THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-1, FEBRUARY 2025

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

ContactUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

EditorialBoard: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

Unveiling Hidden Narratives: Exploring Gender Fluidity and Forgotten Myths in Devdutt Pattanaik*'s Shikhandi & Other Tales They Don't Tell You*

Preeti Kaur
Research Scholar (English),
Maharaja Ganga Singh University,
Bikaner (Raj).
&
Dr. O.P. Tiwari
Professor & Head,
Dept. of English,
Dr. B. R Ambedkar Govt. College,
Sri Ganganagar (Raj).

Abstract:

This research paper explores the complex world of gender fluidity and lost myths as it is described in Devdutt Pattanaik's narrative entitled *Shikhandi & Other Tales They Don't Tell You*. Pattanaik challenges gender conventions and highlights the diverse range of stories that are frequently disregarded in popular discourse by reinterpreting old Indian mythology. This study looks at how author's recounting of these stories provides a novel viewpoint on gender identity, fluidity, and the complexity of the human experience through a critical analysis of these stories. It also exposes the cultural and societal ramifications of these stories, highlighting how relevant they are to the current debates about gender and identity. In addition to enhancing our knowledge of mythology, Pattanaik's revelation of these obscure tales encourages a more inclusive and sophisticated appreciation of the various ways that gender is expressed in ancient writings.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes how crucial it is to go back and reexamine classic myths in order to understand the wider range of human identities and experiences.

Keywords: Gender Fluidity, Myths, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ramifications, Ancient.

Literature has played a crucial role in reflecting the emancipation of women, with authors like Amish Tripathi and Devdutt Pattanaik capturing the essence of Indian womanhood through their narratives. Tripathi's characters, such as Sita and Sati, are portrayed as courageous and resilient, serving as torchbearers for women's rights. They embody a spirited moral consciousness and nationalistic fervor, taking feminist initiatives to transform their ideals into reality.

Devdutt Pattanaik, a renowned author, artist, lecturer, and expert in Hindu mythology, explores feminist interpretations of mythological narratives. However, his views on feminism have faced criticism, with some arguing they are misinterpreted or even sexist. He differentiates between the forest (*aranya*) and the settlement (*grama*), associating the forest with a more flexible, diverse, and egalitarian space where women possess greater agency and autonomy. Pattanaik examines the complexity of female characters in Hindu mythology, highlighting women who demonstrate bravery, wisdom, love, loyalty, rebellion, or retaliation in various contexts. He also discusses Buddhism's role in rendering women invisible in mythological narratives, citing examples such as the Jagannath Temple in Odisha. He contends that women played a significant role in mythological stories, often aiding the gods in achieving their goals and destinies.

Devdutt Pattanaik, a renowned mythologist and writer from Mumbai, India, explores the depths of mythology, uncovering cultural truths embedded in stories, symbols, and rituals. A sought-after lecturer, he emphasizes the relevance of both Indian and Western myths in contemporary society. His work spans the intersections of religion, mythology, and management,

showcasing his diverse expertise. Throughout his career, he has authored and illustrated over 50 books, contributing significantly to the global understanding of mythological narratives.

Patriarchy asserts male superiority over women, feminism advocates for gender equality, and queerness challenges traditional definitions of male and female. Renowned Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik is one of the few voices addressing queerness and religion with both candor and sensitivity. He argues that queerness is not merely a modern, Western concept tied to sexuality but has long been present in Hinduism's rich written and oral traditions. Through his exploration, Pattanaik uncovers numerous overlooked stories where queerness plays a central role, some dating back over two thousand years. These include tales of Shikhandi, who transformed into a man to fulfill his wife's desires; Mahadeva, who assumed a female form to aid a devotee in childbirth; Chudala, who disguised herself as a man to enlighten her husband; and Samavan, who became the companion of his male friend—alongside many other such narratives.

