

## Representation of the Queer in the Retellings of Indian Mythology

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### Abstract

India is the land where clouds have ever since rained stories knitted in and around myths. While exploring all sorts of dispositions, the Indian folklore has also been infused with a plethora of characters displaying queerness, which suggests a society accepting of gender differences. What then led to the reduction of these same characters with a sense of dignity and significance being reduced to stock mediums of cheap humour? And what again is leading the academic fraternity obsessed with mythology to recreate characters openly asserting their identities no matter how much the stigmatization?

The proposed paper herein attempts to investigate such questions and chalk out a parallel between the representation of transgender and other queer identities in the old Indian mythopoeia (particularly from Hindu scriptures), and the retellings of the same myths in contemporary times which has brought with it the possibilities of voicing the perspective of the marginalized as much as the privileged. The theories of scholars like Ruth Vanita and others will be cited with the aim of deriving a conclusion about how the telling of myths affected or was affected by the psyche of ancient Indian society, versus how the retelling shapes or is shaped by the mental conditioning of the present society. I shall also refer to the retellings of Devdutt Pattanaik and compare and contrast them with the narratives in the epic Mahabharata. The study will be made with the aid of the figures of Shikhandi and Brihannala.

### Keywords:

Queer; Myth; Retelling; Perspective; Representation; Colonialism

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### Introduction

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Stories from Indian mythology have been told, and retold a hundred thousand times. With each retelling, a bit of something of the previous is lost to an extent only to gain the teller's own sense of perception and interpretation. One may note that this happens only because of the extreme pervasiveness of these tales in the collective 'Indian' psyche.

Even the sincerest efforts to narrate the stories as they are could not render the stories completely 'original' since ancient India followed the tradition of oral recitation, and not written compilation, thus leading to loss or addition in transmission. Several revered retellers like Vaisampayana and Tulsidas have come and gone, but what remained was their different versions of the same stories. What has been written ages ago, continues to be retold in oral form. Each household is retold the same story of Krishna's leela and Rama's heroics. Similarly, attempts have been made to rewrite what was recited centuries before. Retellings are further different in their understanding of the contemporary world.

Modern era with its technological acceleration has opened the possibilities of all sorts of arguments and counter arguments. The differences in retellings are more so if narrated from the vantage points of differing worldviews. Devdutt Pattanaik has rightly said that the *Gita* of Bal Gangadhar Tilak (of radical approach) differs from that of Gandhi (of pacifist learnings) or Kosambi (of Marxist leanings), and also that the *Gita* will differ more so if narrated from a woman's perspective ("perhaps more affectionate than valorous?"). It differs further more if narrated from the viewpoint of a queer person, but he immediately admits that for now, we can only think of the idea(Pattanaikpt.I).

However, we do see writers and scholars like A. Revathi, Living Smile Vidya, Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, Brinda Bose, etc. writing vastly on queer themes, be it a retelling of the old sagas or their own autobiographical notes, or a story based in the modern world. The present world does have a scope for feminist as well as queer readings, and interpretation. Now the important question that emerges here is, how did this change come about when generations have recognized the subject as a 'taboo' topic?

## **Rediscovery of the Past**

Like resistance to internalized patriarchy unleashing feminist readings and writings from female perspective, entrenched heterosexualism in the society compelled a similar search for suppressed and bowdlerized readings about same-sex attachments. Upon such interrogation, it was found out that today "the celebration of queer ideas in Hindu stories, symbols and rituals is in stark contrast to the ignorance and rigidity that we see in Indian society" (Pattanaikpt. II). There is enough evidence to prove that the past society was inclusive of queer people. There was space for them in the social setup. "In Hindu texts and traditions, both written and oral, there is a god and a story or a variation of a story for practically *every activity, inclination, and way of life*" (Vanita and Kidwai).

