



Unraveling Myths: Queer Ecology in Shikhandi and Other Tale

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Abstract

Queer ecology is a theoretical framework that challenges the traditional norms of heteronormative society through the lens of ecology. It embraces the diversity, fluidity, and transformation of the natural world by celebrating its queerness and interconnectedness with the human world. This paper explores the intersection of queer identities and ecological consciousness in Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*. By examining transformational myths from these stories such as Shikhandi's gender transition and Ila's dual gender identity, this study sheds light on the dissolution of rigid categories in these narratives which reflects ecological principles of adaptability and balance. The paper also delves into the role of natural spaces as sites of transformation and inclusivity by mirroring queer ecological ideals. This text deconstructs the traditional reproductive narratives and critiques anthropocentric and heteronormative notions of fertility and sustainability. Devdutt Patnaik chooses these famous Indian mythological tales to highlight spontaneity of queer sex in both animal and human world as well as plant world.

This paper analyzes that Pattanaik's retelling of Indian mythology not only preserves the wisdom of ancient ecological and gender fluid perspectives but also offers a critique of modern societal hierarchies that marginalized both queer identities and individualism. By situating *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* within the framework of queer ecology, this paper underscores the relevance of Indian mythology in addressing contemporary discourses on inclusivity, ecojustice and coexistence. It positions Indian mythology as a transformative tool to envision a more harmonious relationship between humans, non-humans and their shared ecosystem.

Keywords: Queer Ecology, Indian Mythology, Fluidity, Transformation, Interconnectedness, Heteronormativity

Introduction

Queer ecology brings queer theory and ecocriticism together in a single bucket to unwrap the true colour of both human and non-human world by embracing its queerness. It questions the true meaning of 'naturalness' by challenging the rigid binaries of heterosexuality and cisgenderedness. Additionally, critiques the ideology of anthropocentrism, where humans are given the supreme value over nonhuman.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* is a collection of mythological retellings that explore gender fluidity and non-binary identities within Indian mythology. The book brings together stories from various Hindu texts, highlighting characters who defy conventional gender norms and embrace transformation, hybridity, and multiplicity.

Devdutta Patnaik is now a renowned figure of Indian mythology. He is a popular writer, speaker and illustrator known for his extensive works on modern retelling and reinterpreting and popularizing Indian mythologies. His writings explore the intersections of myth, culture, gender, and identity, making ancient narratives accessible to modern readers. Through his books, articles, and lectures, he challenges Eurocentric perspectives on mythology by presenting Indian epics, Puranas, and folk traditions in a contemporary light. He has authored and

illustrated over 50 books, including *ABC Of Hinduism*, *Babubali : 63 insights into Jainism*, and *Yoga Mythology: 64 Asanas and Their Stories*. Other famous works include *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata*, *The Book of Ram*, *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, and *The Pregnant King*.

Literature Discussion

Several scholars have explored how queer perspectives help reinterpret both nature and cultural narratives. In the article Hernandez (2025) shows how queer ecology not only gives identities to queer people but also gives protection from the outer world. Queer ecology breaks down the rigid binaries of natural/unnatural, male/female, normal/other. Queer ecology invites us to see diversity not as a challenge but as a strength. Similarly, Segnini (2023) discusses key components of Queer Ecology and highlights the inseparable connection between queerness and biodiversity. Bijolia(2024) illustrates how non-binary and fluid forms of sexuality exist within nature itself. She provides examples such as Clownfish, Split-gill fungus, and certain species of sea snails changing sex frequently according to their needs. She also refers to literary texts where the concept of queer ecology is well applied like Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden*. Sandilands et al (2010) begin their discussion by examining the film *Brokeback Mountain*, focusing on the characters Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist whose queer relationship finds a place only in the lap of nature.

