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The pregnant king: A contextual rereading

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Abstract

The Pregnant King is the story of Yuvanashva, king of Vallabhi who in search of his manhood and its validation accidentally drinks the potion prepared by Yaja and Upayaja, two Siddhas, for his childless wives and becomes pregnant. His widowed mother, Shilavati, has ruled over Vallabhi after the death of her husband as a seasoned administrator and diplomat. Now the grown up son has to prove his virility providing a male heir for the throne before he is allowed to rule over the kingdom. Having three wives and married for thirteen years, he is unable to produce a child and starts having misgivings about his manhood. His eagerness to prove his masculinity leads him to take assistance of magicians, alchemists and sorcerers. The rituals, however, are disrupted by two young Brahmin boys Somvat and Sumedha who masquerade as a young married Brahmin couple to get a cow in alms. Though Somvat is converted into a real woman by Sthunakaran, a Yaksha, the King refuses to accept their present reality and orders them to be burnt alive in two separate gates of his kingdom as they are aberrations in the social and moral codes of conduct. Thus, establishing his authority and masculinity among his subjects through terror and punishment, the king approaches his throne at night thirsty and drinks the child producing potion accidentally. He gives birth to a son Mandhata and spends the rest of his life in search of the answer whether he is the mother or father, whether he is man at all and eligible for Kingship. This gender fluidity brings him to the crossroads of established gender roles of heterosexuality and he wonders whether he is a man in woman's body or a woman in man's body.

Keywords: Myth, Indian mythology, pregnant king, gender roles, moral and social codes, aberrations, religion, widowed queen, soul, Ardhanarishvara

Introduction

Based on Indian mythology, *The Pregnant King* is the story of King Yuvanashva of Turuvasu clan. He finds mention in *Vishnu Purana*, *Bhagwat Purana* ^[1] and the Vana parva of *the Mahabharata*. "This book is a deliberate distortion of tales in the epics. History has been folded, geography crumpled. Here, Yuvanashva is a contemporary of the Pandavas..." declares Devdutt Pattanaik in the author's note. Published in 2008, *The Pregnant King* (henceforth, PK) is the story of Yuvanashva, king of Vallabhi who in search of his manhood and its validation accidentally drinks the potion prepared by Yaja and Upayaja, two Siddhas, for his childless wives and becomes pregnant. The writer Devdutt Pattanaik has tried to contextualize this tale in the modern context as he is retelling this story to address persistent gender issues raised and fortified through our understanding of gender in the western context, and find their answers through Indian myths and knowledge system. To reach this end, the writer has placed Yuvanashva in the age contemporary to that of the *Mahabharata* ^[2]. Through a close reading of the text, this paper is an attempt to understand how society conceives gender roles and the predicament of those who fail to meet the criterion, and how such questions have been dealt with in our myths and ancient texts.

Myths are often considered as the windows to cultural attitudes, behaviors, values and identities which help us learn more about ancient cultures, and also about ourselves as we make an attempt to express the truth of the human condition. It does not imply primitive fiction, illusions or superstitions based upon false reasoning. The primary appeal of myth is imagination, man's intuitive faculty. The American Philosopher, Philip Wheelwright says that myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living. The creation of myths exemplifies the thinking process and answers a basic human need.

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The basic effort of ancient myth is to generate a meaningful place for man in a world which is unconscious of its presence. Don Cupitt, in *The World to come* says, “a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual... We can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order and the meaning of the individual’s life...The individual finds meaning in his life by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story.”(pg.29)

