

Problematizing Sex and Gender: Negotiating the *Ardhanarishvara* within in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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Abstract

Society, in general, sees gender as male or female, masculine or feminine. Anything that cannot be delineated in these categories is seen as "other" or not right. This categorization in either way sets the "universality" of gender as the primary organizing principle. It continuously reinforces and reconstitutes the stage for a lifelong process of gendering and creating identity. This attribution to a person as "man" or "woman" is called "Gender Identity". Challenging this heteronormative patriarchal construction, the concept of Androgyny vis-à-vis Ardhanarishvara has come into light as a counter to the idea of male/female binaries bringing in different perspectives in regard to gender and identity.

*The paper aims to explore the problematization of sex and gender and to negotiate the concept of Ardhanarishvara as an androgynous form within an individual's body through Devdutt Pattanaik's novel *The Pregnant King*. The paper will also study the psychological perspective in regards to the presence of masculine and feminine traits within the individual i.e., the "two in one" concept. Further, ideas like gender, identity, sexuality etc will also be taken into consideration.*

Keywords: Androgyny, Ardhanarishvara, gender, identity, sexuality.

...thou shalt not speak, thou shalt not show thyself...

Ultimately thou shalt not exist, except in darkness and

Secrecy... do not appear if you don't want to disappear.

(Foucault 2006)

Society, in general, has from time immemorial tried to suppress voices that refuse to subscribe to the existing dominant social codes of conduct. Popular perspectives find it convenient to dwell on binaries- good/bad, white/black, man/woman so on and so forth and whatever or whoever fails to come under these two binaries are relegated to the margins and in due course skillfully obliterated. This categorization in either way can be seen as a means to manipulate the human world to adjust them to the existing dominant social codes of the society. Simone de Beauvoir's words rightly supports this belief when she says, "one is not born a woman but becomes one" (Beauvoir 267). Sigmund Freud reflects, each child has both a masculine and a feminine disposition, and the relative strength of these two dispositions determine the child's identity. Similarly, Devor in her work *Gender Blending* writes, "Boys

will be boys, and girls will not". These phrases itself describes how sex and gender are understood that "male are defined by what they are, while females are seen as incomplete version of the male" (Devor vii). Thus 'sex' and 'gender' play an important role in understanding gender identity. Sex, in particular is "biological, ascribed and natural", whereas "Gender refers to the arrays of socially constructed roles and relationships" (Ogundiya and Amzat 71) where some roles are specifically assigned to males while some to females. This sets the stage for a lifelong process of gendering and creating identity, as the individual learns to perform as a male or female. This attribution to a person as "man" or "woman" is called "Gender Identity".

In Greek philosophy, the concept of "Androgyny" seems to challenge this existing patriarchal construction of male/female identity. Androgyny is seen as a consequence of the concept that "the Ultimate Being consists of a unity-totality" (Devor 2000) and within this unity-totality are seen to exist "all the conjoined pairs of opposites at all levels of potentiality" (6). Androgyny allows gender to flow naturally from sex, evolving beyond the heteronormative binaries to a more reflexive projection of the self. It is a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes that stipulates a range of experience open to individuals who may as women be aggressive, as men tender, suggesting a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to priority or custom. However, this concept of Androgyny is not a new idea rather it was always present in one form or another in most of the primitive myths and ancient philosophies; it is only that the term found a new lease of life in the twentieth century in matters pertaining to gender identity and gender expression.

The Hindu philosophy sees *Ardhanarishvara* (Sanskrit transliteration: *Ardhanārīśvara*), as one of those thousand ideas of androgynous form. It symbolically represents the unification of 'Shiva' and 'Shakti'. This union is the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies to illustrate the inseparability of 'Shakti,' the female principle of God, from 'Shiva,' the male principle of God. The *Rig-Veda* mentions, "he, who is described as male, is as much the female and the penetrating eyes do not fail to see it." Thus, *Ardhanarishvara* symbolically indicates the dichotomous existence of both male and female within one body. It depicts how *purusha* (men) and *prakriti* (women) are important and interrelated to each other, how they "are necessarily interdependent" (Pande 23) on one other, how they are inseparable and are incomplete without each other.