In the book 'Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History', Ruth Vanita along with Saleem Kidwai has exhaustively talked about various traditions and concepts which validated same sex love, queer space and gender fluidity. They have made an effort to familiarize the audience with various tropes and customs such as sex change and cross dressing, and same sex celibate community. She says Hindu scriptures sell "rebirth as explanation of all forms of love including same-sex love"(2).

In KM Ganguli's translation Vyasa's Mahabharata, Bhishma tells Yudhishtira that sexual congress was not necessary before and it is only in the Kaliyuga that have people started living in pairs through marriages (Santi Parva II CCVII). Bhishma even advises not to get attached to children, which of course are born out of a heterosexual union. This conveys that not only was there a space for homosexual activities, but also not so much importance was given to the heterosexual ones. Both were considered "normal" as opposed to today's normative thinking.

It has been reiterated over and over again that celibacy, not heterosexual alliance led to salvation and enlightenment. There was no need to stick to heteronormativity. One lived in a same-sex celibate community, away from the opposite sex. Not marriage or parentage but friendship was their primary identity of being. Reading of *Kathasaritasagar* tells us that this also holds true for the females who had *swyamvarasakhis* (Vanita and Kidwai). Then there was also the concept of '*saptapadam hi mitram*' which means that seven steps taken together constitute friendship. This tradition is closely similar to the seven pheras taken in marriage, suggesting a fine line between friendship and marriage.

From Ramayana to Puranas, from Kama Sutra to Sushruta Samhita, queerness has been given religious and societal sanctity. Not only humans but the gods themselves practised the change of sex wilfully. There are stories of Hariharaputra, Lord Aravan, Ardhanarishvara, Mohini, and many others. The Sanskrit word "*tritiya prakriti*" which translates to "the third nature" was quite popular. The Kama Sutra has explicitly mentioned about the third sex, which can further be classified into many different gender categories.

The dichotomy between the conventional significance accorded to non-binary people and their descent in modern times is therefore crucial to understand. This brings us to our next question: How did this juxtaposition come about?

### **Criminalisation of Homosexuality**

The book *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* points out the nineteenth century as "the crucial period of transition when a minor strand of pre-colonial homophobia became the dominant voice in colonial and postcolonial mainstream discourse" (Vanita 3).

It is no coincidence that there was a rapid change in literary themes, and conventions after the establishment of the British Raj in India. The earlier celebrated queer community was criminalized under laws such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code 1861 and the anti-sodomy law. Homosexuality was illegalized, and people were forcefully made to conform to the binary notions of gender identity. There was also the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which although did not have anything to do with the queer people specifically, threatened their means of living. The Act had criminalized many occupations which were the traditional source of earning a livelihood for these people, such as singing in the open in wedding ceremonies, etc. This marginalized them all the more. The minds of the nation were already hollowed out by the time we became free of foreign rule, and hence the persistence on criminalization of homosexuality continued.

As we know, literature shapes society and is also shaped by it. According to *Queering India*, "Colonialists and nationalists rewrote traditions by suppressing and misreading texts" (Vanita 4). The *canon formation* reflected this well enough. All such writings were either

destroyed completely, or disregarded the presence of any queer themes in old literary pieces. New writings, if at all they were written about the queer subject, only condemned homosexuality. Adjectives such as "lunatic", "sinful", "unnatural" were promoted for the *once natural* phenomenon. The writings evidently dealing with queer subjects were presumed and extrapolated to be otherwise. A whole range of acclaimed writers including Kamala Das have suffered this tragic fate.

In *Queering India*, Vanita says that the rhetoric of modern Indian homophobia draws directly on a "Victorian version of a Judeo-Christian discourse"(3). It is a 'borrowing'. She also argues that the structuring of homophobia was by masculinities that became normative in colonial and postcolonial nationalisms. It is very much possible that injunctions such as: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination" (*Bible*, Leviticus 18:22) might have been twisted and turned about to favour the heteronormative rigidity which Westerners forced upon themselves during that era, as has been pointed out in several debates across the globe. One must also keep in mind that only in the year 1987 did the American Psychiatric Association decide to completely declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder (Burton, *Psychology Today*).