The story begins with King Pruthalashva’s insistence on becoming a hermit to “seek the true meaning of life beyond this delusion of civilization.”(PK,19) His adviser and close confidant Mandavya seeks resolution of the impending disaster of losing the King and the Crown Prince, Prasenajit at the same time as it has been prophesied that Prasenajit would die at the age of eighteen, two years after his marriage and two months before the birth of his son. He approaches Angirasa Rishis who advise him to search for answers in the kingdom of Avanti where Shilavati, the eldest daughter of King Ahuka, sitting behind her younger brother Nabhaka is getting trained in dhrama-shastras and has attained unmatched and enviable insight into the subject. Mandavya’s reluctance provokes the Rishis who chide him saying, “Don’t let your experience impose limits on the mind of God, Mandavya...The dharma of Ila-vrita may not let women do things that men do and men do things that women do but that does not mean such possibilities do not exist.” (PK,21) This statement by the Rishis of primeval period amply demonstrates how gender biases were negated and questioned in our ancient traditions and knowledge system. What needs to be investigated as an issue of crucial and urgent concern is, as to how such harsh gender related biases and mindset came into practice and under what circumstances they became norms acceptable by one and all. Amazed as well as anxious by her daughter’s acumen to understand state related matters of grave concern with effortless prudence, King Ahuka worries that “Life has spewed out a twisted fate for my daughter, given her a man’s head and a woman’s body.”(PK,27) He is concerned for both his children as his son does not want to be a king and the daughter cannot be a king. Initially hesitant, King Ahuka accepts Mandavya’s suggestion to get Shilavati married to Prasenajit as her widowhood will have an accompanying boon suitable to her character and demeanour. Mandavya’s proposal is not the result of his acknowledgement of Shilavati’s caliber, rather it comes forth out of dire need for the existence and safety of Vallabhi. Once married, Shilavati gets trained in handling weapons and the art of hunt by her doting husband Prasenajit who also teaches her that “You get what you want, if you are willing to fight for it.”(PK,33) Soon, she gets pregnant and thereafter, a widow as has already been prophesied. Renouncing the Kingdom of Vallabhi and placing it in his daughter-in-law’s efficient command, the old and heart-broken King Pruthalashva leaves for Vanaprastha Ashram. Shilavati’s stoic acceptance of her fate and responsibilities is exemplary. She is coronated with full fanfare and veneration due to a king, yet the realization soon dawns upon her that all the ceremonies are meant for the future king she is carrying within her womb as Mandavya traces the tilak with vermilion paste on her navel and not on

her forehead. All misgivings of the state elderly are put to rest with the birth of a healthy son Yuvanashva and she gratefully admits her husband’s claim that “I am too much of a man to father a daughter.”(PK,41)

The widowed queen Shilavati, as the regent mother of the crown prince, brings her son up with all the care and discipline under the guidance of religious gurus and royal mentors. She balances her duties as a mother and a regent queen so dexterously that the state council does not object when she moulds the royal ways to her convenience and foresight. Rather than occupying the “silver pedestal with green cushions” placed below “the gold throne with red cushions” in the maha-sabha of the Thuruvasu Kings, she prefers to conduct the affairs of her kingdom from the women’s quarters sitting “on the floor, on a tiger-skin rug”(PK, 41-42) with nothing placed above her. This gesture is a strong message and statement for the patriarchal mindset of her kingdom’s elderly people that she exercises her rights in her own style and aptitude, and her agency should not be undermined in any way. Thus, she commands their complete submissions and reverence. The security and prosperity of the Kingdom is her prime concern and not its expansion. The Kingdom of Vallabhi flourishes under her efficient administration and the crown prince grows up to be a fine and promising young man.

After a long and effective reign of Shilavati, the court seems to be in an urgency to have Yuvanashva as their King on the throne as they fear that the queen is reluctant to forego her royal authority and deliberately delays the coronation of her son. As she has served her purpose, she is becoming redundant and a deterrent for the Kingdom of Vallabhi. However, a very seasoned administrator and diplomat, the mother forbids her son from joining warring factions in the War of Kurukshetra as he is the only son and heir to the throne of Vallabhi, and has not fathered even a single child after thirteen years of marriage, despite marrying three wives.

Yuvanashva respects and loves his mother to the extent that he never questions her pronouncements, whereas, his friend Vipula tries to make him understand otherwise, “Can’t you see what she is doing? ... she will not let you rule because you have no children. She will not even let you fight because you have no children. She has turned your masculinity against you and clings to the throne like a leech.” (PK,4) Yuvanashva misses a chance to prove his manliness and before assuming the Kingship of Vallabhi, he has to prove his manhood through progeny and warfare according to the diktat of patriarchy as “A king must provide proof of his virility before he can rule.”(4) This episode adequately indicates that sometimes, the so-called stronger sex himself gets trapped into the mesh of his own dictums established in the name of social and religious righteousness. Shilavati gets an opportunity to pay them back in the same coin as she feels slighted and exploited after serving the Kingdom with dedication and diligence for such a long time. Of course, she is not prepared to let go of the royal authority and status she has been a custodian of for so long, unceremoniously. Her actions seem to challenge the partialities and discriminations that one gender is subjected to in the name of patriarchy^[3].

