
Exploring the Truth of Transgressive Bodies And Desires in Select Works of Devdutt Pattanaik and Mahesh Dattani

Soumita Mandal

M.A. in English Literature, UGC NET, Bankura University, Raipur, Bankura. West Bengal

Article Received: 23/02/2026**Article Accepted:** 24/03/2026**Published Online:** 25/03/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.451

Abstract:

Being an Indian doctor, mythologist, author, speaker and illustrator, Devdutt Pattanaik emphasises his works on mythology, Indian culture, tradition and contemporary society. He unfolds the concept of transgender and 'Queer' taken examples from the characters in myths. He beautifully portrays those characters in one of his books *The Men Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. His other well-known books like *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, *The Pregnant King* and *Gender and Sexuality in Indian Mythology* also show queer aspects through mythological stories. On the other hand some untold stories of queer people and their marginalisation by some powerful people in society are excellently sketched by some notable works of Mahesh Dattani, one of the best Indian playwrights in modern era. This paper attempts to show the existence of 'Queer' in Indian mythology as well as in modern Indian society and intends to explore the truth of transgressive bodies and desires through select works of Devdutt Pattanaik and Mahesh Dattani. They exist in all ages but they are still ostracised by gender politics or gender-based prejudices in society.

Keywords : Queer, mythology, gender politics, marginalisation and identity.**Introduction:**

Devdutt Pattanaik, one of the contemporary mythologists, is famous for focusing on the relevance of Indian mythology in the modern era. His observation and revelation of Queer tales from Indian myth and folktales prompt him to write the books like *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, *The Pregnant King* and *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*. These works highlight a new perception on Queer mythology which exists within the context of Hindu culture and tradition. Homoeroticism can simply be defined as universal phenomenon and homoerotic tendencies can be

demonstrated in a lot of ways, ways that may be noted as 'queer'. To interpret the unheard voices of a people and to decipher their coping skills, an uncovering of myth is inevitable. In the present era Mahesh Dattani is also one of the prominent and dominant voices who challenged the gender construction which dwells in Indian society. Complexities of human relationship, conflicts of human mind, gender discrimination, homoeroticism and the politics of closeting the queer are artistically portrayed through his works like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Dance Like a Man*.

Queer 'may be used to describe an open-ended constituency, whose shared characteristics is not identity itself but an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality'(Jagose, 98). In Dattani's plays Queer is interlinked with his attempt of representing invisibilized sexualities and his effort to make the invisible visible. According to Bijay Kumar Das, plays of Dattani merge into human mind and originate characters which are true to life-situations. Amar Nath Prasad utters that Dattani's plays cope with homosexual vulgarity and these can be compared to the Restoration Comedies of Manners. In the book *Many Mahabharatas*(2009) Samhita Arni, through her analysis on Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*, attempts to explain how Yuvanashva had to leave his kingdom when his son rejected to call him 'mother' and shows how social norms, culture, and tradition influenced his life. Dr. Vaishnavi P, in the paper "Veracity of Gender Power with reference to Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*.", analyses the interpretation of emotions and desires of Yuvanashva and other characters. K. Varsha and Parvathy N, in the paper "Vikruti Evam Prakruti : An Analysis of the Identity Crisis in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*", study the unnatural motherhood of Yuvanashva and the reaction of his family members to this incident. Somrita Dey, in her paper "Uncovering the Sexual/Gender Politics : A Study of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*", unfolds the birth secret of prince Mandhata and Yuvanashva's expression of maternal feelings for his son which makes Mandhata uncomfortable.

These papers only focus on some aspects of queerness of Pattanaik's one or two works. But this paper intends to show the existence of 'Queer' in Indian mythology as well as in modern Indian society. They exist in all ages but they are still ostracised and excluded from the mainstream of society just because of their transgressive bodies. Society may decide gender roles or celebrate heterosexuality or condemn homosexuality but acceptance or rejection of a society cannot resist one's sexual desire or emotion. Expression of one's own desire is not a crime in the cosmos but they are not allowed to express their own emotions. My paper attempts to explore the truth of transgressive bodies and desires in select works of Devdutt Pattanaik and Mahesh Dattani.

