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## Exploring Mythology and Queerness: In the works of Devdutt Pattanaik

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### Abstract

*Literature is a reflection of human experience, society, and life. Literature encompasses both the real world and the mind. Sanskrit, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kashmiri, and Malayalam are only a few of the literatures that make up Indian literature. These literary genres are currently in vogue, and the majority of them are widely accessible. In the mother tongue, these genres are known as "Regional Writings." The history of Indian mythology spans millennia and is filled with numerous gods and deities. One can explore the ancient, rich culture, rituals, customs, much more through the perspective of mythology. Studying myth and mythology helps one to learn more about rituals and traditions from the past. There are many different kinds of mythologies, and each country has its own rich folklore. The rich mythology of India is no exception; it contains stories about gods, goddesses, supernatural beings, creative components, folklore, and more. Few myths have survived the millennia, but by recreating these myths in a variety of literary forms, many novelists have managed to preserve the essence of mythology. Physician, mythologist, author, and thinker Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik's writings primarily deal with myth, religion, and mythology. He focuses on the significance of mythology in modern culture. He is especially interested in innovation in the management and leadership domains. He is well known for infusing the epics Ramayana and Mahabharat into Management. Pattanaik has restored the past through his novels: The Book of Ram, The Pregnant King, Shikhandi and other queer tales, Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata, Myth=Mithya:Decoding Hindu Mythology, Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana, My Gita and many more. These folktales and myths provide explanations for a variety of mysteries, including those relating to queer identity, karma laws, the relationship between nature and humanity, gender equality and more.*

**Keywords** – Queer Identity, Indian Mythology, Gender Variance Folklore, Myth, Ancient Epics.



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## Introduction

India has a vast history since thousands of centuries, and its literature may be traced back to the Old Vedas, which have been there for four thousand years, as well as to the Puranas, Tantras, Agamas, and Bhakti literature that appeared in the last two million years. Epic depicts the lives and traditions of a nation. Numerous mythologies, which are the study of how people's subjective truth is expressed in stories, symbols, and rituals, may be found in these literary works. Interpretations of mythological stories that are heavily impacted by the interpreter's beliefs as well as the ideas of those obtaining the translation are not subject to objective truth; they are subject to rationality. Therefore, an objective interpretation does not exist. In the advancement of society, mythology is crucial. It directly affects both the readers and culture. Modern mythologist and eminent author Devdutt Pattanaik has reimagined well-known mythical figures from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, including Ram, Sita, and Jaya. Devdutt Pattanaik utilises myths and mythology as a tool to assess society since he is interested in preserving the relevance of history and mythology for the current age. He contends that myths enrich and unite society. His opinions on myth, mythologies, business, society, and sexual identity are insightful, original, well-considered, and motivating.

By demonstrating that his retellings can genuinely bring back the myths for people to enjoy more and incorporate into their lives, he retouches the old epics with the same magnificence and value. In Mahabharata, for example, it is Shakuntala who arrives at Dushyantha's court to seek protection for their child. However, in Kalidasa's version, Shakunthala's father follows her to Dushyantha's court in order to protect and establish his daughter's social status as the King's wife. This version of Shakunthala's story in the Mahabharata contradicts Vyasa's story of social progress. This demonstrates that the epic was frequently reread and reworked by many poets and sages in line with their times. Similarly, even in this modern day, it is necessary to revisit Mahabharata. Regardless of the storylines, the epic provides the moral and ethical guidance that today's generation requires. Retelling mythology can be entertaining and reveal hidden mysteries and surprises. Pattanaik's book *Jaya* emphasises on ethics and ideals for humanity, but Sita breaks her clichéd portrayal here by being a reformer, daring, and courageous, which was the great facet of how retellings can be more magnificent.