In Hindu iconography, women and men were contemplated as equal and women were even considered sacred and were worshipped as Kali, Sati, Parvati, equivalent to male gods. However, in urban world identity of women and their existence has totally changed. She is seen as the victim of male domination and patriarchy in personal as well as in private realms of life. The *Manusmriti* states that "A woman who controls her mind, speech, and body and is never unfaithful to her husband attains the worlds of her husband, and virtuous people call her a 'good woman'" (Olivelle 165), implying that the creation of the gendered identity is not a biological phenomenon rather a socio cultural concoction, one which is acquired through "repeated stylization of the body" (Butler 519). This acculturation of the body to its allotted gender however incorporates what Butler calls "punitive consequences", that is, "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (522).

Ardhanarishvara thus looks into the grey areas between masculinity and femininity and does not talk about gender in terms of binaries rather comprehend as attributes complementary in nature. It metaphorically presents the existence of both male and female within one body. In the concerned novel there are several instances which challenge the

corresponding gender role blurring the boundaries between the two binaries bringing forth the presence of both masculine and feminine characteristics within one individual. The current paper thus explores the existence of the Ardhanarishvara within one's body through the characters presented in the novel and challenges the society's recurring efforts to silence all human behavior that records either as implicit or explicit violation of this structure vis-à-vis the binary of male/female and of masculinity/femininity.

The novel *The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik is based on the lesser known stories of *Mahabharata* centering on the protagonist, king Yuvanashva who accidentally slips onto the grey area between fatherhood and motherhood thus questioning and blurring the concept of gender and identity assigned to individuals by the society. In the course of doing so the novel narrates several other tales that similarly explores the notion of gender and identity, which in general tends to reduce human beings to mere social performers of the pre-defined set of rules and expectations. Pattanaik in author's note mentions, "The story of the pregnant king is recounted twice in the Mahabharata. Once by the sage Lomasha during the exile of the Pandavas. And the second time by the poet Vyasa during the war with the Kauravas... This book is a deliberate distortion of the tales in the epics. History has been folded, geography crumpled...my intention is not to recreate reality but to represent thought process" (Pattanaik vi-vii). Thus the dialogic voices within the novel bring forth a more subjective and fluid understanding of human bodies through the concept of androgyny vis-à-vis Ardhanarishvara.

At the beginning of the story Yuvanashva is shown as a king who can be easily considered as the epitome of manhood, an upholder of dharma (rules). As the trajectory of the story goes, the king accidentally drinks a magic potion meant to impregnate his wives and as a result himself conceives a child that begins to grow in his left thigh. After giving birth to Mandhata, his son, Yuvanashva is now unable to make a sense of the rigid knowledge constructed around the human body in the form of two genders, man and woman. He fails to understand how should he be perceived now, a man or a woman, a mother or a father? Being a man, he cannot be a mother; and vice-versa. He falls into a dilemma in having to choose whether he wants to be a father and a king or a mother when his first queen Simantini asks him to choose between "a king or a mother?" (258), thus making him struggle all his life negotiating between sex and gender, duty and desire, and personal and social truth. She says, "To be a mother you must be a woman. Are you saying you are a woman, Arya? If you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne" (258). Compelling him to follow his dharma, she states, "The world must not know that you are an aberration" (259). From here begins his trial, his desperate attempts at negotiating with his 'fractured' sexual and gender identity, and his relentless struggle against society's repeated efforts at camouflaging the fissures to affirm its "non existence" which by implication is "an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (Dey 22).