In *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*, Devdutt Pattanaik recounts various mythological stories, exploring their significance in shaping the modern Indian mindset. Playful, touching, and occasionally unsettling, these narratives—when compared to their Mesopotamian, Greek, Chinese, and Biblical counterparts—highlight India's distinct approach to interpreting queerness.

Elizabeth Spelman critiques the assumptions made by philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, as well as much of feminist literature, which often treats women's experiences, roles, and self-conceptions as uniform, primarily reflecting those of white, middle-class women. Feminist theory argues that women are treated as a homogeneous group, while feminism itself aims to dismantle barriers to gender equality. Equality feminists like Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir contend

that differentiating between men and women stems from sexist ideology. Another perspective emphasizes defining womanhood based on its distinctiveness rather than sameness with men. Spelman suggests that certain traits of women cannot be universally applied if they are inseparable from specific social contexts. In her view, essentialism not only posits a universal concept of "woman" but also assumes a shared identity among all women, overlooking critical differences.

MacKinnon's concept of gender is limited in addressing diversity, as it promotes a monolithic view of women. In contrast, Elizabeth Spelman argues that the term "woman" carries multiple meanings to account for diversity. While she acknowledges similarities among women, she does not determine whether these similarities classify them as a single type. Her "ways-of-life" understanding of gender makes her argument compelling, yet it remains unsatisfactory due to its lack of clear criteria for categorizing women. Those who identify as "women" often connect based on shared political goals, experiences, and physical characteristics. However, Spelman's perspective raises concerns about the sex-gender divide, as it strongly supports the idea that gender is a social construct shaped by different social contexts.

The concept of "woman" is closely tied to both gender and sex, functioning as a cluster concept where individuals need only fulfill some defining features to fit the category. Feminism rests on two key premises: (1) that gender differences underpin structural inequalities between men and women, leading to systematic social injustice against women, and (2) that these inequalities are not biologically determined but rather culturally constructed. The notion of "woman" constitutes a type due to the structural similarities among its members. Sentences attributing a woman's nature to the world hold validity because women form a type based on shared biological and social traits. Resemblance nominalism allows for diversity within this classification, recognizing that while members of the category may vary, they still share essential characteristics.

The concept of "woman" consists of four general components: (1) femininity is influenced by sexual orientation, (2) women are typically associated with various phenomenological characteristics, including physical sensations, social roles, responsibilities, and self- and externally attributed identities that arise from physical traits, (3) the phenomenology, function, and social assignment of "womanness" are linked to female sex characteristics, and (4) self- and externally attributed identities also emerge from physical traits. These components help define the paradigms necessary to establish a class of similarity among women.

H. H. Price explains similarity nominalism and outlines a method for creating a resemblance class. Based on this framework, a "woman" can be defined as an individual who meets at least three of the cluster's components. A person is considered a woman if they meet these criteria, such as an African American with XX chromosomes and female sex characteristics, an Asian American trans woman with female secondary sex traits, a white European intersex individual raised as a girl, or a Papua New Guinean with XX chromosomes and female sex characteristics.

Pattanaik defies traditional gender norms, offering a nuanced portrayal of femininity in mythology. His collection presents diverse female personas, granting them autonomy and complexity often absent in conventional retellings. By challenging societal norms, he creates a platform to redefine women's roles in historical narratives.

Additionally, the text incorporates queer theory, which originated in 20th-century studies on homosexuality and lesbian relationships. Expanding beyond transsexual identities, queer theory provides a flexible and inclusive framework that embraces diverse sexualities while rejecting rigid gender rhetoric. Unlike gay and lesbian studies, it explores and debates sexual identities considered

queer—unusual, unconventional, or nonconforming. Moreover, queer theory detaches sexuality and identity instability from societal norms, emphasizing that no identity is inherently aberrant, deficient, full, or incomplete. This perspective enriches the interpretation of gender and sexuality in Pattanaik's retellings, fostering a broader and more inclusive understanding of these themes in mythology.