All these instances and readings call for the need to look at an original story and the modern retelling of it in order to figure out how the changes in history have affected and shaped the modern Indian discourse. For this purpose, I shall make a textual analysis of Devdutt Pattanaik's *'Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You'* and attempt to contrast it with the original version of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa's Mahabharata, translated in English by Kisari Mohan Ganguli. We shall look at the figures of Shikhandi and Brihannala to serve our motive, and find out how the modern writer has not only retold but also reworked the old narratives to suit the demands of the 21st Century.

### **Analysis of Shikhandi**

Pattanaik has briefed the narratives of the epic Mahabharata and focused solely on the transgender trope in order to achieve his aim of highlighting the presence of such characters in the Indian Mythology. He narrates the account of how Shikhandi, the warrior, was first born to King Drupada as a female Shikhandini, whose identity can be traced back to princess Amba of the Kashi empire.

In a turn of events, Amba's proposal for marriage was rejected by the King of Shalva, King Vichitravirya, and Bhishma. Attention must be paid to Vichitravirya's response in Pattanaik's retelling: He let her go because "the idea of satisfying two wives was stressful enough" (pt. II.1). The author has made a witty choice of words to downplay the toxic masculinity where a 'true man' should be capable of sexually gratifying multiple women and the greater the number of women he is able to lure, the more 'manly' he is. The language used by Pattanaik strongly challenges this patriarchal mindset in a time where patriarchy is no longer relevant.

In his version, the King of Shalva rejects Amba as she had been "tainted", as opposed to the original Mahabharata where he says that having the knowledge of shastras cannot accept a woman who was to be wedded to another man (Ganguli, Udyog Parva sec. CLXXVI). She is rejected by Vichitravirya too as a "gift" once given should not be taken back. Distressed, she finally asks Bhishma, the severe one, to accept her as his wife but he too refuses her proposal on the account that he had vowed eternal celibacy. He asks her either to return back to her father's household as a maiden or to serve in his palace as a maid. These perhaps were the only options available to deserted women belonging to 'respectable' families.

One may contest that here Pattanaik's choice of words suggesting objectification has followed from the same patriarchal mindset he so wishes to criticize, but I would like to counter argue that he has deliberately used such expression not to mock at Amba but rather to justify her actions and further highlight the problem of such notions as emerging from regressive mentality. The author's retelling has a feminist angle to it where the first and foremost step to solve a problem is to call it out. However, the usage of "*he/his*" pronouns for Shikhandi is something that gay rights activists might rightly object to.

Suffering from several heartbreaks, all in a single day, Amba feels greatly humiliated and calls upon Kartikeya, Parshuram and lord Shiva one by one to help her out of her plight. Shiva grants her the boon that in the next birth of hers, she will get a chance to defeat Bhishma as a man. Nonetheless, she was born as a female, but raised as a man by Drupada since he believed her to be "the man" destined to kill his friend turned staunch enemy Drona, as prophesied by Shiva himself. Shikhandi was even married off to a Darsana princess who got

offended on finding that he was in fact a 'she'. King Hiranyavarna, father of the bride, attacked Drupada's kingdom in order to avenge the insult of his beloved daughter (it should be noted how the patriarch is supposed to avenge the insult of the females of his household be it Ravana fighting for his sister Surpanakha, or Bhima ripping off Dushashana's chest to take the revenge on Draupadi's behalf. These examples are very much unlike Amba who fights for herself). Shikhandini contemplates suicide and goes to the forest where a Yaksha named Sthuna (or Shtunakarna) pities her and lends off his masculinity to her, thus making Shikhandini's sex align with their gender and sexual orientation and enabling 'him' capable of performing "husbandly duties to the satisfaction of his wife". Pattanaik has explicitly mentioned this in his footnotes as the "borrowed organ". He sees it as an organ transplant by a donor and Shikhandi as a *female-to-male transsexual*, who undergoes what we call sex change in modern day terminology. Also, he has framed intentional, rhetorical questions in between to emphasize on the theme of queerness, for example - "Was it a woman he saved or a man?"

