QUESTIONING 'DELIBERATE HETEROSEXUALIZATION' THROUGH A READING OF SEX-CHANGE MOTIFS IN THE MAHABHARATA

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Abstract

The history of transgender in India has been an inherent part of the history and culture of India. Despite the presence and celebration of alternate sexualities in Indian history and cultural practices, these sexualities havebeen marginalized throughout time. Moreover, with the intervention of the Western school of thought, gender-bending in Indian mythology came to be constructed through a 'deliberate heterosexualization' of non-normative sexualities. In an attempt to counter this 'deliberate heterosexualization', this paper attempts to trace the lineage of certain queer characters present in Mahabharata and read them through the lens of 'gender fluidity'. A study of change of sex as a motif in Hindu literature such as the Mahabharata will be carried out through a reading of the select texts by Devdutt Pattanaik, to prove the contention that non-normative sexualities formed an integral part of the Indian consciousness, thereby condemning the idea that homosexuality or non-normative sexualities are transgressive and a 'disease' from the West.

Keywords: Hindu mythology, Mahabharata, transgender, sex-change motifs, gender fluidity, Devdutt Pattanaik

Introduction

The paradox of equality in the position of alternate sexualities in India is captured inherently in Gayatri Spivak'scomment that "sexuality in India itself is caught in 'violent aporia' between "subject constitution and object-formation (Mukhopadhyay22)". This 'aporia'or the paradox between the subjective position of the non-heteronormative sexualities and the predominant objectification of these identities is amplified in the long journey towards an 'un-doing' of the 'deliberate heterosexualization' of these identities. The attempt at 'un-doing' engulfs one of the many journeys such as the struggle towards the recognition of transgender as 'third gender' by

the Supreme Court in 2014 along with the repealing of Section 377 of the IPC in 2018. While striking off the age-old rules set down by the colonizers comes as a herculean task for the queer communities in India, their recognition as 'individuals' with equal access to rights and position in social and political scenariosremains in an ambiguous position.Consequently, as homosexuality remains frowned upon with same-sex marriages barely meeting their ends, transgender communities, though acknowledged by society in religious and spiritual engagements, more often than not, turn out to be the victims of discrimination and violence.This paradoxical subject formation of transgender as a 'disease' or 'transgressive' will be contested in this paper.

A look into the history of India brings forth several instances that prove that gender variance or gender non-conformity is not a foreign concept or a 'disease'that unfolded in the Indian consciousness because of Western intervention. It has instead come to be considered as a 'disease' as a result of Western intervention and its attempt towards a 'deliberate heterosexualization' of a culture where stories of alternate sexualities were captured in its historical as well as canonical texts such as the *Mahabharata*. In a culture that worships the gods and deities, in its intersexed forms, the marginality of the transgender community brings forth the paradoxical relationship with equality that this community in India is now living with.

The presence of gender variant identities in India and its paradoxical relationship with equality isfairly a result of British colonialism, its internalization of heteronormative[i] identity, and itsmove towards a civilizing mission of a hitherto exotic nation.This mission led to the internalization of homophobia which not only made heterosexuality the norm but also exercised what Ruth Vanita termed as "deliberate heterosexualization" - where "the anti-colonial nationalists internalized this homophobia and attacked not just homosexuality but all deviations from what the colonial masters declared as "civilized" - including polygamy, matriliny, courtesan culture, etc.(Mukhopadhyay22)".As a result, the British colonizers laid the foundation of a dimorphic relation between sexuality and gender criminalizing any "other forms of attachment, embodiment and livelihood (Chatterjee947)".

Apart from this, various layers of certain religious texts like the Puranas and *Manusmriti*laid the foundation forforming a society circled around*Dharma*.Progeny came to be the standalone factor and heterosexuality the norm, a rule charted out by the books of laws, known as *Dharmashastras*.The non-normative identities happened to be frowned upon because of the failure to produce children, which happened to be considered as 'bad' for one's *karma*. Yet, the existence of gender variant identities was celebratedin the culture and history of India.