Chatterjee et al. (2023) explain how Pattanaik uses these mythological tales to challenge the notion of patriarchy, masculinity, and heteronormativity and by ignoring gender fluidity and queerness. Also focuses how Hindu mythology has often been overlooked in the name of nationalism. Bhaduri (2018) shows how this text exhibits all the ancient mythological stories to give hope and acceptance to the LGBTQ+ communities.

Research Objectives

Lots of separate research on queer theory and queer-ecology are available online but current academic research often isolates mythological studies from environmental science. Existing research reads Shikhandi primarily as queer myth and queer nation-building, not explicitly as queer ecology. However, its emphasis on fluid bodies, hybrid forms but the ground of queer ecology is still unexplored. My research objectives will be

- 1) To examine Devdutta Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Others Tales They Don't Tell You* through the lens of queer ecology.
- 2) To analyze how nature functions as a sacred space that enables and reflects gender fluidity and transformation.
- 3) To explore the interconnectedness between human and non-human world.
- 4) To evaluate the relevance of this text in the context of LGBTQ+ rights in contemporary India.

Queer Ecology and Gender Fluidity in Shikhandi

At the very beginning of this storybook, Pattanaik clarifies that “the stories in this book are like hijra’s clap, a call to do darshan, look at all things discovered and invented, question all that makes us uncomfortable” (31). One by one, the author presents stories in which we can see how characters change their gender repeatedly in order to change their fate. For instance, Shikhandi changes her sex and becomes a man so that he can satisfy his wife. Similarly, Chudala disguises herself in a man’s clothes in order to enlighten her husband. Vishnu transforms into Mohini many times-sometimes to defeat Bhasmasura and sometimes to become the wife of Aravan, the son of Arjuna. We also find stories like that of Bhangashvana, who was both a man and a mother, and Urvashi, who was born without a woman. In these stories, we witness characters who change their genders. This fluidity mirrors the cycles of the natural world. These characters are not rigid but they possess adaptable qualities which make them more aligned with nature. Like rivers that alter their course or forests that regenerate with the seasons, these characters also transform, regenerate, recreate, returning renewed and redefined. These insights come from our mythologies. It seems that from the very beginning, this fluidity was always there, we just lacked the vision to see it. It was so natural, so pure, always waiting to be recognized.

Sacred Natural Spaces as Sites of Transformation

Many of the myths in Shikhandi take place in forests, rivers and other natural settings, where societal norms are suspended and transformation is possible. In nature, these characters feel a unique comfort to express their true selves. It is as if these natural spaces alone can understand them. These ideas can also be observed in several mythological narratives. For example, in the story of Bahuchar, the husband is not a conventional man,

but a Hijra who goes to the forest every night to reveal his true inner self. Similarly, in the story of Ila, Prince Sudyumna once entered a forest where Shiva and Parvati were engaged in love. Due to Shiva's spell, the prince was transformed into a woman named Ila. When Ila prayed to Shiva to reverse the spell, Shiva explained that the transformation could not be completely undone but could only be modified. As a result, Ila lived as a man during the day and as a woman during the night. What initially appeared to be a curse eventually became a blessing when Ila met Boodh, who had been cursed by Brihaspati to be born with an indeterminate gender. The two found companionship in each other and lived happily, embracing the fluidity of their gender identities.

Not only humans but even deities in mythology demonstrate such transformations. For instance, Shiva once assumed a feminine form to dance with Krishna, taking the name of Gopeshwar. He transformed himself as a female only by dipping in the water of Yamuna. Similarly, Narada temporarily changed his gender in order to understand what is called 'Maya', gaining deeper spiritual knowledge. Another well-known example is Arjuna from the Mahabharata. After rejecting the advances of Urvashi, he was cursed to become a eunuch. However, Arjuna later used this curse as a blessing during the Pandavas' exile, disguising himself as the eunuch dance teacher named Brihannala. This transformation helped him conceal his true identity and remain hidden from the Kauravas.

