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Feminine Masculinity and Masculine Femininity in Devdutt Pattanik's *The Pregnant King*

- Pragti Sobti

Abstract: Myth and literature are taken analogous as they both are enmeshed in the socio-religious fabric of a community. Myths are considered as those platforms which give the narrator privilege to modify personal ideologies with a wider, acceptable frame of thought. Devdutt Pattanaik's intriguing novel *The Pregnant King* is based on rich and complex Hindu mythology, in which the lines are often blurred between men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. Extracted from great Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the story revolves around Yuvanashva, the childless king who accidently impregnates himself after drinking the potion made for his wives, and his mother Shilavati, who is born with the desire to rule. Throughout his fictional work the author emphasizes the enigmas and inversions of gender, highlighting the story of struggles of contradicting forces, rendering Yuvanashva, body of man and heart of woman bearing maternal instincts and Shilavati with a body of woman and heart of man bearing desire to rule. The present paper aims to accentuate the social and individual reaction when gender roles are topsy-turvy in the royal family of Vallabhi. Shilavati, the queen sidelines her role as a mother and wants to be on throne as a ruler controlling the kingdom and her son; on the other hand Yuvanashva animated by his maternal instincts forgets to be a king and yearns to be called mother. Very competently the author make the reader face to face with the fundamental conflicts of human psyche between what one wants to do and what one should do.

Keywords: Mythology, Potion, Inversion, Gender, Conflicts.

The existence of myth is as old as human existence. "A human society without myth has never been known and indeed it is doubtful whether such a society is possible." (Finely, 1954). Myth and literature are taken analogous as they both are enmeshed in the socio-religious fabric of a community. Myths are considered as those platforms which give the narrator privilege to modify personal ideologies with a wider, acceptable frame of thought. Mythology in Indian context is perhaps the most utilized and most admired for every generation and genre. Mythological themes in Indian literature first bear their most efficacious and substantial traces in the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In A.K.

Ramanujan's words: "In India and South-East Asia, no one ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, always ready". (Ramanujan, 2012) Ramanujan's statement categorically confirms the fact that these two texts are integral mythological pillars of Indian society i.e. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* till date continue to engage the Indian imagination through their incredible and vivacious myths and beliefs. One such prominent myth that permeates not only these two texts, but covers plethora of other mythological texts is the myth of 'male' God (creator of this world). If we accept that the world is someone's creation (as most of the religions confer) then the creator is assumed to be Man. This myth is inversion of reality as it is the woman who creates new life. However there are certain myths in Vedas and epics where men literally give birth to children. According to Vedas, Mandhata, Agasti and Dronacharya are directly born out of men. These myths collectively reflect the male desire to appropriate the female reproductivity.

Devdutt Pattanaik has done a marvellous job by exploring the myth of Mandhata, who is born of king Yuvanashva in his riveting and intriguing novel *The Pregnant King :*

> With infinite myths lies the eternal truth
> Who sees it all?
> Varuna has but a thousand eyes
> Indra, a hundred
> And I, only two.

In the author's note, Pattanaik questions the readers "What matters more : the pot or the potion" (viii) giving us the novel insight to interpret the mythological events with distinct bizarre conceptions, it is upon the readers to decide what is important for them the reality of the events, characters and places or the emotions brought up by the writing and by churning of the historical, geographical and mythological facts. Pattaniak declares his tale as "it is about love, law, identity, gender, power and wisdom" (viii), but I feel it is more about emotional upheavals, twisting of biological roles and about man-woman relationships. The book is interfaced with not one but many incidents from the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata* which reveal the inversion of gender roles. Within the complex plot Pattanaik has intricately woven paradoxes and ambiguities of gender, highlighted ones are of Shilavati Yuvanashva's mother and of Yuvanashva himself.