### **Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata**

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya*, Retelling of the Mahabharata revisits one of the greatest epics, Mahabharata. Epics are more than just stories, histories, or occurrences; they depict a nation's culture, preach valuable virtues to people, and shape them in a constant process. As a result, revisiting an epic encourages people to live ethical lives. Mahabharata was primarily concerned with the formation of Dharma and the Laws of Karma. By reviewing the epic, one can comprehend the laws of Dharma and Karma, which are discussed and justified from various perspectives. Even in our modern age, revisiting and reciting Mahabharata stories helps people understand moral ideals, ethics, virtues, and philosophies. The main characters, such as Bhishma,



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Drona, Duryodana, Yudhishtra, Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, Krishna, and others, teach mankind a valuable lesson, which we can sense via their mistakes and reactions. This enables every individual to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, leading to a resolution in which an individual can study oneself, comprehend the reason of life and therefore purify themselves. Reading the epic induces the Aristotelian 'Katharsis.' Mahabharata has eighteen parvas or chapters in its current form. The epic is the longest epic ever written, made up of one hundred thousand verses, and Vyasa focused on all elements of human existence in this story, including connection with oneself and community, ethics, and Dharma norms, economic activities as Artha, ecstatic activities as Kama, and divine activities as Lokha. This narrative has been repeated in various ways by great forebears and their offspring, Gurus and disciples, allies and foes, winners and losers. But every rendition survives the challenge of time and encourages people to live a righteous life, or confront the law of Karma.

Amba's role exemplifies a woman's bravery and how she seeks revenge for Bhishma's death in her next life as Shikhandi, and these figures appear as icons that persist for every age and convey numerous morals. Similarly, Draupadi mocks Duryodhana's fall, which sows the seeds of her own humiliation in the future, preaching to mankind that one should not degrade others. Everyone can learn from Savithri's character how a strong will can change one's own fate, her firm belief and wit to bring her spouse Satyavan from Yama. There are numerous lessons to be learned from the characters in the Mahabharata, and it is vital to collect those ideas, implement them in one's own life, and preach them to future generations. When Arjuna was intended to save Brahman's child, but he fails to save the child, he intends to kill himself, but Krishna guides him to Lord Vishnu, and there he discovers his true purpose, to reinstate Dharma on earth. Arjuna represents action, whereas Krishna represents wisdom. Krishna and Arjuna's relationship represents the relationship between Mortal and Immortal. Mahabharata's tales have withstood the test of time because they are useful to people of all ages. For example, how the game of dice led to the destruction of a mighty Pandavas kingdom, a loss of confidence with his people, and the disgrace of a woman. Yudhishtra's uncontrollable passion to gamble even made him and his entire family to live in the forest for 13 years. Again, this failure exemplifies how one can learn a lot even when he is completely defeated. During their exile period, the Pandava brothers learned vast learning from numerous sages, which strengthened their spiritual force and mental strength.

### **Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana**

This book elaborates on the epic Ramayana from Sita's point of view. Janaka discovered an abandoned girl infant, who was given the name Bhumiya because she came from the earth's mother. As Sita matures, it becomes clearer how Janaka treated her as an equal among the great rishis in order for her to take part in the conference that would eventually become known as the Upanishad. When Ashtavakra provides a precise explanation of Ahimsa, one may truly compare their own selves to it and comprehend their true selves. Janaka heard Ashtavakra say: "Animals fight to defend their bodies, Humans curse to defend their imagination of themselves. This



imagined notion of who we are and how others supposed to see us, is called aham. Aham constantly seeks validation from the external world. When that is not forthcoming it becomes insecure. Aham makes human accumulate things; through things we hope people will look upon us as we imagine ourselves. That is why, Janaka, people display their wealth and their knowledge and their power. Aham yearns to be seen.” [19] Rama emphasises the difficulty of the path to enlightenment in the chapter "Dashratha Lets Go of His Sons". Such a rewriting glorifies the stereotypical females as more informed, as is evident from Viswamitra's statements. Janaka's daughters were depicted in different shades, and their level of intellect and reasoning is rather astounding. Retellings are more than just narrations; they recreate the typical portrayal of a character in an unusual way, such as Sita lifting Shiva's bow by herself. The reality buried in female's life is exhibited in the lives of Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Shrutakriti, after the ceremonies of their wedding they won't look back since they understand the letting go of possessions is real knowledge. Mandodari opened the door for Sita to choose her freedom, even though characters like Urmila sacrificed their feelings. One can understand how the story of Ram and Sita is passed down from generation to generation through the epilogue. The purpose of this repetition is to let the human race realise how important their existence is. Additionally, these archetypes encourage individuals to overcome various psychological problems. The personification of faith is Sita and Ram. With this, it is realised that the true meaning of life is to appreciate the past and imbue that with the present. One's intellect and spirit are refreshed by these retellings. The purpose of retelling these epics is to inspire hope in humanity. Reading this epic again causes one to reevaluate life's realities.

