

Myth and Modernity: Exploring Queer Themes in Pattanaik's Mythical and Kundalkar's Realistic Narratives

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Abstract

Queer theory has its roots in recent past yet queer themes have been present in Indian literature for centuries with examples like Shikhandi, Mohini and Brihannala. These narratives have questioned the traditional gender roles to form a queer canon, achieving this by using a child's perspective in 'Lihaf' by Ismat Chughtai or by employing the stream of consciousness technique in Sachin Kundalkar's Cobalt Blue. These narratives give us a very realistic portrayal of the inside workings of a queer mind. This paper analyses two works, Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales by Devdutt Pattanaik, rooted in ancient mythological narratives and Cobalt Blue by Sachin Kundalkar, rooted in a contemporary portrayal of queer love in the 21st century. It explores gender portrayal and queer representation by close reading the texts and conducting an in-depth analysis of its themes, motifs and narrative techniques. The paper utilizes key concepts by Butler and Kosofsky, to analyse the themes of love, societal acceptance, desire and gender performativity along with contemporary reinterpretation of ancient myths in the queer context comparing it to the queer representation in modern texts. It highlights the question of queer visibility in Indian Literature with reference to socio-religious context, furthering queer visibility in Indian Literature within global narratives.

Keyword: Queer Theory, Gender Identity, Gender Performativity, Myths, Queer Representation

Introduction

"To understand queerness, cultural filters are necessary," (Pattanaik 5) states the author in his book Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales. Indian mythological figures have often been associated with an innate feeling of queerness. The field of queer theory is quite recent, with pioneers like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick being the flag bearers. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity talks about gender being a performance, constructed by societal context. To put it in the words of Simone De Beauvoir, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (Beauvoir 330). Gender, according to her, is defined not by one's biology or by the cultural setup but by how one chooses to move forward with it.

A tumultuous change has been witnessed in queer representation in Indian Literature. The ancient Indian mythological texts treated the subject as inseparable from the wider narrative as Pattanaik puts it, "Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness" (Pattanaik 12). This very vocal representation dwindled to queerness becoming a marginalised or silenced aspect of literature and society. Instances can be picked up from the short story 'Lihaf' by Ismat Chughtai, where the characters of Begum Sahiba or the Nawab are never called homosexual explicitly, the lihaf in itself becomes a symbol of queerness in the story. Vikram Seth, in his A Suitable Boy, affords the queer characters a sub-narrative where the friendship of Feroz and Maan can only be hinted at as a homosexual love story; the theme is abandoned halfway and never picked up again for discussion.

With changing times and society and the exit of British imperial forces, Indian literature perhaps found its voice back, queer characters started making appearances more often and there were fewer attempts to hide their identities by their creators, affording queer people a voice of their own and a right to exist independently in society. Foucault says, "For a long time now, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continued to be dominated by it even today. Thus, the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (Foucault 3). Literature has always been a mirror to society and life has always found a way to infiltrate literature. India has come a long way from treating the subject as taboo to first decriminalizing homosexuality to now fighting for marriage rights and this change in the fabric of society is visible in literature too. Authors are now able to write more freely and openly on the subject. Characters such as Anjum in The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy was afforded the status of a central character.

In ancient Indian Literature queer characters have been more prevalent than is known to us, examples

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of Shikhandi, Mohini (avatar of Vishnu), Brihannala (the name Arjuna, one of the pandava brothers adopted while living for a year as a eunuch) are a few among many. These narratives have been central in questioning the traditional gender roles. Writers have used various narrative techniques over the years to form a queer canon. These techniques include the stream of consciousness as employed by Sachin Kundalkar in *Cobalt Blue*, the use of a child's perspective as employed in Ismat Chughtai's short story 'Lihaf' or how Arundhati Roy employs magic realism in her *Ministry Of Utmost Happiness* to reflect gender fluidity. The question of being queer has thus been addressed in several ways by various writers. The framework of these works changes with the changing times. If we look closely at these works, we can identify the time period the stories belong to and the cultural setup.

This paper highlights the questions of the queer identities and the changing representations in literature. Both the works though have similar themes; they are extremely different in their narrative techniques. Kundalkar employs stream of consciousness, presenting the narrative from two different points of view to give a realistic portrayal of the two minds and their inner workings. The stream of consciousness technique has been very effective especially in the context of queer literature, as it helps further the cause of queer theory and gives us an intimate experience of the characters. Pattanaik uses the mythological reinterpretation technique, picking up specific stories featuring queer characters from ancient mythological texts to highlight the motif. These stories are a retelling and reinterpretation of ancient myths featuring queer characters. The reinterpretation helps us place these stories within the contemporary context.