I

Shilavati – the young, aspiring, keen and sharp princess possess all the qualities of being a king, but being a woman was devoid of this privilege. Her father realizing the potentials within his daughter became very sad because he knew though fate has given her "a man's head and a woman's body" (27) she cannot become a ruler. Shilavati herself knew that a

"woman's destiny" is bound to her body" (27) and because of these callous and excruciating realities, she can't choose the path she likes and deserves. *Markandeya Purana* states that women possess *Chitte Kripa samara nishthura* i.e. mercy of heart and fierceness of attitude. But as the time passed, under the umbrella term of *dharma* they were given the task of maintaining family and thus seizing from them the opportunity to evince fierceness of attitudes in decisions. Bose, highlighting predicament of women opines, "Instead of embodying positions of decision making power and defying order women became vehicles of orthodoxy" (Bose, 2000). It was this umbrella of *dharma* and charade of orthodoxy which prevented Shilavati to be a ruler despite possessing regal qualities. When the proposal from Turuvasu's clan came for matrimonial alliance between Shilavati and Prasenjit, King Ahuka agrees. Though the astrologers forecasted an early widowhood but, "with widowhood will come the opportunity to rule" (29) for sake of her daughter's happiness, Ahuka accepted the unpredictable proposal.

Dressed in red and laden with gold when Shilavati was presented as the queen she felt a gush of power and even dreamt of herself on the throne. This is the point where Pattanaik infuses the signs of masculinity in Shilavati's attitude. Her desire and her calibre to rule were so vigorous that seeing the throne, she envisaged herself as a ruler. She bore the news of her husband's death stoically, again showing masculine traits, not only for the sake of her unborn child but also for the sake of her kingdom , before becoming a ruler she was worried about welfare and morale of her people. Rejecting the old notions of men being superior ruler, Shilavati declared, "men are foolish, they actually believe just because someone has a moustache they make better kings than someone with breasts" (65). With a foresight of a ruler she organised elephant hunts, festivals and fares in Vallabhi. She formed peaceful relations with neighbouring countries. When Brahmanas complained that peace was making warriors lax, she answered, "Kingship is not about winning wars. It is about maintaining order" (45). She made diplomatic and outrageous decisions aiming at welfare of her country.

Well-versed in 'dharma-shastras' Shilavati performed the duties of a ruler in a magisterial and magnanimous way. Her desires to govern and rule were very strong like an ambitious ruler, she continued to govern Vallabhi even after her son was fit to be a king, sometimes giving excuse of his incompleteness due to marriage, "but he is incomplete. Let us get him a wife first" (51) and sometimes giving him time to perform his husbandly duties "why to distract him from his husbandly duties?... There is no hurry. His inheritance is safe. I rule it well" (61). Even the ministers felt that Shilavati was clinging to throne depriving it of its real heir. Even when Mandavya tries to give relative reference of Shastras, she tried to turn

away the vague references by giving the counter argument that a king is fit to be on throne until his son bears a son, and as Yuvanashva had no son, she possesses the right to be on throne. Even when her son urged her to let him rule and to be a participant in glorifying his kingdom's name she emotionally made him realize his primary duty towards his wives and dissuaded him to be a virtual ruler of Vallabhi.

Indian mythology is replete with the details of female rulers governing their country not only efficiently but also facilely, no doubt Shilavati was one among those, but her over possession with being "in power" transgressed its boundaries and provide her a masculine trait. She was not bothered about her social image, sometimes she even staked her motherly image and went to extent of denying her son his long awaited right, perhaps that right which she was given the charge to foster, as she herself noticed during her coronation Mandavya put the "tilak vertically just above her navel" (37) then and there she realized that all the obeisance and rituals were not for her but for the child she bore.

II

Pattanaik in his other fictional work *Jaya : An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* cites the same case, "who should be king? The eldest son or the fittest one? A child belonging to the original bloodline, or anyone with the right capability? a man or a woman? (Pattanaik, 2010). Shilavati was fit to be a ruler, but Yuvanashva was fit to be a king on every ground.