Sexualities floated free in the South-Asian societies without itbeing sexualized and marginalized in any manner. This can be justifiedby the presence of various transsexual characters present in the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Change of sex was not an unknowable phenomenon and mostly occurred through various motifs such as a 'change of sex through magical powers or a magic potion, by bathing in an enchanted pool or stream, by a curse or blessing of a deity or an exchange of sex through a yaksha (Brown 5)'. While a lot of debate has been carried out on the position of transgender in India, a study such as this would posit the idea that change of sex, homosexual interests and the presence of the queer community is known to the Indian socio-cultural history from time unknown.

Taking this purview as the foundation, this paper would draw attention to the select transgender characters in Mahabharata for the study. The studytakes into account certain works by Devdutt Pattanaik: select story from*The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*(2012)*and* the novel, *The Pregnant King (2018)* to explore the characters from *Mahabharata*, Yuvanasha- the pregnant king,Brihanalla- the transvestite warrior and Mohini- the cross-dresser. These characters would be studied through different motifs of sex change that occur in the Hindu epic, thereby reflecting on the presence of transgender throughout Hindu mythology. The study will be supportedby the Foucauldian concept of the discursive formation of gender as well as Butler's idea of gender performativity. This would be done to point towards the contention that the idea of equality would not have been a paradox for the transgender communities in India who now, live in an encumbered space if the British colonizers had not invented the 'sexualization' of the gender variant identities.

Gender as Performative: Sex-change Motifs in *Mahabharata*

Hindu scriptures are laden with gender-variant representations. These subversive sexualities find their place in myths, legends, lore, and texts such as the *Mahabharata*. The malleability of gender is prevalent in the epic as the text does not explicitly comment on the ambiguous nature of the characters and their sexual organs. The epic presents us with "characters very fluid in their sexualities like the Lord Shiva worshipped as Ardhanarishwara or the God of Fire out of whose womb was born Draupadi and Shikhandin (Custodi209)".

This malleability of gender contradicts the age-old colonial creation of the dimorphic of sex and gender. Foucault argued that this dimorphia is rooted in identity politics and identities such as sexual or gender, a category defined by discourses of power.Gender in its very essence does not present itself as rigid, a fixed phenomenon, or even the determination of an individual's identity. Itis formedby one's socio-political/cultural space, morality and ethics, and the society at large.

The reiteration of gendered subjects formed through discursive practices collectively forms one of the many narratives found in the various books of laws and codes of conduct in Hindu tradition. The correlation between knowledge and power and how discourses of power govern the "collective ideology of a given society or state(Foucault42)"marks the creation of the 'compulsory hetersexualization' in esoteric cultures as those found in South Asia. In an attempt to take the discursive nature of gender further, Butler (1988) proposed the notion that gender is 'performative' rather than inherent:

Gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (323).

This means that gender takes on the shape of a performance, in which behaviors, gestures, and desires create the appearance of an internal core or substance on the surface of the body. The essence of identity that such acts, gestures, and enactments otherwise attempt to express, is a fabrication, created and maintained by corporeal signs and other discursive means. As such, these acts, gestures, and enactments are often viewed as performative.Kirstin Cronn-Mills further defines this performativity as gender fluidity – as "individuals [who] prefer to remain flexible about their gender(s)(24)". This fluidity is reflected through behavioral or dressing patterns, and is exercised in a way when "some dress in ways that reflect both genders at the same time, while others may express one gender and another gender on another day. Some gender-fluid people choose to express a gender that lies between a masculine and feminine presentation (24)".

Such gender-fluid presentation exists in the myths and legends from various cultures. For instance, the cross-dressing hero, the mighty Hercules, and Achilles in Greek mythology can be read as an example of gender fluidity. Moreover, various Irish folktales refer to recurrent stories of sex change, like that of a handsome young abbot Drimnagh who turned into a woman, gave birth to children, and went back to his wife after transforming into a man on the day of the Easter feast. There happens to be a universal presence of gender and sexual metamorphosis in mythologies around the world.

