a domiciliary, and Chudala's story is one of these. The story is about King Shikhidhvaja who was seeking wisdom had a wife named Chudala, a wise Yogini, who was well equipped in primeval mystic ways, with even the skill to transform herself at will. On the other hand, as usual, the sovereign did not worth her much as she was a woman. He believed her to be a good wife, mother but not a knowledge giver. When the king left for the forest, she followed him in form of a man like Kumbhaka and shared her knowledge and also possibilities to live in society being sage. Kumbhaka also shared that he has been cursed by Sage Durasa, to turn into a female at night, so at dawn Kumbhaka changed into a lady named Madanika. In a way, the king was a hermit throughout the day as he did not get deviated by the fact of a woman being next to him. One day Shikhidhvaja agreed and gave consent to the desire of Madanika to long the pleasure of a woman. And so from that day the King was a hermit by daytime and householder as nightfall. This gives us a piece of information and the true meaning of a hermit and is not in being an eremite and living in the woodland, but about overcoming envy and desire whenever you are. (pg. 54-56) We can also claim here that it was queerness due to which a wife turned into a man and enlightened her husband and in a way patriarchal can be eradicated. The point can also be put here that Chudala turned out to be a man to enlighten her husband, but her wiseness did not change and so people should not be judgemental upon the sexuality of a person. Talking about *Manju Kapur, an eminent writer in her novel 'The Married Women'* dealt with how a woman is bound with patriarchal hegemony battles to find her love, identity, and sexuality. The protagonist boldly responds to the subjugation done to her by the patriarchal culture.

## DEPICTIONS OF QUEER IN KAMASUTRA

The enmity between the cliques of Shiva, Shakti, and Vishnu in medieval Bengal, from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is rerouted via Queer expressions. The idea of bisexuality is embedded in Kamasutra as well. Also when Arjun is doomed to live as a female for a year, he holds his physique and masculine ways, although he did not look much like a woman but as a hermaphrodite or a crossdresser man, about whom reference could be tracked in Kamasutra and the Tamil epics. (pg. 51). The book also illustrates Women in King's harem uses objects to satisfy themselves and also virginity of one woman taken by another woman (pg. 94), but all these are considered to be a crime in Manu's Dharma- Shastras and harsh punishments being given to the one who does so. Kamasutra also talks about Svarini, who is an independent woman, who accepts and allows lovers of both sexes into her house. (pg.148). The concept of Tiritiya Prakriti i.e third sexual characteristics or third sexuality is also found in brief in the Mahabharata and in an elaborated way in Kamasutra. The people under this category use feminine pronouns and categorizes them as feminine and masculine. The womanlike garbs as

women and is most of the time named as courtesans and masculine uniformed as men and are known as masseurs.

### JUSTICE IS SERVED THROUGH QUEERNESS

Multiple times Krishna taking the form of Mohini is quite evident to us. The battle between Kaurava and Pandava is very well known to us and also that both were equally matched. The only way left for Pandavas to convince the goddess of war and guarantee their triumph was to detriment humans. Krishna, Arjuna, and Aravan( Arjuna's son by the serpent princess) were found most eligible for this, but Krishna and Arjuna were indispensable, the only one left was Aravan. But he wanted to get married as that will only entitle him to cremation but obviously, not a single woman was ready to get married to him. After all who will wish to get widowed on the very next day of marriage. With no option left, Krishna turned into a beautiful Woman Mohini and spent a night with Aravan, and even after his death is mourned as his widow. (pg. 102) . Here we can give a thought among many reasons Krishna's changing into Mohini, where is Queer is also one of the reasons which contributed to Pandava's winning the battle and establish Dharma and justice on the battlefield.