A folktale compiled by A.K.Ramanujan and later on retold by Wendy Doniger in her book *Splitting the Difference*, has been cited by Pattanaik as one that upholds the idea of androgyny, that every man has a woman inside and vice-versa. Yuvanashva in order to maintain dharma sacrifices his personal self for the collective purpose of kingdom. Even Mandhata did not accept Yuvanashva as his mother. The truth was too bitter and complicated for him to accept, a boy born out of a man, as it would make him an aberration. Mandhata refused to acknowledge such a truth, as for him "social truth matter over personal truths" (Pattanaik 293). Throughout the novel, Yuvanashva is relentlessly tormented to know the truth of his body, to validate his personal experience, and to disprove the social knowledge as the final truth. He "yearned for accommodation and validation" all his life asking:

When will my son Mandhata accept that I am his mother? When will my family accept the truth of my life? When will Vallabhi stop laughing? (341)

Yuvanashva finally unfolds the truth of his life by publicly declaring himself as Mandhata's mother. But everyone simply laughed at him. He says, "Vallabhi gags my truth with the lies of my mother. My people laugh and see only what they want to see. They don't see me. The real me" (305). Yuvanashva ultimately renounces the world seeking "freedom from all lies" (307) after being rejected by everyone. His pursuit of truth leads him to seek references for someone who has gone through the same experience of being a man who has created life both within as well as outside of him across time and space. Within this context, the author weaves into the novel various references through the characters of Shikhandi, Arjuna, and Krishna from the *Mahabharata*, and the stories of Nara and Narayana, Aruni, and Bhangasvana through the bards of Vallabhi to present mythological truths of the androgynous bodies. It redefines the slippery nature of 'gender identities' which are difficult to classify into binaries of 'man, women or others.'

Similarly, the author also introduces the presence of feminine-masculinity through Shilavati, Yuvanashva's mother who has all the intelligence and passion to rule Vallabhi through an excellent set of spies making Vallabhi prosperous. When Shilavati salutes the old king, Pruthalashva, and says, "I know you did not want a woman to take care of your kingdom" (Pattanaik 65), the old king replies,

Men are foolish. We actually believe that just because someone has a moustache they make better kings than someone with breasts. The Angirasa knew better. Mandavya knew better. I am glad I listened to them. I wish my son had not died. But had he lived, and had he confined you to the women's quarters, as he would, in foolish male pride, Vallabhi would not be what it is today. (65)

However, in spite of her capacity to rule the kingdom Shilavati is forced to act only as her son's regent. Towards the end Shilavati is reluctant to sacrifice her ruling powers and retires unwillingly- all for the sake of dharma.

The novel further negotiates the concept of Ardhanarishvara through the character of Sumedha and Somavat. These two Brahmin boys were burnt alive on the orders of Yuvanashva for transgressing the boundaries of dharma by marrying each other. Both of them appeared as married couple in the yagna organized in Vallabhi to bless the queens of Yuvanashva with sons. However their plan turned awry when Polomni, the second queen recognized Somvat as a man dressed in sari and both Somvat and Sumedha were beaten and thrown in the prison as a punishment. Sumedha and Somvat(i) both chose their feelings for each other and announced, "we will not live a lie because it is convenient to your dharma" (Pattanaik 160). They were burnt alive to death, which they accepted with fortitude without any protest "as if life outside the flames was even more painful" (163). However, they could not cross the Vaitarni since Yama would not allow them to go to the other world as a man and woman, neither did they go with any other identity. Thus, both of them returned as ghosts-Brahma-Rakshasa to Yuvanashva declaring him as his creator. They tricked the king to drink the magic potion which made him pregnant. Later revealing to Yuvanshava,

It was not vengeance, father. It was the only way to make you part of our truth. Vallabhi rejected us for wanting to be husband and wife. You rejected Vallabhi because you want to be mother. You feel our feelings. You understand. (323)

