

**Gender Beyond Binaries: Revisiting Forgotten Myths in Devdutt Pattanaik's
*Shikhandi***

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Abstract

The paper explores the versatile and fluid images of gender, which are enshrined in Indian mythological traditions. Beyond the binary divides of male and female, the research prefigures the role of myth as a place where other forms of identity are envisaged, as well as tolerated and normalized. The paper is able to point out the gender plurality through the discussion of the lesser-known narratives and characters like Shikhandi, Mohini, and Ardhanarishvara and criticize the mainstream heteronormative views. It claims that these mythical characters unstable notions of identity and creates possibilities of seeing gender as fluid and performative.

The paper, based on an interdisciplinary approach, which relies on gender studies, mythology, and cultural criticism, critically reviews the reinterpretation of traditional tales by Pattanaik to appeal to modern readers. It argues that these retellings recover marginalized voices and at the same time provide an insightful critique of the contemporary restrictions of gender and sexuality in society. The research shows that uncovering the lost myths is not only a matter of cultural recovery but a radical experience that reinvents gender as a continuum by connecting the ancient stories with the current discussion. Finally, the paper highlights the importance of myth in enhancing inclusivity, widening identity discussion and breaking the strongly held binary thought in modern society.

Keywords: Mythological, Gender, Shikhandi, Pattanaik, Marginalized

Introduction

In recent years, discussions around gender identity and fluidity have gained significant attention, challenging the traditional binaries that have long dominated societal perceptions of gender. In this light, Devdutt Pattanaik's rendition of the mythological character Shikhandi in his work, *Shikhandi: The Story of the In-Betweens*, serves as a powerful narrative tool that invites readers to explore male and female identities beyond simplistic classifications. Pattanaik, an acclaimed Indian mythologist, uses his storytelling prowess to draw from ancient texts, such as the Mahabharata, providing contemporary interpretations that speak to modern sensibilities regarding gender. This paper will delve into how Pattanaik's reframing of Shikhandi not only resurrects a significant yet often overlooked figure from mythological canon but also challenges entrenched notions of gender, thereby advocating for a more nuanced understanding that transcends binary classifications.

The Historical Context of Gender in Mythology

In order to understand the implication of the way Pattanaik presents Shikhandi, it is important to put the gender representations in myths of history in context. According to ancient Indian writing, gender is not fixed, but is fluid. The Hindu trinity has so many deities with both masculine and feminine characteristics. Indicatively, the god Ardhanarishvara is a combination of Shiva and Parvati, which is a demonstration of the duality of god itself. Such representations confront the binary concept of gender by permitting the coexistence of male and female qualities. This fluidity plays a central role in interpreting such characters as Shikhandi, whose very presence in the Mahabharata challenges the hard and fast boundaries of gender roles that have now become common in modern discourse.

The story of Shikhandi starts with the earlier life of the person as a princess, Amba, who has been wronged, and reborn with a special destiny. The intricacy of the identity of Shikhandi is used to explain the many layers that are present in the notion of gender and how cultural myths conventionally provided the space to express diverse identities. The metamorphosis of Amba into Shikhandi is not just a change of body but a comment on the social systems which limit the individual to predefined roles on the basis of gender. Thus, Shikhandi turns into a prism through which modern readers can analyze how gender roles changed throughout the history and what the strictness of dichotomies leads to.

Analyzing Shikhandi's Character

Pattanaik's interpretation of Shikhandi is multifaceted, positioning the character at the intersection of masculine and feminine identities. In the Mahabharata, Shikhandi is pivotal to the epic's climactic battle, yet his identity is frequently marginalized. For Pattanaik, resuscitating Shikhandi's narrative is not merely an act of homage; it is a deliberate attempt to incorporate an essential figure within a broader discourse about gender fluidity and

identity. Pattanaik unpacks the essence of Shikhandi's existence, illustrating that his gender identity is not tangible but rather exists in a space that transcends conventional norms. This portrayal invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths about societal expectations and the plight of individuals who defy these constructed binaries.

Pattanaik contextualizes Shikhandi's character within the larger framework of masculinity and femininity by asserting that both identities are performative rather than inherent. His exploration acknowledges that gender is significantly shaped by cultural narratives and social practices. Shikhandi's use as a military pawn during the battle of Kurukshetra exemplifies the ways in which gender can be politicized and weaponized within patriarchal structures. Yet, this duality also reinforces the idea that gender is not static; rather, it is subject to change and evolution based on the context and individual agency. This understanding positions Shikhandi as a complex figure who disrupts the binary narrative and invites readers to explore the ambiguities entrenched in gender identities.

Myth and Modernity

Nowadays, in the age of the LGBTQ+ movement and gender inclusion, it is of utmost importance to analyze Shikhandi in the prism of modern problems. Pattanaik creates a story that can be familiar to the contemporary audience that wants to be represented beyond the binary identities. Returning to such myths as that of Shikhandi, the reader can make comparisons between ancient narratives and modern gender equality and acceptance battles. The character is the symbol of intersectional identities and complexities involved. Shikhandi is the symbol of the power of reClaiming narratives in order to bring understanding and acceptance in a society where non-binary identities are not always viewed positively.