Taking into account the position of the queer in India, its myths and narratives of gender fluidity are present throughout the canonical texts.To take the study of gender fluidity one step further, it is impertinent to consider the position of trans communities both in Indian mythology and tradition. In the Hindu tradition, the binary oppositions, male/female first began to deeply

permeate social and mental spaces with the arrival of the British invaders and their heteropatriarchy[ii]. Hindu philosophy and mythology as such have a history of various transgender characters. While male and female are referred to as *purusha*[iii] and *prakriti*[iv]*,* the Vedas refer to a third gender as*tritya-prakriti.*

A study of the gender-fluid characters in Mahabharata can be made through these lines where the performative construction of characters moves the plot of the text. Amongst others, this is also exemplified in the story of Brihanalla – the transvestite eunuch or a castrated male who dresses like a woman. The great archer, Arjuna,is cursed by the celestial nymph, Urvashi to turn into a eunuch. This story perfectly fits one of the many sex-change motifs in the Mahabharata- sex-change through a curse. Another such occurrence is sex-change through exchange of genitalia with a Yaksha. It is in Mahabharata that we come across such stories as that of Shikhandi, the transsexual warrior. Born to King Drupada of Panchala, as a girl, Shikhandiniwas brought up with the skills and practices of a man, a warrior too, as Shikhandi, the transgender prince. Even a wife was given to her. The night of wedding came as a horror for the bride who went to her father, horrified, after learning that her spouse was a woman. Embarrassed by her confrontation with femininity, Shikhandi planned to take her life when she meets a Yaksha named Sthuna in a forest. The tragic situation in Shikhandi's life arouses a sense of pity in Yaksha's heart who gives her his masculinity to save herself and her family from the calamity that would soon follow. The queer academia would call this an example of transsexuality, a female-to-male transition of the body, permanently. Modern-day science would view this as a case of gender affirmation surgery. A few of these recurrent motifs will be discussed in detail to address the presence of gender fluidity in Indian consciousness as well as a contest against the marginalization of transgender communities in India.

Change of Sex through Magic: King Yuvanasaha as a Father and Mother

In *The Pregnant King*(2018), Devdutt Pattanaik tells a story which challenges heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality.The protagonist of the story, Yuvanashva, the Vallabhi prince, unintentionally finds himself in the parenthood and motherhood conundrum. A childless monarch, he accidentally becomes pregnant after he consumes an enchantment intended to impregnate his wives. From this point on, his struggle and his frantic attempts to recover his fragmented sexual and gender identity begin. He finds himself questioning when he looks at Jayanta, "He will call me 'father', as he should. Looking at Mandhata, he wonders "What should this one call me? Father or mother?(238)".The King, who is said to be the embodiment of manhood and the guardian of Dharma, yearns until the end of his days to hear Mandhata refer to

him as "mother" only once. What we see here is the conflict between the norm, the male/masculine father and female/feminine mother, and the desire of the soul.

The novel presents a lack of congruence between the set norms of heteronormativity that completely nullifies the desire for the body and the presence of rigid gender identity. It is not only the repression of Yuvanasha'smotherly desires that are questioned. Yuvanasha, in the later part of the novel, renounces his royalty, leaving his kingship behind to become an ascetic in Vanaprastha ashram. The story of Yuvanasha can be studied through Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. She posits that gender is a series of culturally constructed,'a stylized repetition of acts, gestures', performed to build the concept of being a male or female. Butler points out that the binary gender category might be dismantled by rejecting the traits that are socially associated with each biological sex and subverting gender norms, which would then open the door to a wide range of potential gender "positions."Where the desire of the body stands as an instrument of society which constantly regulates it for its benefit, Yuvanasha breaks this tangent of gender norm that creates a binary between his desire of being a mother. The novel dismantles heteronormative and heteropatriarchal narratives through its overt presentation of gender-bending. There are numerous subversive sexualities as this in Mahabharata, where the characters are found to denounce their prior sexual identities. These narratives tell of the malleability of gender in Mahabharata and how it is not maintained as assertively as the right-wing construction of sexualities, heteronormative or not, in India.