These narratives illustrate that gender fluidity and transformation have long been present in mythological traditions, challenging rigid notions of identity and demonstrating the diverse possibilities of human and divine existence. Here nature played a vital role. The characters of the story went to the serene nature to reveal their inner desire, as if it is only Mother Nature who could understand them. Mother Nature is so benevolent to everyone that it never discriminates against anyone on the basis of their caste, gender, colour or anything.

Queerness in Nature

Nature itself demonstrates remarkable diversity, and many scholars argue that it can be understood as inherently queer. Same-sex behaviour and sexual diversity are not uncommon in the natural world. In fact, researchers have documented more than 1,500 animal species that display same-sex behaviours. These examples challenge the assumption of strict heteronormativity in nature and reveal that diversity in sexual expression is a natural phenomenon. Various organisms in nature exhibit forms of sexual fluidity and variation. For instance, some fish species are capable of changing their sex depending on social conditions. The clownfish is a well-known example: when the dominant female in a group dies, a male fish transforms into a female in order to maintain reproduction within the group. Similarly, *Crepidula fornicata*, a species of sea snail, can change its sex during its life cycle.

Same-sex bonding and courtship behaviours have also been observed in animals such as dolphins, whales, penguins, and monkeys. In addition, sexual diversity is evident in plant life. More than 90 percent of flowering plants possess both male and female reproductive organs, demonstrating that hermaphroditism is widespread in nature.

Scholar Disha Bijolia in her blog "Gender, Sexuality and the Environment: The Rise of Homegrown Queer Ecology," highlights the extraordinary diversity of sexual systems in nature. She writes, 'For some human beings, three sexes is one too many. Imagine their response when they find out the *Schizophyllum commune*, AKA the split-gill fungus, has more than 28,000 sexes.'

These examples clearly illustrate that diversity in sex and sexuality is deeply embedded in the natural world. Therefore, nature itself provides strong evidence that fluidity and variation in gender and sexuality are natural rather than abnormal phenomena.

Recontextualizing Queer identities in contemporary India

LGBTQ+ rights in contemporary India can be understood through its constitutional and legal developments. Over time, the country has moved from criminalizing queer identities to recognizing them, but full equality has not yet been achieved. The colonial-era Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860) criminalized same-sex relations and was used for many years to marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals. This changed in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), when the Supreme Court declared that such discrimination violates fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21 of the Constitution.

This judgment built on earlier progress made in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014), which recognized transgender persons as a third gender and affirmed their right to dignity and identity. In addition, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was introduced to provide legal protection to

transgender individuals. However, many critics argue that this law does not fully address issues like self-identification and social inequality.

Devdutta Pattanaik's work *Shikhandi and Others Tales They Don't Tell You* functions as a cultural intervention that complements juridical progress by providing a historical and mythological legitimacy to queer identities. The narrative emphasis on transformation, fluid embodiment, and the interdependence between human and non-human worlds resonates with queer ecological thought, where identity is understood as dynamic rather than fixed. This is particularly relevant in contemporary India, where despite constitutional recognition, LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face social stigma and lack of institutional support, especially in areas such as marriage equality and anti-discrimination protections. By situating queerness within indigenous mythological traditions, this text not only resists the argument that LGBTQ+ identities are "Western imports" but also fosters a culturally rooted discourse of acceptance.

Conclusion

The article suggests that we need to broaden our minds and try to accept queerness as something natural and legitimate. While many countries have recently begun to raise their voices in support of LGBTQ rights, Indian mythology has long been enriched with narratives of gender fluidity and transformation. These mythological traditions demonstrate a more expansive understanding of identity that transcends rigid binaries.

Moreover, Indian mythologies are deeply concerned with the concept of the soul. In Hindu philosophy, the soul is considered eternal and independent of the physical body. As a result, the body is often viewed as secondary or transient. This philosophical perspective makes it easier to establish a meaningful connection with queer ecology, as both frameworks challenge fixed notions of identity and emphasize fluidity and transformation.

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