Many critics have analysed the presence of queerness in literature in order to foreground it. Ruth Vanita an Indian critic has based her study around this subject and published her book *Same Sex Love in India*. She traces the history of same sex love and desire in Indian culture. She starts the book by saying "This book traces the history of ideas in Indian written traditions about love between women and love between men who are not biologically related" (Vanita xiii).

Theoretical Background

This paper uses queer theory and gender theory to understand the position of queer representation in literature in modern Indian texts vs that in mythological texts. The primary texts analysed are *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* by Devdutt Pattanaik and *Cobalt Blue* by Sachin Kundalkar. Contextually speaking, the geopolitical context within which the two texts are placed has changed significantly. Pattanaik places the mythological tales within the contemporary context, and reinterprets these tales with a queer motif. The fluidity and ease of these narratives, break the societal gender norms, each of these stories stand out on its own. Post each tale he offers footnotes which give us a fresh perspective and help us in reinterpreting the tales.

The term 'queer' is an umbrella term, which originally meant "strange or peculiar", the term evolved over the years giving it its current meaning, a term used to represent anyone who doesn't fit the norms defined by the society. The term is used to describe the LGBTQIA+ community. The Queer Theory was earlier called the Gay and Lesbian Studies. Pamod K. Nayar states "Queer theory moves between literary analysis and activism because it shows how cultural representations contribute to very real material oppression of homosexuals" (Nayar 184). Many intellectuals have helped give the theory its current form.

Judith Butler is one such spokesperson who has advocated for the rights of women and the LGBTQIA+ community. They view gender as a societal performance which has nothing to do with the biology of a human. Nayar says "Butler's theory of gender and the subject treats the subject as a process, a performative act where gender 'occurs' only through the repetition of particular acts – an argument that suggests the subject is never a stable, cogent entity" (Nayar 190). It is not something that one is born with but something that is acquired. Gender according to them is thus subject to change and is not fixed and defined by stringent parameters.

Stories from Indian Mythology often feature women transforming into men and vice versa. They talk about celestial births, stories of woman marrying woman, man marrying man, all these instances can be clubbed under the queer theme. *Cobalt Blue* is a story of love between two men making it another instance of queer love. Reading these texts in the light of queer theory show us how the characters have been represented in these works of literature, their roles with respect to gender performativity and the context within which they are

placed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a pioneer of the queer theory discusses aspects of being queer, specifically the binary oppositions of men and women and the limiting aspects of doing so along with this she presents the analogy of a closet.

The two writers are testament to the changing times - one tries to bring the past closer to the present to make it relevant today and the other reflects the change and materialises it in his works in the present. The two texts also show the gap between the two times. On the one hand, Pattanaik's narratives show us the natural treatment of the subject, on the other hand, Kundalkar's narrative show us the inner turmoil the characters undergo in accepting their sexuality. The gap in the two narratives is testament to the changing time and thought.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has done extensive work in the field of queer theory having written numerous books like *Tendencies* and *Epistemology of the Closet*. She defines the word queer in her book *Tendencies* as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 8). Having said that she tries to tell us that she is not trying to be limiting with the definition.

In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Kosofsky's main idea is that binary oppositions limit our understanding of sexuality. A person's sexuality becomes an important part of their identity. Sexuality can't be limited to the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality; it is a spectrum. She says in her *Epistemology of the Closet* “in Foucault's words “the homosexual was now a species”. So, as a result, is the heterosexual, and between these species the human species has come more and more divided” (Kosofsky 9). For example, the paying guest in *Cobalt Blue* is a bisexual having relation with both the brother Tanay and the sister Anuja, taking us away from the binaries of heterosexual Anuja and homosexual Tanay. The book itself explores more than the binaries of the two sexualities.

Tanay in describing perhaps what was the paying guest and Anuja's first meet says “Anuja shook your hand firmly, no doubt hurting your fingers” (Kundalkar 8). The question of gender being a performance is raised every now and then. Critics have argued gender should be independent of one's biology. Gender also sometimes becomes a personal choice, with society moving towards acceptance slowly, people have also become more accepting of the different genders and we have now moved on from the ancient framework of the existence of just two genders i.e. male and female. The word gender is “the social, psychological, cultural and behavioural aspects” of a person. The two texts that we analyze amply explore the question of gender, the constructed and acquired gender and the fluidity of gender. Tanay and Anuja are not gripped within the societal concept of gender and we see them portraying the fluidity of gender. Anuja can't be described as feminine in the traditional sense of the word and neither can Tanay be described as masculine. Nayar summarising Butler's theories of performativity says “Gender is thus a performativity that constitutes identity” (Nayar 191)