Change of Sex through a Curse: Arjun asBrihanalla

The place of the transgender holds an unique place in India. The eunuchs in India are known by various names like *hijra* or *aravanis*, *kliba*, or *niwaans/ nirvans*. They are a part of the Indian ethno-cultural group called the *hijra-gharanas*[v] with their pictures etched in Indian history as well as in its socio-cultural practices. Keeping in mind its branches- transvestites, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and drag queens, the character of Brihanalla can be called a transvestite eunuch-a castrated male who dresses like a woman. The story of Brihanalla in *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tale from Hindu Lore (2012)*, begins with Urvashi, the celestial nymph falling in love with Arjuna when he visits the city of Amravati to acquire the skill of dancing from the *Gandharvas*[vi]. Being the son of Indra and carrying the blood of Pururava, his ancestor, he refused the sexual overtures of Urvashi. Vexed Urvashi, hissed out a curse, "Only a eunuch refuses a willing woman. So be one," and walked away in a huff" (Pattanaik, 111). In the thirteenth year of his exile, Arjuna used the curse,as modified Indra, to his advantage by acquiring the identity of Brihanalla, a eunuch transvestite, finding work in the royal women's

quarters as a dance instructor to Princess Uttaraa, the daughter of King Virata. It is believedthat many Central Asian warlords who conquered India's northern plains codified the use of eunuchs as attendants in harems and women's quarters.

While Brihanalla performed the role of a eunuch in the royal courts of Virata, he was also a great warrior. When the Kaurava forces invaded the Virata Kingdom, sulking Uttara, son of King Virata was completely petrified by them so much so that leaps out of the chariot, led by Brihanalla, and started running back to the city. Brihanalla now takes the role of a warrior, an effeminate warrior. With his prowess over the bow, the arrows of his bow succeed in driving away the invaders in no time.

The story of Brihanalla doesn't feature in the Sanskrit Mahabharata but is a later interpolation that is found in Kesari Mohan Ganguly's translated version of the same as well as in Peter Brook's movie adaptation. Many times this transformation of Arjun is used as a tool of humor and is passed off as a comic interlude. But this story concludes itself as an important example of gender fluidity where the monolithic assumptions of masculinity or the masculine warrior is destabilized.

Change of Sex through Power: Krishna as Mohini

In the Hindu month of Chaitra (April/May), the Koovagam festival iscelebrated in the Koothandavar Temple of Tamil Nadu. The eighteen-day-long festival is celebrated by the transgender and the transvestites, known as Aravanis, where they re-enact the marriage of Aravan and Mohini. In the ancient Hindu texts, we find Krishna playing the role of Mohini, a cross-dresser, who tricks deities and demons. "Traditionally, Krishna is known as a *purna-purusha*, the complete man, though purusha also refers to the consciousness that is gender-neutral(103)".

The story of Mohini as the wife of Aravan forms a part of the oral retellings of the Tamil *Mahabharata*. Devdutt Pattanaik tells this story of the transvestite trickster, an enchantress, and a wife in the text, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tale from Hindu Lore*(2012). The seer of the Pandavas prophesied a human sacrifice to appease the goddess of war to ensure their victory. Arjuna, the leader, Aravan, and Krishna, the heavenly guide, were the three men in the Pandava camp who were deemed deserving of sacrifice. Since Arjun and Krishna formed an indispensable part of the Pandava army, Aravan, the son of Arjun and the serpent princess, Uloopiwas deemed precise for the sacrifice. Aravan wanted a wife so that he could be cremated and receive the right funeral rites before being sacrificed. As the fear of widowhood led to its rejection by many women, Krishna fulfilled his wish by transforming into a woman, Mohini. The

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marriage was consummated and on the morning of his sacrifice, Mohini, the widow, mourned for her husband, weeping like no widow ever did.

While Hindu philosophy would consider the transformation of Krishna/Mohini as a reflection of the power of God, who is both formless and/or embodies both the male/female form, the queer academia could consider this ability to transform as an example of gender fluidity. Susan Stryker describes gender as a mimetic representation of socio-cultural notions on the determination of sexualities and rightly so:

The relationship between bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity is imagined to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic—a real thing and its reflections. Gender is simply what we call bodily sex when we see it in the mirror of representation…..the contrary subjective identities of transsexuals, the sartorial practices of transvestites, and the gender inversion of butches and queens all work to confound simplistic notions of material determinism, and mirror-style representational practices, in relation to questions of gender(9).