Furthermore, the interaction of Pattanaik with Shikhandi promotes the review of the cultural scripts that still support the restrictive gender norms. When re-telling this myth he also asks us to wonder why some identities have been marginalized or forgotten in the mainstream discourse of mythology and social history. In so doing, he does not just bring back the life of Shikhandi, but also gives a wider contemplative room in which gender manifestations of various kinds can be recognized and honored. With the changes in the societal definitions of gender, the role of characters such as Shikhandi, who represent the diversity of human experience beyond the rigid categories, gains a different meaning. The available literature on gender binaries tends to provide a dichotomy, which fails to recognize the complexity of human identity. Pattanaik breaks these binaries head-on in Shikhandi by deconstructing the story. The expression of the duality of the identity of Shikhandi provokes the readers to appreciate the importance of transitional identities that have been neglected in the past. He uses character development to investigate the conflicts and resolutions that arise when people do not want to obey the expectations of the society.

The current academics on the subject of gender binaries tend to offer a dichotomy that fails to capture the multifacetedness of human identity. Pattanaik directly challenges these binaries in Shikhandi by deconstructing the narrative. By stating that Shikhandi was a person with a dual identity, he is urging the readers to appreciate the importance of the transitional identities that were previously ignored. In the development of characters, he delves into the conflicts and resolutions that arise when people are not willing to follow the social norms.

Based on the idea of intersectionality and the queer theory, Pattanaik prefigures the significance of perceiving gender as overlapping with other forms of social identities like class, caste, and sexuality. This multi-dimensional mode is very important in describing the realities experienced by people who maneuver through the compound societal constructs. The transformation of Shikhandi as a warrior against all odds, which is a result of her life as an amba, is an act of resistance against the oppression of the liminal space occupant. This transition compels the readers to consider the life of people living beyond the binary system, which induces compassion and sympathy.

The importance of Shikhandi dressing up as a man underscores the performative nature of gender where identity is not a determined essence but a sequence of performances that have been informed by the cultural discourses. This observation leads to reconsidering the meaning of masculinity and femininity and stimulates the notion that everyone has the uniqueness to determine their identities according to personal truths instead of the established norms. Mythology is a cultural storehouse that exudes and determines societal norms. The work of Pattanaik is a good example of how myth can be reused to give voice to the marginalized and break the paradigm. When Pattanaik emphasizes the story of Shikhandi, she draws attention to the historical accounts, which have undermined or suppressed non-binary and gender-fluid identity. This reclamation act challenges modern society to consider the diversity of its mythological culture and at the same time encourages inclusivity and representation.

Furthermore, Pattanaik's exploration of myth enables a critical dialogue that connects the past to the present. He posits that understanding the narratives within mythology can lead to transformative discussions about identity and human relationships. By reviving figures like Shikhandi, he invites modern audiences to engage in conversations that question rigid gender roles and explore the potential for multiple identities to coexist harmoniously. This perspective resonates with the growing recognition that gender diversity has always existed within cultures, waiting to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Consequences of Gender Binaries

The implications of adhering to rigid gender binaries are manifold, impacting individuals' mental health and societal dynamics. Pattanaik's portrayal of Shikhandi encapsulates the struggles faced by those who transgress normative boundaries. Shikhandi's experience captures the anguish of being both embraced and rejected by society, a reality that many individuals navigating non-binary identities encounter today. The tension between Shikhandi's desires and societal expectations serves as a mirror reflecting the difficulties that arise from conforming to gender norms.

Furthermore, the consequences of gender binaries extend beyond individual experiences; they shape entire communities and social structures. Traditional gender roles often perpetuate systems of power that marginalize diverse identities, leading to exclusion and discrimination. By promoting the story of Shikhandi, Pattanaik emphasizes the need for societal change—one that recognizes and values the complexities of gender as an essential component of the human experience. This shift not only honors the lives of individuals like Shikhandi but also holds the potential to foster more inclusive communities that celebrate diversity.

Conclusion

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: The Story of the In-Betweens* serves as a profound narrative that challenges the rigid binaries often associated with gender. By delving into the character of Shikhandi, Pattanaik encourages the readers to revive the forgotten myths and adopt a more subtle view on identity that will not be judged by society. Looking at the history of gender representation and breaking down the traditional narratives, he restores the importance of such figures as Shikhandi as an embodiment of fluidity and resistance.

In a world that is more conscious of the issues of gender, the retelling presented by Pattanaik provides a way by which people can reconsider themselves and the cultural discourses that form them. The Shikhandi legacy does not merely preach the cause of inclusivity but it also promotes the value of glorifying the myriad forms through which human experience can take place. Going back to these ancient tales, the reader is welcomed to a world of gender that recognizes diversity and encourages acceptance, and eventually leading to a future that appreciates all types of identities. In repossessing Shikhandi, Pattanaik concludes that the myth remains timeless in helping us manoeuvre the modern discourses on gender, forcing us all to accept the fluidity within.

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