Another possibility of understanding the androgynous human body is highlighted through the bard's narration about the shrine of Bahugami. Bahugami was married to a handsome prince; however their conjugal life was never consummated for many years. Determined to know the truth of her husband, Bahugami one night finds out "her husband dressed in a sari, complete with the sixteen love-charms of a married woman" (212). Later feeling disgusted with the sight of her husband dressed like a woman, she threatens him to tell the truth of his body. To which the prince replied, "My body is that of man. But my heart is not. I think like a woman. I feel like a woman. This is the way it is. I have tried to change my mind. Spoken to Rishis and Yogis and Shiddhas. But non have helped me" (212). He further states, "You think my father does not know? You think my mother does not know? They know. They all do. They all know that I feel like a woman and that I only pretend to be a man... they do not, they cannot, understand the truth about me" (212-213). Bahugami finally kills herself after castrating the genitals of the prince and cursing him. She turns into the goddess and the prince became her priestess. Since then, "the priestesses of this goddess were men who lived their lives as women. They castrated themselves, offered their genitals to the goddess, wore women's clothes and adopted women's mannerisms" (209). Out of concern, Simantini, the king's first wife asked the chief priestess of Bahugami temple whether Yuvanashva is also a woman in man's body. The old priestess replied, "...he is not one of us. We desire no women. Our flesh is that of a man but our hearts are that of a woman. Your husband's heart is that of a man but his flesh seems to have turned into a woman's" (214).

The text further takes liberty with the time-period and makes Pandavas and Turuvasus as contemporaries to bring out multiple references of androgynous body depicting gender fluidity. The characters like Shikhandi, Arjuna, and Krishna are highlighted to portray myriad possibilities of human subjectivities. Born as a woman, Shikhandi was declared and raised as a son by Drupada, the king of Panchala, who desperately wanted a son in order to take revenge from Kurus and Bhishma. Having a female body, Shikhandi learned all the skills expected of a worrier and prince. Even out of blindness in his ambition Draupada married Shikhandi to Hiranyavarni, the daughter of the king of Dasharna. It was only at her wedding night that Shikhandi faced the stark truth of her body. Hiranyavarni also did not accept Shikhandi as her husband after she saw his (her) woman body. However before the situation got worsen up, Sthunakarna, the Yaksha, came to the rescue of Shikhandi and lend him his manhood to be returned later. Though she turned into a man and had proved the newly acquired manhood, no one really accept Shikhandi as a man. Even Draupada who raised her as a man refused to accept her/him as a man enough to go to battlefield. Therefore, he created two more children to fulfill his revenge. Neither did Hiranyavarni accepted Shikhand as a man for she says, "My truth remains my truth" (270). Later Krishna called Shikhandi to the battlefield to kill Bhishma. It was only Shikhandi who could kill Bhishma, not by the merit of his/her strength and capability, but because Bhishma would never raise arms on a woman. Thus, Shikhandi says, "I have become a man convenience with a weapon called womanhood." Before going for the war, Shikhandi, on Hiranyavarni's request made love with her. A beautiful girl named Amba was born out of this union "ten moons after the battle of Kurukshetra..." (264). But Amba was considered as an aberration by the society as others would say her father was not a man, and she is an offspring of two women. No prince

participated in Amba's *gandharva*, as no one deemed her fit to be a queen. Mandhata says, "Shikhandi's daughter embodies an aberration, a disruption of order. She has therefore been rejected by all the kings of *Ill-vrita*" (290). It was only after Yuvanashva confronted Mandhata to accept the truth of his own birth, and later coaxed by his grandmother Shilavati to take over the throne, he married Amba.

Pattanaik further gives references of Arjuna and Krishna, where both of them changed their bodies from a man to a woman. During the last year of Pandava's exile, Arjuna disguised himself as Brihanalla, a eunuch, to stay at the palace of Virata, king of Matsya. Arjuna says, "I was neither. I was a eunuch. False man. False woman" (248). On asking his experience on living as a woman in man's body, Arjuna replied, "liberating actually. I could get any with anything. I could dance and sing as I pleased. I had to answer to no woman or man. I was no one's husband or wife" (246). But Kama did not leave Arjuna at peace. The matter became complicated when on one side Arjuna fell in love with Uttari (princess of Matsya) and on the other side Uttara (prince of Matsya) fell in love with Arjuna (taking him as a woman). Later when the truth was revealed at the end of the exile period and Arjuna's manhood was restored, Uttara was heartbroken. His love for Arjuna was so strong that he told him, "I cannot stop loving you just because your body has changed. My love is true, unfettered by flesh" (249). As Ruth Hubbard puts it,