He also points out how retellers often avoid such details and refrain from explicitly talking about homosexuality which he says reveals a "*patriarchal bias even in the queer space.*" This is in close similarity to the case of the 24th Jain Tirthankara who is believed to have been a female, but was represented as a male with only one symbol of femininity: the earthen pot (Pattanaik pt. I), and also Sulabha indulging in a debate with king Janaka that the self is not gendered (Vanita and Kidwai 23). Buddhist ladies also argued that like men, women too have nothing innate in their character and anatomy hence they must not be required to undergo a sex change and become a man to be able to join a monastic order.

The patriarchal bias and the need to distort the representation of what is homosexual and homoerotic in nature as something simply effeminate is vivid in Baldev Raj Chopra's television serial, a 'retelling' based on Mahabharata. In his portrayal of Shikhandi, he has missed out on quite a lot. This can be a deliberate measure in the direction on the grounds of colonial stigmatization of homosexuality, and the efforts of the later emerging nationalists in the process of centralization and streamlining of diverse opinions into a singular, stand-alone perspective. Shikhandi here is shown as a man who simply remembers being born as a woman in his past life. This is the sole cause of his effeminate behaviour. Bhishma too, having lived for centuries on account of his *icchamrityuvaran*, identifies Shikhandi, now a man, as a woman in his past life. Him not lifting up his weapons in support of his argument that Shikhandi was a woman in his past life makes no sense for Indra too took the form of a female on various occasions, and lord Vishnu took the Avatar of Mohini.

Amba is shown as a vengeful woman in the serial, hellbent on destroying Bhishma for no justifiable reason, again the *querelle des femmes* that women are either idealized on a godly pedestal (falling in this line are Sita, Urmila, Rukmini, Subhadra, etc.) or are vindictive and cruel (Amba, Surpanakha, Kaikey, Manthara. Kunti and Draupadi are often seen in a grey shade in some parts but since they are the wives of the most virtuous men existing, they are seen as necessarily in the first category but also blamed for the misery of those men related to them). As opposed to this, we have Pattanaik's work neatly presenting two contrary schools of thought. The unorthodox Drupada says, "Bhishma will see him as a woman but we will contest his view, for now he is a man with *a wife who no longer doubts his masculinity*" (unproblematic when seen as a deliberate tool to highlight the problem associated with the usage of such language). Meanwhile orthodox Bhishma argues, "*Born a woman, you are always a woman*" (pt. II.1).

Pattanaik has skipped episodes explaining the cause of rivalry between friends turned staunch enemies Drupada and Drona, whereas one sees separate episodes dedicated to the same in BR Chopra's serial. This suggests what is important for which ideology. However, Pattanaik too has baffled me in calling Shikhandi as "useless" since he could be neither one (perfect man) nor the other (perfect woman) while reasoning why Drupada had to perform a yagya in order to fulfil his wish of gaining a son who would kill Drona, and a daughter who would divide the Kuruvansh dynasty. This indicates that though there are numerous movements and campaigns happening for demanding better treatment for queer persons, we still have a long way to get people to give them the respect they rightfully deserve.

Both in the ancient text (original Mahabharata) and the latest modern text (retelling of Devdutt Pattanaik) have shown a contestation between two parties making two different choices based on their two different ideologies and the consequence they suffer as a result of those choices (progressive and regressive). One must note the tension created between a sexual being, and a virgin male, a transgender and a celibate wherein it is the transgender who is ultimately garlanded with victory. My statements are supported by Pattanaik's saying that Shikhandi playing a key role in the battlefield of Kurukshetra means "*queerness here is not accidental but quite deliberate*". Indeed, it is Bhishma's vow of celibacy which has always been celebrated by the patriarchal mindset as the ideal way to lead a life because women serve as



distractions in the path of achievement of men's goals, that causes his destruction, degeneration and misery. He has subtly suggested the subversion of Bhishma's identity: "In the Jain Mahabharata, so that no one doubts his vow of celibacy, Bhishma castrates himself" (pt. II.1).