We can trace queer narratives in Hindu mythology through the works of Devdutt Pattanaik . The most popular story related to changing sex is of Shikhandini into Shikhandi in *The Mahabharata*. ‘Puranic Hindu’ literature gives constant references of overlooked Queer tales. *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You* is a compilation of short-stories from various myths, cultures and folktales across India. The stories of women becoming men and men becoming women are described here. It is known to us that King Draupad’s daughter Shikhandini was brought up like a man and even married a woman. On the wedding night Shikhandini’s wife unveiled that her husband was also a woman like her and she denied to accept her as husband. The problem was solved when Shikhandini borrowed manhood from a yaksha, Sthuna and performed all activities as a husband. But when Shikhandini came to bring back his ‘borrowed organ’ to Sthuna, he was satisfied with his reliability and gave permission to Shikhandi to take advantage of this masculinity as long as he survived. When her body was transformed into a male, she became a ‘man’ and brave warrior and she possessed all the characteristics of a male and also produced children with wife but Bhisma could not consider her as man. She was destined to kill Bhisma. Her entry into the battlefield brought a drastic change on the 10th day of kurukshetra war and she became the reason of establishing ‘dharma’. At the beginning of part II of this book Pattanaik has beautifully expressed his thought by saying,

All things queer are not sexual

All things sexual are not reproductive

All things reproductive are not romantic

All things romantic are not queerless. (Pattanaik, 37)

Accepting queer can also shatter patriarchal attitude from society. Patriarchal society considers that men are better than women, Feministic world explains women and men are equal but Queerness clarifies what forms female and male. ‘Queer’ can be used as a derogatory term or it can be utilised to describe something which is not standard. We should look back the ancient time when these identities were recognised as ‘naturals and equals’ instead of marginalising them in the modern era. Pattanaik elaborates queerness in *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You* as ‘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’(Pattanaik, 10). He explains queerness through various stories of men who turns into women, of women who turns into men, of men who can produce children without women, and of women who can create kids without men. It is evident from the story of King Shikhidhvaja and Chudala. King Shikhidhvaja’s wife Chudala was a wise yogini and more knowledgeable than her husband and she could convert herself at will. Oneday she transformed herself into a man, Kumbhaka to share her knowledge to enlighten the king. We know that several times Lord Krishna took the form of a woman. During kurukshetra war Pandavas prayed to goddess of war for their victory and for this they had to sacrifice a human. Aravan, son of Arjun and Uloppi, was

perfect for this ritual but he wished to have a wife who would mourn after his death. But no women agreed to marry him for one night and to get widowed. So Krishna took the form of beautiful woman Mohini and married him and lamented as widow. The contribution of Queer to this war is evident to establish Dharma.

Some of Dattani's notable works like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Dance Like a Man* reflect not only the politics of closeting the queer but also the gloomy problems and hidden issues of urban families. Our society considers heterosexuality as the only mode of survival of human race and homosexuality as immoral. Dattani tactfully unravels that the marginalised trans people are torn between social rules, regulations and their choice of expressing own desires. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* explores gay identity and lesbianism in urban cities like Mumbai. This play mirrors kamlesh's attempt to conceal the fact from his sister that he was in a relationship with her would-be husband. It spotlights the dramatic tension of not only one or two characters but also involves audience into their own psychological conflicts and attitudes to the real human experience. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* highlights the plight of trans people who are victimised and subjugated by rich and powerful people. On the one hand they are invited to holy occasions to entertain people ; on the other hand nobody pays attention to them or considers them as part of our society. *Bravely Fought the Queen* sketches the theme of homosexuality as well as physical and mental distress of a wife due to her husband's gay relationship with her own brother. Dattani remarks in an interview with Mee that *Dance Like a Man* is a 'play about the self, about the man and the woman in self'(21). It speaks the story of an artist whose father and wife conspire against him to separate his male and female selves to suppress his creative power and to represent him as a 'perfect man'. Coleridge said, 'the truth is, a great mind must be androgynous' (587). Human beings can create something great only after the unification of two selves – male and female. This universe is also the result of unification of 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti'.

Most mythological stories are spread orally and each storyteller has different versions or beliefs or perspectives. Pattanaik uses Indian mythology to explore the harsh reality of modern society. This is the fact that society does not consider everyone equal even after being so much progressive. This truth and agony of those marginalised trans people is skillfully drawn by Dattani in his works. Both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* explore the great warriors of Bharat who are not considered as male or female but they are the unification of male and female. Mythology plays an important role in our life as it can answer to a lot of moral and religious questions and can also differentiate what is evil and what is good.

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