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**THROUGH THE COUNTER DISCURSIVE LENS: A STUDY OF
DEVADUTT PATTANAİK'S *THE PREGNANT KING***



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ABSTRACT

*The paper aims at studying *The Pregnant King* by Devadutt Pattanaik as a counter discourse. Analysing the narrative pattern of the text and character delineation, the paper rereads the text to dig out the gender stereotyping and sexual discrimination that have been ingrained into the text. Subverting the peripheral*

reading of the text as an obliteration of gender constructs, the present study underlines the discriminative approach that the author has adapted in the question of gender construction.

KEYWORDS

Sexuality, Gender, Counter Discourse, Normative Conformity, Subversion, femininity, masculinity

RESEARCH PAPER

Literature is a political terrain that is capable of cementing the stereotypical norms or of subverting and asserting counter norms. This is evidently reflected in the depiction of gender roles in the different genres of literature. Either the accepted norms of gender are proliferated through the pages of literature or they are vehemently attacked through the nuances of character delineation and literary discourse. Like many controversial topics like racism, nationhood, subaltern studies, the theme of gender is a much debated one analysed in myriad ways through the trajectories of literary readings.

Gender is socially constructed and a result of sociocultural influences throughout an individual's development (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts 2005). Gender identity can be affected by, and is different from one society to another depending on the way the members of society evaluate the role of females and males. Our gender identity can be influenced from the ethnicity of the group, their historical and cultural background, family values and religion. Often people confuse or misuse the terms gender and sex. The term sex refers to the biological distinction of being male and female (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts 2005). To make the distinction clearer one could consider that we inherit the sex but we learn our gender (Boss 2008).

Gender is a structural feature of society and the sociological significance of gender is that it is a device by which society controls its members (Henslin, 2006). Gender like social class and race can be used to socially categorize people and even lead to prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is a set of attitudes, more likely unfavorable, towards members of a group (Pennsylvania State University, 2011). Discrimination is overt negative behaviors towards a person based on his or her membership in a group (Pennsylvania State University, 2011). When there is differential treatment of people based on their sex the term sexism defines this behavior.

Sexism refers to any bias against an individual or group based on the individual's or group's sex (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts 2005). Gender discrimination is another way one could define sexism and in particular this is associated with discrimination and stereotyped beliefs against women. Stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups and most of them are socioculturally based (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts 2005).

Stereotype ideas and beliefs regarding women, although they have been changed and improved, are still evident in our country and in other modern cultures. Unfortunately in

several countries around the world such as Arabian courtiers, Africa and India things have not changed much and women are still considered a minority and do not have equal access and rights in their societies as do males (Henslin, 2006). This variation regarding gender around the world makes prominent that gender identity is influenced by social variables and has little to do with biological variables.

Cultural and religious beliefs and attitudes have a serious impact on gender identity and in many cases promote stereotype beliefs against women and lead to gender discrimination. When it comes to culture and religious influences in a society regarding the view of gender, the concept of institutionalized sexism is appropriate to describe the situation. Institutionalized sexism is the sexist attitudes that are held by the vast majority of people living in a society where stereotypes and discrimination are the norm (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2011). When a society has specific norms people living within the society will adapt to them and they will do the same even for discriminatory norms. For instance when a society, due to religious and cultural reasons, view women as weak or inferior people living within the society will develop the same views and will act accordingly. People tend to conform to their group and will do the same even when they engage in discriminatory behaviors as they want to fit in and be accepted by their group which is known as normative conformity (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2011).

Society constructs our gender and categorizes its members similar as it does with age, ethnicity, race, social class and status. However the categorization according to gender is another way of manipulating members of a society and to promote inequalities. There are obvious biological and anthropological differences between the two sexes but we cannot use these differences to infer conclusions and provide stereotyped models about gender. As mentioned in the beginning sexism is the term that accounts for gender discrimination and has different forms. One of them already mentioned is benevolent sexism characterized by positive but stereotyped views of women. Contrarily another form is hostile sexism which is characterized by negative stereotypical views towards women. For instance hostile sexism views of women are centered on beliefs that women are inferior to men due to superficial views that one can hold against women. Lastly another form of sexism is ambivalent sexism which holds views of both hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes simultaneously (Schneider, Gruman & Coutts, 2005). However no matter the form, sexism has overall negative consequences and results in stereotyping women, and even prejudice and discrimination.

The Pregnant King is a book authored by Devadutt Pattanaik based on the lesser-known stories of Mahabharata. Centering on the protagonist King Yuvanashva, the author seems to

question and subvert the gender roles assigned by the society. The first reading of the work will give the impression of a counter discourse against the social constructions of gender and sex, thereby giving a veneer of a revolutionary book. Yet, a deep analysis would reveal the latent and hidden gender discourse that is woven so intricately into the fabric of the book.

Among the many lesser-known sub-stories in the Mahabharata is one told by the sage Lomasa to the exiled Pandavas, about a king named Yuvanashva who accidentally gets pregnant. This thread forms the base of the book by Pattanaik. The protagonist, King Yuvanashva is the well-liked ruler of Vallabhi, an obedient son, a devoted husband who aspires to be just towards all and uphold Dharma in his kingdom. From the onset of the story, the epic battle of Kurukshetra is imminent but the king's mother, Shilavati, refuses to give her consent since he's yet to sire an heir. Despite having three wives and several years of futile rituals the king has reached a point of desperation. So he seeks the help of the two Siddhis, Yaja and Upayaja, who after an elaborate ritual create a potion. The king mistakenly drinks the magic potion meant to make his queens pregnant with a son. The incident is hidden from everyone including the child except the wives, Shilavati and Asanga, the healer. After given birth to son, Mandhata, he successfully impregnates his second wife, Pulomi. The king who has lived his whole life by the code of Dharma now finds himself in a dilemma. He wonders whether the new found identity would fetter him or free him from the centuries long burden of gender roles. The plot follows his character as he struggles to come to terms with his true identity and gender.