Bhishma's celibacy serves as more of a curse than a boon by the gods, since he being bounded by his oath of loyalty towards Hastinapura, is forced to take stand and fight from the side of evil Kauravas in spite of his heart showering all blessings to the righteous Pandavas, and ultimately being pinned down due to the intervention of Shikhandi, the trans man. In the endnote, Pattanaik forces us to pause, ponder and introspect for a while when he raises questions such as, "Who will inherit Drupada's throne?" One falls in dilemma whether the "perfect man" but younger Dhristadhyumna owns the right to inheritance of kingship or the elder but effeminate "son" Shikhandi does (pt. II.1)? We are also compelled to think from the perspective of Shikhandi's wife on how does she feel to know her husband was a woman on their wedding night but later became a man due to the sacrifice of another's manhood?

### **Analysis of Brihannala**

The specifics and intricacies of the time when Arjuna guised himself as one of the third gender, under the pseudonym of Brihannala, is often deliberately missed out. Devdutt Pattanaik seeks to arrest our attention towards the same.

In the Mahabharata, we find that once when Arjuna journeyed to Indra Lok to improve his skills and gather divine weapons, an apsara by the name of Urvashi was entranced by his appearance. She approached him to profess her sentiments but was surprised when Arjuna refused to comply with her demands on the grounds that he saw her as more of a mother figure since she was the lover of his ancestor Pururava. She told him that although the laws of mortality did not apply to her, she was nonetheless disregarded since Arjuna was a mortal person. To quell her rage and make herself feel better, she cursed Arjuna: "Since thou disregardest a woman come to thy mansion at the command of thy father and of her own motion- a woman, besides, who is pierced by the shafts of Kama, therefore, O Partha, thou shalt have to pass thy time among females unregarded, and as a dancer, and destitute of manhood and scorned as a eunuch" (Ganguli, Vana Parva sec.XLVI).

A question arises in the mind that if a woman is "commanded" then how can she be "of her own motion"? As opposed to this, we have Pattanaik's version of: "Only a eunuch refuses a willing woman. So be one" (pt. II.16). In his narration, we see how more freedom of choice is given to women. Pattanaik has also used strong, explicit words to describe Urvashi's desire and Arjuna's plight. He is straightforward in his approach.

In Ganguli's translation, one finds the words "unregarded" and "scorned as a eunuch". The fact that Arjuna was *cursed* to be a eunuch speaks volumes. They might be accepted, they might also be prominent in the royal women's quarters, but of course not preferred. The stigma associated with being a eunuch is effectively highlighted by Pattanaik.

In the words of Arjuna, "I will declare myself as one of the neuter sex. O monarch, it is indeed difficult to hide the marks of the bowstring on my arms. I will, however, cover both my cicatrized arms with bangles. Wearing brilliant rings on my ears and conch-bangles on my wrists and causing a braid to hang down from my head, I shall, O king, appear as one of the third sex, Brihannala by name. And living as a female I shall (always) entertain the king and the inmates of the inner apartments by reciting stories" (Ganguli, Virata Parva Pandavapravesha Parvasec. II). Pattanaik has skipped the details of Brihannala's appearance. While the original version declares it difficult for Arjuna to hide his manliness, Pattanaik intentionally declares Arjuna to have been temporarily "castrated".