Throughout the novel, Pattanaik highlights the enigmas and aberrations of gender and life. Both Shilavati and Yuvanashva's gender roles are lopsided in the novel. On one hand was Shilavati who being a female, yet was over possessed with the desire to be on throne like other kings and on the other was Yuvanashva who being a male, after giving birth to a child was emotionally inclined towards him, showing signs of feminine emotions garbed inside masculine body.

III

Yuvanashva contacted two siddhis, Yaja and Upayaja to help him to beget a child, after his failure to produce children even with three wives and undergoing a series of futile rituals. Yaga and Upayaja after performing intricate rituals, prepared a potion meant for his queens to drink, but under a bane king himself drank the potion and ends up being pregnant. The incident was hidden from everyone including the child, except the wives, Shilavati and Asanga, the healer. As soon as he became pregnant Yuvanashva started dreaming about a child in a cradle. Though Shilavati decided not to let the king come near the child, yet the maternal instincts in Yuvanashva's heart and body made him crave for his child and he ordered the child to be brought to him.

Robert A. Heinbin's comment aptly suits the condition of the King, "...

being a mother is an attitude, not only a biological relation". And in this particular situation when the child was born from Yuvanashva's own body, his instincts for the child were quiet natural. Though Yuvanashva was aware of the fact that being a king it was not possible for him to disclose the secret of giving birth to a son to his countrymen. So though the bards he tried to deliver the message in his country that even men have the potential to bear new life in them. Through stories of Urvashi and Aruni he tried to becalm his perturbed heart and mind. He was eager to give his son, whom he named Mandhata (one who is nursed by me) his status so following Simantini's advise he declared him his first born. He could not resist himself from nursing his child and went eight times a day to Simantini's chamber to feed his son. When fever Goddess curse struck Vallabhi and made Mandhata ill, the King himself wore all the love-charms and went with offerings to Goddess for well being of his son.

In order to find a way to declare himself as Mandhata's mother, Yuvanashva searched the scriptures, explored the myths and probed the folklores, but learnt the fact that though other feminine roles were played by males in history – as Arjuna became an eunuch during his exile and Krishna became wife for Aravan, but history bore no examples of a man being called as mother of a child. When once in a fever fit Mandhata called him mother he felt as if he had experienced something heavenly. He expressed his overwhelming emotions to Vipula and said. "I feel, while there is sweetness when your son calls you 'father', there is more sweetness when he calls you 'mother'" (257).

The King undergoes a very cardinal psychological strife between what he desires and what he is duty bound to do. King yearns to be called mother the tenderest and loving of emotions he has ever felt, to hold the child that is part of his own body and to nurse and love him. But the fear of societal rebuttal and rejection forbids him to do so. Sexuality becomes an important marker of his; destiny. Pattanaik's own comments highlight the emotional turmoil which the king undergoes. "Biology is destiny. We delude ourselves with the idea of freedom, but we are fettered by our body."

IV

The power structures and role plays within the family and society are absolutely affirmed. Biological sex differences have been taken as due warrant for the separation of activities for man and woman. Society always holds up binaries between male / female, masculine / feminine and any kind of deviation from these binaries is always called as deviation from the path of supposed normalcy. The negation of all kinds of marginal sexualities, and those human tendencies that violate the gender stereotypes, is imperative to maintain the binaries between male and female and hence they are suppressed. And this was the reason for

suffering of Shilavati, who was denied the position of king despite being the ruling authority and of king Yuvanashva who was deprived of his right to be called "mother" though he gave birth to Mandhata.

Taking in background, the complex mythological framework Pattanaik has woven the storyline presenting a conflict between desire and social obligations faced by both males as well as females. The distinction lines between male and female emotions are blurred as the story develops. Shilavati – being a female was supposed to be submissive, dormant and subservient, and Yuvanashva being a male and a king was supposed to be dominating, authoritative and able to control his emotions, but Pattanaik has inverted their roles by providing masculine role and emotions to Shilavati in first half of the novel and assigning feminine role and emotions to Yuvanshva in second half.

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