Each of us writes our own sexual script out of the range of our experiences. None of this script is biologically given. We construct it out of our diverse situations, limited by what we are taught or imagine what can be permissible and correct. There is no unique female sexual experience, no male sexual experience, no unique heterosexual, lesbian, or gay male experience. We take the experiences of different people and sort and lump them according to socially significant categories." (Hubbard 65)

Another instance of gender fluidity comes from the story of Krishna who becomes the wife of Iravan, son of Arjuna and Uloopi, a Naga princess, for one night. Iravan joined the Pandavas in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. But when the situation demand a "human sacrifice" (Pattanaik 251), Iravan, being the perfect man with "thirty six sacred marks on his body" (251) was considered the best option. However, Iravan wished for a demand in place of his sacrifice, a wife who would weep for him after his death. Krishna "became a woman. A perfect woman. Mohini, the enchantress"(252) since no women agreed to marry him for a single night. After Iravan was offered to god as sacrifice, Mohini wept and mourned as a widow. Arjuna said, "I have seen many widows cry. But none like Krishna" (253).

However, Yuvanashva's truth was different from the others, as he experienced motherhood in a man's body. He has given birth to a child from his own body, had fed him milk from his bosom, and had a strong yearning to be called as mother by his son. He was both a man and a woman. His quest to know such references from the past was finally quenched by the bards when they told him the story of Bhangasvara/Sudyumna/Ila, a rarely known story. Ila was cursed by Lord Shiva with the spell that "Ila's masculinity would wax and wane with the moon. He would be all male on full moon days and all female on new moon nights" (313). As a woman Ila fell in love with Budh and had many children from him. Thus, "Ila came to be both son and daughter, man and woman, husband and wife, father and mother" (314). The fluidity of Ila's body created chaos all around. All his children who called him mother, and all his children who called him father fought with each other to claim Ila's property and love

eventually died. Illa finally sacrificed his life to restore the lives of his/her children. It was only by making Illa (the man) as Ileswara (the god) could this strange truth be accommodated. When Yuvanashva asked the bards that why the story of Bhangashvara/Illa is never told, the bard replied, “because no one ever saw this as history. They said it was a poet’s imagination. Men cannot be mothers, and mothers cannot be kings” (317).

Towards the end Yuvanashva gains new wisdom about Adi-natha through Yaja and Yupajaya, and he realizes, “men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are ultimately nothing but souls wrapped in different flesh that had created life within itself and outside. Flesh nevertheless. Mortal flesh that enjoyed, suffered, age and would one day be ash. Within was the soul” (339). Yuvanashva searches for truth of the self and when he reaches the final stage he meets Agnirasa, who tells him,

...you are the pregnant king. The greatest of the sixty- four Yoginis. ...You confound us. You confuse us. You remind us that what is impossible in the mind of man is possible in the mind of God...You terrify us with the infinite possibilities of the world. Tell us there is always something that we do not know. You demand that we widen our vision and our vocabulary, so that we make room for all, and are frightened of nothing” (343).

Yuvanashva finally realizes and accepts, “I am both. I am the terrifying embodiment of society’s unspoken truth. I am also yet another of nature’s delightful surprise. I am the soul. I am also the flesh. This is who I am” (343).

Thus, Pattanaik through a deliberate attempt of blending history and mythology, fact and fiction, real and imaginary, problematizes the essentialized notions of human body and desires and unsettles the socio-culturally constructed truths (myths) about human existence. It addresses the notion of the presence of both the sexes within one single body bringing in the debate on gender and sexual identity, where he asserts, “There is a world beyond the flesh, a vision greater than anything that is shown and seen” (333). Thus, Ardhanarishvara reduces the masculinity and femininity to ephemeral robes of body and mind that unfolds the sexless, genderless soul. It talks about masculine goddesses and feminine gods, man who becomes women and women who becomes men, kings who become pregnant and heroes who cross-dress, capturing an entire sexual spectrum and gender fluidity.

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