The disguise of Brihannala is seen in different ways by different scholars. Ruth Vanita sees him not so much as a woman as a hermaphrodite or a cross dressed man similar to what is found in the Kamasutra and Tamil epics. She writes that Arjuna is cursed to live as a *woman* but he "retains his brawn and manly ways" (Vanita and Kidwai8). This is also evident in BR Chopra's Mahabharata when Brihannala shows extraordinary strength and rage in the episode of Kichaka Vadha by Bhima. Pattanaik sees the disguise as a "eunuch". While most of the English versions of the Mahabharata simply refer to Arjuna as "eunuch" in an archaic and deceptive manner, this characterization is obviously incorrect for a number of reasons. To begin with, Arjuna's transgender conduct shows that he is far different from a simple castrated man or eunuch. Mere castration does not lead regular heterosexual men to become more feminine psychologically, physically, or socially. Second, mutilation of the body was seen by Vedic literature as being in the form of darkness, and castration was not a recognized practice

in ancient India (Brihannala, *Academic Dictionaries*). In his essay titled 'Homosexuality and Hinduism', Arvind Sharma writes, "...the limited practice of castration in India raises another point significant for the rest of the discussion, namely, whether rendering a word such as "kliba" as eunuch regularly is correct" (qtd. in Swidler, 1993).

When Arjuna is cursed, Indra congratulates him instead of consoling. He rejoices and takes pride in mentioning that Arjuna vanquished even Rishis by his patience and self-control. (Rishi Vishwamitra was 'disturbed' in his austerities by apsara Menaka. He could not protest or stand her beauty for long and finally gave in to feelings of lust). This is a reflection of the masculine cult that celebrates celibacy, and thinks that it goes hand in hand with valor. Ironically, Indra was once temporarily castrated for not restraining his desires, when he sported with Ahalya in the disguise of her husband Rishi Gautama (Pattanaikpt. II.17). Unfortunately, while Indra is only temporarily punished, Ahalya suffers a graver punishment for a lesser crime when she is turned permanently into a stone, all because she is a woman. As opposed to this, we have Urvashi acting as a privileged man here. She is unable to take rejection and ends up inflicting pain upon the one she claims to love. It is the same psyche of a man who feels entitled enough in the present day to throw acid on the woman who rejects his advances.

The time when the Kauravas were poised to attack the kingdom of King Virata, it was Brihannala who came to the rescue. Prince Uttara "did not like the idea of serving a eunuch" and decided to kill himself on feeling "public humiliation when brought back to the battlefield by Brihannala" (Pattanaik pt. II.16). Here, Uttara's patriarchal ideal is plain to see. Pattanaik transports us to the time when Krishna fled the battlefield and took the name Rana-chor-rai (one who withdrew from battle). The cleverness and maturity of Krishna are praised for what is perceived as a 'tactical withdrawal', but Prince Uttara's escape is depicted in a black light, which is the exact reverse of this. He is returned to the battlefield by a cross-dressing eunuch, which is an "injury to his masculine pride." King Virata who not only accepted Brihannala but also massively respected her as the Guru of his daughter, smacks Kanka, who is actually Yudhishtira in disguise, for saying that it was the eunuch Brihannala and not his son who routed the mighty Kaurava army. Nobody wanted to think otherwise. It was more plausible than the idea that a eunuch- dancer could wield the bow.

Author Pattanaik draws attention to the fact that Arjuna was able to beat the Kauravas single-handedly when he posed as a eunuch-dancer, but during the Kurukshetra conflict when

he had already regained his masculinity, he turns into a nervous wreck and is "chastised" by Krishna for his unmanly behaviour. Once again, a person of the third gender plays a significant role in the Mahabharata. Thus, the celebration of the queer in the epic is highlighted by him. He is therefore neutral in displaying both the negative and the positive aspects of Brihannala's representation.

Moreover, it seems Krishna is comfortable with his feminine side when he cross dresses as a Gopi. Gender can theoretically be assumed or lost in life by someone who is appropriately prepared for such changes since, like the body itself, gender is considered as a garment or disguise that is assumed at birth and shed at death. The self is neither entirely determined by one's gender, nor is it rigid and immutable (Vanita and Kidwai 65). Gender, as well as other categories like age, caste, and class, are finally superseded by the individual. This is something that most people cannot comprehend, but an enlightened person can.