As such, one can understand that gender doesn't reflect sex, because part of becoming gendered is adopting a binary identity to conform to the heteronormative binary of gender identification. Gender as such is a play of the 'prediscursive' forces, an intermingling of various signs, and does not necessarily lead to sex, thereby conforming to the fact that there exists no innate gender identity. That Krishna can transform into the form of Mohini can be considered as one of his temporal qualities. Stories like that of Krishna's cross-dressing are laden in the *Mahabharata* with characters like Bhima and Ghatotkacha performing tranvestism. This demonstrates the ever-encompassing attitude of the Hindu philosophy towards gender-fluid identities, while also reflecting the volatility of gender.

Conclusion

The *Mahabharata* weaves tales of various gender-fluidcharacters- gods and goddesses, kings and queens as gender conformity is not a monolithic structure in this epic. Such motifs, stories of unfettered gender transformations, and a variety of gender types abound in the *Mahabharata*. Several deities in Indian mythology are depicted as both male and female in various events or as combining masculine and feminine energy, melting it into one, such asArdhanarishwara, the androgynous god who was half-woman. Shiva as Ardhanariswarasymbolises the universality that exists beyond dualism.Stories likethese disrupt the whole perception of sex and gender binaries. Writing and revisiting the stories thatwere eternalized and came to be constructed as natural by various regimes of power and discourse creates a space where numerous possibilities to what seems monolithic can be challenged and subverted. To this,Lakshmi Bandlamudi writes that "the

characters are simply seen as prototypes and molds in which humanity is cast and hence their validity is understood as timeless" (2010:105).This completely encapsulates the fact that gender is a performance and a mimetic reflection of a mirrorimage upon the body it is cast on.

Turning back on the contest of transgender as 'transgressive', the'transgressiveness' can be rightfully understood as a matter of gender fluidity, through a reading of these characters. They may not be referredto as 'transgressive' but rather complyingwith the fact that it challenges the monolithic position of heterosexuality. They go through various stages of sexual and gender metamorphosis, demonstrating the ambiguity and fragility of gender and sexuality. By doing this, the protagonists in the stories not only challenge the rigid heteronormativity and the 'deliberateheterosexualization' of a culture but also destabilize the 'sexualization' of bodies seen as the 'other'.The characters, thus, emphasize once more that gender is not a biological characteristic of human existence but rather a manufactured category of experience with historical, social, and cultural origins brought into being with the power of discursive practices. These stories capture the ambiguity as well as ambivalence of sexual identities which until the intervention of the West, floated free in cultures and practices in South Asia and were not deemed as an 'unnatural disease'.

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[i] Michael Warner coined the term heteronormativity in 1993 "to refer to heterosexual culture's interpretation of itself as the natural, inevitable structure of society" (Howarth, *Adventures in Heteronormativity*, 260).

[ii] Heteropatriarchy refers to the social, political, and economic system in which heterosexual men are the dominant group in a society or culture. The concept is made up of two parts: hetero, described as an inherent attraction to theopposite sex, and patriarchy, defined as systematic domination of men across a myriad of social institutions. (Kelly, "Heteropatriarchy", 256).

[iii] The Purusha is the the ultimate Brahman and the universal cosmic male. He is both the subject and the object of sacrifice ceremonies. By offering a sacrifice to him, one obtains passage to the higher worlds or attains liberation. (Pattanaik, *Shikhandi*, 19).

[iv] Prakriti refers to something that is present in its untouched, natural state. Vikriti, which implies something that is deformed or transformed from its natural state, is its opposite. (Pattanaik, *Shikhandi*, 19).

[v] The hijra *gharanas* are symbolic units of lineage, called a *house*, guiding the overall schematic outlining of the social organization of the hijra community in India. (Goel, "Understanding Caste and Kinship", 102)

[vi] By the time the Puranas and the two epics were composed, the **Apsaras and Gandharvas** had become performing artists to the gods; the apsaras are singers, dancers, and courtesans, while the gandharvas are musicians. They are somewhat semi-divine; the gandharvas are companions to the apsaras. They are handsome, possess brilliant weapons, and wear fragrant clothes. (Anindita Basu, "Apsaras and Gandharvas", World history Encyclopedia, last modified 5th September 2016, https://www.worldhistory.org/Apsaras_and_Gandharvas/).