The behavioural qualities of the two siblings are something unique to each of them and this free portrayal of the gender identities can also be a by-product of the changing times. On the other hand, Pattanaik's book depicts the same in context of the ancient Indian literature. What is curious is how this representation and acceptance changed over time. If we read these tales metaphorically, we can infer many connections to the queerness and we can go on to conclude, being queer was as natural as a tree or a tiger in olden times. There are characters whose sex is not defined. Shikhandi, a woman by nature is a male, he even marries a woman. His wife on their wedding night discovers that Shikhandi is indeed a woman by birth and not a man. Thus, we can highlight that the issue of gender being a performance since the olden times, the best examples of which becomes Shikhandi. Shikhandi is considered a man because he had been raised by his father as a male he was dressed and taught warrior skills and thus Shikhandi can be a classic example of gender being a performance, something that is acquired by repetition and not decided by birth. Shikhandi was a male because of the way he was treated and raised. Shikhandi has been described as someone “who is neither a complete woman nor a complete man” (Pattanaik 48). Shikhandi is also described to have borrowed male genitalia after his wife finds out on their wedding night that Shikhandi is indeed a woman, in the words of Pattanaik this “is what modern queer vocabulary would call female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally” (Pattanaik 46).

Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales, They Don't Tell You

Devdutt Pattanaik in his book highlights the various queer instances that have appeared in mythology as he puts it “Hindu mythology makes constant reference to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness” (Pattanaik 12). He also poses the question of gender performativity through stories of Mahadev, Shikhandi, Chundala, Vishnu, Kali who all transform into the opposite gender, all these stories have been so fluently and effortlessly presented in our mythology that it has been viewed as something very natural. The process of transformation of a man into a woman or a woman into a man is seen as an intrinsic part and not the subject of laughter.

The tales can be interpreted literally or metaphorically as for the tale of Bhangashvana, Pattanaik says “A queer person may see Bhangashvana as a bisexual. They would see him as a married gay man who considers both his children and his lover's children as his own, relating to the former as a father and the latter as a mother. They would see the tale as a metaphor, as most people see mythological tales. Those uncomfortable with queer sexuality would prefer seeing the tale literally, rejecting all attempts to rationalise it” (Pattanaik 86). Bhangashvana was a man who wished to sire a hundred sons so he prayed to all gods and performed a hard penance, pleased with his Tapasya the gods granted him the boon. King of gods Indra, was displeased with this because Bhangashvana did not make an offering to him so he cursed him and turned him into a woman. In due time Bhangashvana bore 100 sons as a woman and thus now had 200 sons, half of whom addressed him as father and the other half addressed him as mother. After Indra found out Bhangashvana was still happy he cursed the kids, they fought with each other and died. The story is told by Bhishma on his deathbed to Yudhishthira when Yudhishthira asks him, “who gets greater pleasure in the world: a man or a woman” (Pattanaik 84).

He further talks about characters like Gopeshwar, avatar of Shiva, who took the form of a milk maid to enjoy the transcendental dance with Lord Krishna. No men were allowed to witness the ras leela and any man who wished to do so had to first take a dip in river Yamuna and allow themselves to be transformed into a woman to take part in the ras. Pattanaik points out that any man wishing to take part in the ras had to shed their masculinity or egos. Thus, the question of being born with a particular gender and adopting it as your complete identity is raised here. Thus, gender is not a fixed identity but a performance subject to change.

The book also discusses the story of “Bahuchara, whose husband was an incomplete man” (Pattanaik 105). The story goes “a girl's husband never came to her at night. Instead would mount his white stallion and ride out into the forest” (Pattanaik 106) She follows him one night and finds out he is a hijra. She transforms herself into a “fiery goddess known as Bahuchara” (Pattanaik 106), she tells him, “Men like you should castrate themselves, dress as women worship me as a goddess” (Pattanaik 106). Pattanaik tells us that “a hijra may be called variously as a cross-dressing homosexual, a male to female transgendered person, a eunuch.” (Pattanaik 108). This story is taken from the oral traditions of hijras. “Hijras were deemed 'criminal tribe' during the British raj” (Pattanaik 108) the effects of which can still be seen today. Hijras were afforded a position in courts in ancient India but that changed over time and it is only now that they are starting to be afforded the recognition of a third gender.

These retellings place these stories in modern times, giving us a side-by-side reference of the two times, the way it was originally written down and how it can be reinterpreted in present time. Some of these stories have metaphorical meanings attached to them and can be viewed to have deeper meanings. The anthology places these stories within contemporary times and challenges prevalent cultural norms and traditions. They can be an exploration of the cultural identity of ancient and contemporary India.