In Draupadi cults, Arjuna is given the epithet Savyasachin, which translates to "ambidextrous". This title signifies that, like Shiva, Arjuna is capable of uniting the left, or female side, of the body with the right, or masculine side (Vanita and Kidwai 59). The paradox of being regarded as a celibate in spite of being married and having children is evident here. Arjuna is seen as a brahmachari because he approached his wives only for the purpose of procreation. A man who goes to women "for the sake only of offspring" is described by Bhishma as the one who overcomes all difficulties in life. (Gangli, Santi Parva 1 Rajadharmanusasana Parva CX)

On discovering that Brihannala is none other than Arjuna himself, King Virata offers his daughter's hand in marriage to him, but he rejects the offer saying that she is like a daughter to him as well. He suggests her getting married to his son Abhimanyu. Pattanaik intelligently and subtly changes the narrative here: "Arjuna is content being seen as the dance teacher, and parent, or shall we say *mother*" (pt. II.16).

## Conclusion

Some critics might argue that Devdutt Pattanaik has deliberated queerness in his retellings of myths which are otherwise simply metamorphoses of beings. Notwithstanding,

the opposite of this seems more probable after reading the theories of several researchers, Ruth Vanita being the foremost one. The queerness was always present, but as time went on and societal prejudice against homosexuality increased, people started to perceive these stories in a more constrained context. The removal of lord Ganesha's human head and its replacement with an elephant's head by Lord Shiva is seen today as a celebration of a highly complex and imaginative scholarly community, if not a scientifically advanced society overall. This is in no way brought down to the level of a simple fantasy of a poet hallucinating about beings capable of metamorphosis either by possession of divine or demonic powers. The same, however, does not stand true for myths revolving around queer characters - an umbrella term for the LGBTQIA+ community which has been ignored for a long time. But in the evolving times, the community refuses to be ignored by society.

Pattanaik contrasts his own efforts at recounting queer stories with the "peculiar" clap of the hijra by using it as an example. He claims that the hijra's clap is a signal for us to pay attention to their existence and identity (pt. 1). His works also attempt to make the public aware of the long-overlooked or manipulated stories of gender identity. He challenges the binary classification of gender and sexuality, just like Vanita and other scholars, and seeks to reassure the non-binary by reminding them that there was a period when society was more welcoming of them rather than being judgmental. Closely studying them reveals that Hindu tales frequently depict sex change by a variety of mechanisms, including swimming in enchanted pools. In his introduction to another of his books titled '*The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*', Pattanaik asserts "queer manifestations of sexuality, though repressed socially, squeeze their ways into the myths, legends and lore of the land."

Social activism frequently coexists with literary movements, while the reverse is also true. The hijra community was given official recognition as the "third gender" on April 15, 2014, by the Supreme Court of India. Since then, hijras have been accorded OBC-level reservations in both workplaces and educational institutions. In order to guarantee the non-binary population's access to employment, education, and housing, the Transgender Persons Act was also passed on November 26, 2019 (Hazarika, *New Literaria* 237). The repressed queer community has become more conscious of their rights as a result of these amendments. There is no denying that the custom of retelling of stories has played a vital part in bringing about this enlightenment.

Brinda Bose states that “...the evolving relationship of the state with the hijra possess the potential of creating a space for her within it that recognizes her sexual identity without stigmatizing it, and her sexual difference without fetishizing it in a reductive exercise” (135). Unfortunately, this experience continues to be ridden with numerous challenges because the state has a history of purging and stifling "non-normative" identities. This finding explains why an increasing number of authors are developing their own queer interpretations and studies to support the movement against the marginalization and denigration of the queer.

In the end, this research has certain limitations, just like any other research. There may be inconsistencies between the translated and original meanings of words and I have only referred to the English translation of the Mahabharata. I have used "queer" as an umbrella term which might not appeal to some people. The use of pronouns for Shikhandi and Brihannala might also be inaccurate. Additionally, no consideration has been given to the theories of those who contend that feminism and queer rights advocacy developed in the West. This is a topic that needs further study.

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#### Author's bio-note

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