> … I have a man's body. I reject this body. I desire no one. I have a woman's body. I reject this body. I desire no one. I have a man's body. I dress like a woman. I desire men. I have a woman's body. I dress like a man. I desire women. I don't know if my body is a woman's or a man's. I feel I am a woman. I don't know if my body is a man's or a woman's. I feel I am a man. I am neither male nor female. I am both male and female… To appreciate this fluidity of nature And the shifting rigidities of culture Is to appreciate queerness. (Pattanaik 10).

Although Shikhandini was born as Drupada's daughter, she was raised as a soldier and even acquired a wife. However, on their wedding night, Shikhandini's wife discovered that her spouse was a woman. Shocked by the revelation, she returned to live with her parents. In response, Stuna, a yaksha, intervened, granting Shikhandini manhood for a single night so she could fulfill her marital duties. When Shikhandini later sought to return the temporary manhood, Kubera, moved by her moral integrity, allowed her to retain it permanently. Thus, Shikhandini became Shikhandi.

Shikhandi's entrance in *The Mahabharata* marks a pivotal moment in the Kurukshetra war, signaling its turning point. For nine days, the Pandavas and Kauravas fought without resolution due to Bhishma, the formidable Kaurava leader who possessed the boon to choose the moment of

his death. As Wendy Doniger notes, "Shikhandin retained her female gender when she lost her female sexuality. Indeed, it is imperative for Bhishma that Shikhandin is in essence (in this case, in gender) a woman, despite her outer male form" (Doniger 355). Understanding that Bhishma would never fight a woman, Krishna brought Shikhandi—who had undergone a unique transformation—into battle. Recognizing Shikhandi's true gender, Bhishma laid down his arms, allowing the Pandavas to gain the upper hand.

Despite Shikhandi's crucial role in *The Mahabharata*, retellings often alter his identity, depicting him as a eunuch, a castrated male, a transgender man, a hermaphrodite, or a man who was formerly a woman (Amba). His ambiguous sexual identity places him among marginalized characters, reflecting persistent patriarchal attitudes, even within LGBTQ+ narratives. Interestingly, ancient Hindu literature—including *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, and *The Puranas*—was, in many ways, more progressive than 21st-century society in its treatment of gender fluidity.

Arjuna is another figure in the epic who exhibits queerness. His temporary emasculation resulted from his refusal to succumb to desire. Once, Urvashi, a celestial nymph from Indra's realm, descended to Earth in search of pleasure. On the banks of the Amravati River, she encountered Arjuna, whose striking appearance captivated her. Approaching him with romantic intent, Urvashi was shocked when Arjuna declined, explaining that as Indra's son, he regarded her as a mother figure. Urvashi argued that, as an apsara, she belonged to no one and was not bound by mortal laws, but Arjuna still refused. Enraged, she cursed him: "Only a eunuch refuses a willing woman. So be one" (Pattanaik 110).

Desperate, Arjuna pleaded with Indra to lift the curse. While Indra could not undo it, he modified it, allowing Arjuna to choose when it would take effect. Arjuna later used the curse during his year-long exile, disguising himself as Brihannala, a eunuch dance instructor in the royal women's quarters of King Virata's palace. There, he taught dance to Princess Uttara. Some *Mahabharata* retellings and TV adaptations portray Arjuna merely as a man in disguise, but according to the epic, he fully lost his manhood for the duration of that year.

In the broader context of Indian mythology, Pattanaik's work enriches ongoing discussions on representation and diversity. The collection emphasizes the agency of female characters in shaping their destinies and challenging societal norms. Characters like Amba, who transforms into Shikhandi, exemplify resilience and strength in navigating complex circumstances. By reinterpreting these stories, the author creates space for conversations on gender, sexuality, and identity. The narrative choices in *Shikhandi & Other Tales They Don't Tell You* challenge traditional norms, fostering a more inclusive approach to mythological storytelling.