### **Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You**

Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You is a collection of Indian mythological short stories that exposes queer elements. With Pattanaik's prismatic vision, the book gives the reader a wide range of experiences. This work makes an effort to analyze queerness in contemporary culture. One can solve several puzzles, including those involving gender identity, cross-dressing, homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender people, and hermaphrodites, by using mythology as a lens. 'Shikhandi' by Devdutt Pattanaik is a turning point in the exploration of queer ideas. Queer stories shouldn't be avoided because they educate the excluded population, including transgender people, tribadic people, Sapphic people, and others. This book offers a fresh perspective on a novel notion of queerness in everyday life. Queer theory is illuminated by the stories from many Puranas, Vedas, Jainism, Buddhism, Mahabarata, Ramayana, and Skanda Purana. Numerous examples of such queerness, femaleness, and manliness can be found in Hindu mythology. Additionally, other additional mythologies from around the globe have their own evidence of this weirdness. Through these mythological stories and their accompanying evidence, one can actually see that such queer cultures and queer individuals are not to be violated or viewed as exceptions, but rather, that these gay people and their way of life have roots in both modern and ancient mythology. Here, an attempt is made to explain how retellings can provoke thought and help one reconsider their views on queer relationships. In contrast to



modern discrimination against these gay conceptions, each story in this novella simply highlights the queer concept as a common one. The character of Shikhandi, daughter of Drupada, who was born as a woman but who acquired all the knowledge of warships and battle, is highlighted in the opening chapter, which is an excerpt from Mahabharatha. Shikhandi was nurtured like a man; in fact, he was married to a bride. When the bride's father, King Hiranyavarna, learned that Shikhandi is a woman, he ordered his army to avenge Drupada. Hearing this Shikhandi went to woodland, where she met a yaksha called Sthuna, he offered his manhood for one night and King Hiranyavarna realized that Shikhandi is male. Shikhandi returned to the woods to reclaim his manhood as he had promised to Sthuna after apologising for his error, but Kubera, King of the Yakshas, was so struck by Shikhandi's honesty that he gave him back his manhood till he passed away. After promising to kill Bhishma in her past life as Amba, Shikhandi fought alongside the Pandavas in the battle, and Arjuna killed Bhishma because Bhishma wouldn't lift his bow in the face of a woman. This type of organ transplantation was common in our ancestors' time; thus it is quite natural for some people to go from being male to female or female to male. These kinds of transitions have not just occurred with mortals; they have also occurred with immortal gods, goddesses, devas, asuras, angels, demons, and other beings. For instance, according to some oral traditions, gods frequently take on human form in order to protect their followers. In truth, Devdutt refers to the Thayumanaswamy, in which Lord Shiva assumed the appearance of a mother and travelled to Earth to aid his devotee's daughter, who was undergoing labour pains. Once more, one can imagine that devotion to God is unconstrained by gender stereotypes. The stories from the Puranas have a variety of morals, codes, and practises, such as the story of Lord Vishnu who changed into Mohini and joined with Lord Shiva to give birth to Lord Ayyappan and Lord Hanuman. These stories once more demonstrate how commonplace these strange transformations are, even for the immortal gods. As the author correctly points out, the purpose of these manifestations and transitions of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva is to reestablish harmony between the two factions.

Our earliest stories contain examples of this form of heterosexual bonding, like the relationships between Koperunchozhan and Pisirandhaiyar, Arjuna and Krishna, and Duryodhana and Karna. Such partnerships, which aren't about physical pleasures but rather an amalgamation of abstract emotions, have an inescapable and intangible tie. Even gods and legendary characters occasionally engage in cross dressing, typically as a cover for sneaky attacks and to make people laugh. The deity Krishna is mentioned in this passage by the author as loving to dress up and playing dress-up with the gopikas. In contemporary society, "queer identity" is no longer an ambiguous concept; intersex, hijras, and other forms of queer partnerships live alongside heterosexuals in our society. Furthermore, the divine deities have regarded such bizarre transformations as commonplace. One can actually conceptualise the physical and mental trauma experienced by such queer people and queerness in the contemporary era through these retellings of such ancient myths and folklore.





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