### QUEERNESS ANSWERS TO IDENTITY CRISES

Queerness means shedding one identity and getting a new one but do people around understand this? We all know about *A. Revathi, a transgender, and her autobiography, 'The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life story'* is read worldwide. In her book, she talks about her Nirvaanam ceremony, after which she was beaten up badly at home, her head was shaved and she was left to beg. But, this raises a question on the society why was she ill-treated, only because she fought the battle against her identity crises and finally found herself. We always look up for our epics and mythological texts to get the answer to the end number of questions. Also, we still have strong faith in old Wives' tales. But all this goes in vain when we need to understand a person's sexuality. One of the old oral tellings of Hijra's talk about Bahuchara, (her temple is located in Gujarat), who was a princess. Although the precise specifics of Bahuchara are blurred as diverse oral tellings narrate not the same facts, the goddess is prayed and invoked in most of the hijra groups during the hijra Castration ritual known as "Nirvana". It means the end of one identity and the birth of a new one. The oral Telling explains that Princess Bahuchara was upset as she never got the physical love a wife desires from her husband and to find the reason she one day followed her husband who every day rode to the forest. Princess was offered help by a giant fowl as it mounted princess on itself and scoured the forest to find her husband. She felt cheated when she found her husband behaving like a hijra. *She then declared, "Men like you should Castrate themselves, dress as Women and worship me as a goddess. (pg.106-107)*

### SOME MORE HIDDEN EXAMPLES FROM MYTHOLOGY SIMPLIFYING QUEERNESS

We all know about King Dilip who had two wives but then, unfortunately, had no offspring. He requested the *rishis* to concoct a potion that his spouses could drink and become pregnant, but he collapsed before the potion was ready. On the guidance of the sages, one of the empresses consumed the potion, and the other Queen as a husband approached her. By this act, a child was born by the amalgamation of two *bhagas or vulvas* (pg.92) Devdutt's work is an attempt to explicate the existence of the queer narratives within the majestic religion opus, keeping in mind the compound and unclear connection between desire, fertility, and celibacy in the Hindu paradigm. He talks about a goddess who turned Sariputra into a woman and then changed into a male form. The goddess, in turn, asked "What happened to the male form earlier, happened to the female form later it changed. I neither made it nor changed it. There are umpteen examples in our mythology that prove the queerness is not new in our tradition but, is it the same in contemporary society? (Devdutt Pattnaik's book *The Man Who was a Women. pg.32*). It is interesting to note that Pattnaik's perspective towards mythology is not only to deal with myths but also to observe life. He tries to highlight in the selected texts that in ancient times queerness is observed neutrally and even at many instances being celebrated. The Hindu mythology makes references to queerness almost constantly. All the stories discuss the voices which are less discussed in the contemporary world. We can also say that society accepts mythology and myths at their convenience. Reference to Queerness can also be found in *Upendra's Bhaja's* (an Odiya poet of late 17<sup>th</sup> Century or early 19<sup>th</sup> century) '*Baidehisa Bilasa*', written in the ornate courtly fashion, paints a fascinating account of the desires of Rama and Sita beyond the natural order. In canto 21, he says during the exile when Rama, Sita, and Laxman were wandering in the forest a group of sages saw them and surprisingly looked with desirable eyes to Rama instead of Sita and were even jealous of her. The Sages requested God to turn them to Woman and placed earthen pots on their chest to mimic a female body, But they realized their wish couldn't be fulfilled and jumped into the fire. Rama confers upon the dead sages the boon of being united with him as his lovers in Rashlila in next life as Krishna. (*The Print, 12 July 2018*)

## CONCLUSION

Maybe, there is a man, a woman, or a mix of the two in all of us. Now, the question is whom shall we opt for and satiate; who is more true to ourselves. Shall we go with our biological imposition that is sex or society's imposition that is gender? It is very difficult yet important to discover ourselves. The paper helps us to identify the concept of queer and also that it will take some time to deepen its understanding in society. Devdutt Pattanaik, an eminent mythologist in the above-mentioned works has tried to clear the ambiguity over the concept of queer by showing its presence and acceptance in mythology. It is time now that the untold Queer tales from our rich mythology are being discussed and imparted. Society needs to change, as it has started accepting feminism and Dalis, hope the hegemony of straight people over Queer will end soon. The reading of the text elaborates that Queer is not a new concept for our nation, nor we find that they were marginalized segments of the society. As Foucault says, " *Power is essentially what indicates its law to sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear.*" But, yes society is changing and soon the day will arrive when we all will stand under one umbrella of humanity.

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