Cobalt Blue

Cobalt Blue was first written in Marathi by Sachin Kundalkar. It was translated in 2013 into English by Jerry Pinto. The novel highlights the story of siblings Tanay and Anuja and their love story with their paying guest. The novel is divided into two parts. First from the point of view of Tanay and the second from the point of view of Anuja. The two siblings offer us an insight into their minds, their lives and their respective love stories. Both the siblings falling in love for the same man aligns with the queer theme. The novel follows the stream of consciousness technique, giving us intricate details of the minds of the main characters. It uses a first-person narrative, that produces an effect that makes us feel deeply connected to our subjects. The siblings also

respectively negate the societal definitions of gender where the brother Tanay is showcased as a tender, emotional boy and Anuja on the other hand is a rebel, with a loud personality. Anuja is described by Tanay as “a girl whose idea of fun was a strenuous trek to a fort, who grinds your fingers in a painful grip when she shakes your hand, who snores a little in her sleep” (Kundalkar 8). This description of Anuja informs us how Anuja is not seen by her brother as someone tender and feminine.

The story focuses on the love and intimate moments that is shared between the tenant and the two siblings on different occasions. We are also given the description of the tenant from two completely different points of view that of Anuja and of her brother Tanay. The tenant himself is a queer figure; from the story it can be concluded that he is bisexual and perhaps also a polyamorous person who has relations with both the siblings at the same time. We see that he shares equally special bonds with both the siblings and also helps them figure out important issues of life. We can see him encouraging both the siblings to do their best. He helps Tanay out of his shell and Anuja to realise her true potential, he helps her recognise her wings and gives wind to her flight.

Tanay is a homosexual whose character is clouded with questions of his own identity. He is portrayed as an introvert character who finds it really hard to open up to the world or to voice his opinions. The fact that Tanay is an aspiring writer also hints at his quest for finding his voice and identity in his writings. Tanay is a closeted gay and thus is in a constant fight with his identity. His relationship with the paying guest is perhaps the only thing that goes well in his life, which is disturbed by his sister, who is shown to be eloping with the paying guest. Later, she comes back home alone. We see him exclaiming in the novel saying “Who is your Anuja? When did you get to know her? How? And how could I have been so blind right up to the end?” (Kundalkar 9). Tanay finds it difficult to continue living at home and thus forges a letter faking a job offer and leaves home with his typewriter, the only valuable possession in his life, which gets stolen. The theft of the typewriter is significant since it reflects the loss of a queer person's voice in society. The story is a reflection of the modern Indian society where queer voices are more often than not subdued and oppressed. The book becomes a testament of Tanay's struggles and story.

The paying guest remains nameless and is only seen from the lens of the two siblings. He is afforded space in the novel relative to the two siblings and is not given a space of his own. His bisexuality is explored and he is shown as someone trying to connect more to his own self. The story gives us a picture of a typical patriarchal Indian society and how young queer individuals face their identity and sexuality in such a setup, often resorting to extreme measures such as running away from home. The male dominated society brings with it their thoughts of male dominance, where a woman's ultimate goal in life is to get married. The two siblings are seen fighting this mentality throughout the course of the novel and both the siblings have their own battle. While Tanay fights with his sexual identity and feels suffocated by his family and Anuja's love affair with his lover, Anuja tries to battle with a lost love and her family's disappointment in her.

Conclusion

The findings conclude the changing perspectives of society and the way queerness is seen and regarded in literature and society over the years. We see the queer characters and their open and fluid portrayal in ancient mythology and the rigid representation in today's time, where the characters are often portrayed as closeted. This shows that though society has come a long way where initially queerness was treated as a crime, it still has a long way to go where it can see queerness as an integral part of the social fabric. The Indian culture has always had queer heroes and they need to be given the attention they deserve. This paper also helps further the debate within the larger queer literature.

The subject of queer literature is important; it is something that needs to be discussed more openly and be destigmatized. One of the best ways to bring change in society is through media. Literature helps give voice to the voiceless. It brings key issues to the surface and creates awareness. Indian literature needs more authentic voices to help us understand and accept this.

To conclude, we can say that ancient Indian society was far more accepting of queerness. However, the same cannot be said of modern Indian society, where the subject has been treated as a taboo for long, which is very evident from the portrayal of queerness in literature. Tanay is seen as a closeted homosexual, the paying guest is a bisexual who chooses to elope with Anuja, perhaps to hide his identity and pass off as a heterosexual.

Queerness is so much more about just the sexuality of a person. To put it in the words of Pattanaik:

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)

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