The character of Yuvanashva can be seen as the main tool of subverting the gender construct. He is the King hailed as the epitome of manhood. He has all the powers ultimate to a man/king. When he becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child, Devadutt Pattanaik makes him yearn for the celebration of motherhood. He craves to feed and nurture his child, he hankers to sing lullaby to his baby, he desires fervently to be called as 'mother'. This craving and yearning for the feminine emulations give the readers an impression that the author is celebrating womanhood, that the book is appreciative, rather than being discriminative, of the female gender roles. Yet, the scrutinised reading of the novel will proclaim and dig out the inherent discriminatory paradigm of the text towards the question of gender and sex.

The story follows the predicament of Yuvanshva in having to choose whether he wants to be the father, mother or the king, as the lines between the three start to blur for him. Yuvanashva finds himself unable to cope with the separation from his son. He yearns to nurse him, and take care of him, just as any mother would. He would sing lullabies from his chambers to soothe the young prince, but it wasn't enough. He constantly tries to win the affection of his

son, and be a mother to him, but fails, because he is unable to tell his subjects that he is a mother. Guided, or rather constrained by dharma, he is forced to curb his desire to be Madhanta's mother, and as a result he painfully distances himself from his child. His entire life becomes a Hamlet-like quandary of whether he should be a mother to his son, or a king to this subjects. The irony is not lost on the readers. At the beginning of the novel we see a king who can be easily considered as the epitome of manhood and upholder of Dharma and we see him become a man who is left with no other wish than to be called 'mother' by his son.

The craving for motherhood was depicted so powerfully that the readers would confuse the reading of the novel as a fête of womanhood. The beauty and depth manifested to the motherly feelings give the façade of epitomising and lionising maternity. Yet, the analysis of the inner politics would reveal that the text is only a headlock in cementing the gender based binaries. The King, Yuvanashva who was an embodiment of manhood is depicted as having lost his royal charisma post-partum. He forgets his role as a ruler of a state and dreams of rearing his child. Rather than being proud to be the ruler of his subjects, he craves to be called as the mother of Mandatta. Though as a ruler he has the power to dictate, after his pregnancy he is hushed even by his wives to speak about his new gender role. He loses the power of the word, thereby alienated from the power of logocentrism. These developments speak of the change that a personality has to go through once there is the reversal of gender and sexuality. The man loses his power as he steps on to the realm of womanhood. He inadvertently succumbs to the gender roles of the society assigned to a woman by becoming meek, servile and docile. His masculinity loses its temper once he gets immersed in femininity. As the society plays the villain by not ascribing any power to his new found gender role, he goes in exile. His departure to invisibility itself speaks of the plight of women who are destined to live in invisible terrains throughout their lives.

Devadutt Pattanaik, though delineated the story as a counter discourse ultimately falls into the genre of a political fiction immensely impregnated with gender stereotyping. He has cemented the fact that there is no escape from the gender roles ascribed by the social constructs. Pattanaik has also made it clear that femininity is inherent with meek feminine feelings where there is no place for power or supremacy.

In order to further demonstrate how gender roles based on dharma can destroy people, the lives of Yuvanashva's three wives, Simantini, Poulami and Keshni can be studied. Pattanaik, though scarcely, dedicates space to talk about the pain these women experience, by virtue of being unable to bear a child. They become despondent and blame themselves, even though there is a good chance that it is Yuvanashva and not them who is sterile. He also shows the

envy and disappointment they face when their husband brings home a new wife. The idea that women only exist to sow their husbands seeds is very beautifully depicted, without ever actually saying those words. The women quietly accept their fate, and finally even find some sort of companionship with each other. Poulami is the only wife who blames their failure to be a mother on Yuvanashva, and she even ridicules him for birthing a child. When Yuvanashva hears about it, he angrily forces himself on her, almost as if he wished to prove a point. Poulami becomes pregnant as a result, but the relationship between the two is soured forever.

The novel also looks at the issues of transgender identities too through different characters. The novel delves into the stories of other characters like Shilavati, the ambitious and sharp princess who cannot be king because she's a woman. Widowed at a young age she becomes the regent but this disturbs the Brahmin elders because they were not used to a leader who nursed a child while discussing matters of dharma. It's notable that the unconventionality of Shilavati's own life doesn't make her any more tolerant of her son's situation later on, which underlines the point that non-conformity/anti-tradition can take many forms, and these aren't always kindred spirits. It also tells the story of Somvat and Sumedha, two childhood friends who decide to get married despite being men. Sthunakarna, a yaksha, who forsakes his manhood to make Shikhandi a husband and then reclaims it to make Somvat a wife. Arjuna, the great warrior with many wives forced to masquerade as a eunuch after being castrated by a nymph. Adi-natha, the teacher of teachers, worshipped as a hermit by Yaja and an enchantress by Upayaja. It's also the story of the patron god of Vallabhi, Ileshwar Mahadev, who becomes God on full moon days and Goddess on new moon nights.

The novel thus can be read as a book that plays on the controversial issues like gender and sexuality. The paper offers numerous counter discursive readings that help to study the text in myriad angles. It opens new readings and counter studies for the readers to work on.

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