> No society can exist without myth. Humans cannot function without myths because myth creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties. Marriages, monogamy, peace, salvation non-violence, are all concepts based on myth; they don't exist in nature. All religions, all nations, all tribes, all ideologies, all ways of life, are based on myth. Human right is based on the myth of equality. Only a world without humans is a world without myths. (Pattanaik 132).

Pattanaik's retellings present strong, subversive female characters that reinforce a feminist perspective. This political stance encourages marginalized individuals to take an active role in resisting their oppression. Even in Vedic times, women faced injustice; however, Pattanaik's

writings offer insights into addressing these issues. His retellings bridge modernity and tradition, reflecting both contemporary realities and the moral principles of their cultural origins. By centering women's experiences, these narratives blur the boundary between mythology and history.

ender stereotypes are among the oldest and most pervasive societal divisions, affecting cultures regardless of their social, political, or economic structures. Women do not need to imitate men to prove their competence. In Amish society, women possess a strong sense of self-worth, having earned their status through perseverance rather than receiving it as a privilege. Their existence does not make them inherently vulnerable to manipulation. As Raut and Upadhyay state, "Change in women is not advocated; rather, the attitude of men in general needs to be changed" (21).

Since literature mirrors society, it increasingly reflects the emancipation of women in contemporary times. Pattanaik captures the essence of strong and virtuous Indian women, portraying female characters who are courageous advocates of women's rights. They break free from societal constraints, serving as guiding lights in the darkness. Adversity becomes an opportunity for them to rise above challenges and emerge triumphant. The term "manipulate" in this context refers not to conforming to traditional male roles but to demonstrating that women are strong, independent individuals who define their own identities.

In conclusion, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi & Other Tales They Don't Tell You* offers a profound exploration of gender fluidity and overlooked myths in Indian mythology. Through meticulous retellings and insightful commentary, Pattanaik highlights narratives in which characters like Shikhandi challenge conventional gender norms, providing fresh perspectives on

identity and empowerment. By uncovering these hidden stories, he not only deepens our understanding of ancient texts but also encourages contemporary reflections on inclusivity and diversity. This work underscores the enduring relevance of mythological narratives in shaping cultural attitudes toward gender and identity, urging readers to reconsider traditional interpretations and embrace the complexities of human experience across time.

Works Cited:

Bala, Saroj and Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi. "The Women Characters of Amish Tripathi: A Postfeminist Perspective." LITERARY VOICE (2024): 308-316. <https://literaryvoiceglobal.in/index.php/files/article/view/104>.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism And The Subversion Of Identity*. London: Routledge, Chapman, And Hall, Inc., 1990.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British India, David Arnold and David Hardiman, Subaltern Studies VIII." Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Chatterjee, Ratnabali. "The Queen's Daughters: Prostitutes as an Outcast Group in Colonial India." Report, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen. Committee on the Status of Women. 1974. Towards Equality, Government of India. New Delhi, 1992.

Doniger, Wendy. *On Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Jamison, Lori. "Retelling and Responding to Texts." *Guided Reading Basics*. Pembroke Publishers, 123-136.

Mondal, Krishna Chatur Sow, et al. "Tripathi's Sita: A Symbol of Feminist Revisionist Nationhood." *International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope* 5.2 (2024): 830-845.

<https://www.irjms.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Manuscript_IRJMS_0661_WS.pdf>.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *No Society Can Exist Without Myth* Namya. Sinha. hindustantimes.com, 4 July 2016. <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/no-society-canexist-without-myth-says-devdutt-pattanaik/storyPG1v4iB17j07dV5Vyv86QN.html>>.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*. Zubaan Books and Penguin Books India, 2014.

Ragi, K. R. "Where Myth and Folklore Become Characters: An Analysis of Shashi Despande's Selected Novels." *Research Scholar* 1.4 (2013).