Betrayed by fate, deterred by the mother and unable to produce a child, Yuvanashva starts having misgivings about his manhood. He starts feeling that “he had lost his freedom. He was reduced to being a performing bull in the royal

cowshed. A pathetic sterile bull. But he has to endure this, if he wished to be father and truly king.”(PK,85) His dejection at his failure and eagerness to prove his masculinity finally lead him to take assistance of “Magicians. Alchemists. Sorcerers.”(PK, 109) The reluctant mother has to give her consent knowing full-well of the repercussions if something goes wrong. Overlooking her genuine concern, he is now getting convinced of his mother’s ulterior designs to keep him away from the throne^[4].

The rituals, however, are disrupted by two young Brahmin boys Somvat and Sumedha who masquerade as a young married Brahmin couple to get a cow in alms. Though Somvat is converted into Somavati, a real woman by Sthunakaran, a Yaksha, who had earlier given away his manhood to Shikhandi and acquired female-hood to save the latter’s marriage. Along with their sex, their feelings for each-other also undergo a change. Though, they realize and declare their true feelings for each-other publicly and their current reality is made public and validated, the King refuses to accept their altered reality and orders them to be burnt alive at two separate gates of his kingdom as they are aberrations in the social and moral codes of conduct. Thus, establishing his authority, justice and masculinity among his subjects through terror and punishment, the king approaches his throne at night thirsty, accidentally drinks the child producing potion prepared by the Siddhas and gets pregnant. As the fate designed it, the moment Yuvanashva feels like a real man and truly a king, a new seed of life gets implanted in his body. He could not approve of any deviations in the established gender norms and nonconforming relations in his kingdom, entirely unaware of his own predicament that awaits him in the near future. Ironically, it is the company of Sumedha and Somvati as Pishachas whom he had got burnt at the stakes, that gives him solace during his tough time. The news of his pregnancy is kept a closely guarded secret even from him as “Who will accept such a man as a king? It will be the end of his kingship.” (PK,195)^[5]

He gives birth to a son Mandhata and spends the rest of his life in search of the answer whether he is the mother or father, whether he is man at all and eligible for Kingship. This gender fluidity brings him to the crossroads of established gender roles of heterosexuality and he wonders whether he is a man in woman’s body or a woman in man’s body. His son, declared to be the son of his eldest wife Simantini, is kept away from him as it does not behove a King to suckle a child like a mother with milk oozing out of his chest. His wives get bitter towards him at his transformed reality which he nurses very passionately. Piqued by his second wife Pulomi’s barb that “Now he has a womb and breasts. Why does he need wives? All he needs, perhaps, is a husband”, Yuvanashva forces himself upon her in the presence of her maids as he feels this masculinity has been challenged by his wife. After this violation, though their relationship sours for the rest of their life, Pulomi becomes the mother of a son Jayanta. Both Mandhata and Jayanta are presented to the public as Yuvanashva’s sons and the whole Kingdom rejoices this abundant grace of nature.

All should have turned well and settled at this juncture, yet Yuvanashva’s growing restiveness to be accepted as Mandhata’s mother does not allow him any peace. Shilavati seems to get her final justice when Simantini asks her husband to choose between motherhood and kingship. She clearly states “No. Mothers cannot be kings. If Shilavati

cannot be king, Yuvanashva cannot be mother...To be a mother you must be a woman...If you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne.” (PK,258) The justice is furthered when she suggests him that “The world must not know that you are an aberration. They will cast you into the same pyre into which you cast those two boys.” (PK, 259) However, still greater debate on anomaly occurs when grown up Mandhata, unaware of his own truth, refuses to participate in the *swayamvara* of Shikhandi’s daughter saying “How can anybody accept as bride a woman whose father was a woman?”(PK,267) Apparently blissful and composed, a turmoil of uncertainty and lie raged inside the King. Nobody was there to answer his nagging queries as he felt that “I am seed and soil. Man and woman. Or perhaps neither. A creature suspended in between...Unfit to be a Raja, unfit to be a Yajamana...”(PK,277)

Patriarchy had constrained both Shilavati and Yuvanashva, one a king and another a mother, one a woman and another a man. The social obsession with clearly defined and demarcated gender roles somewhat sours their bond and both start regarding each-other as political infringements and opponents. Shilavati leaves her claim on the throne for her son and declares “Motherhood is a disease when it springs in a man’s body, like kingship is in a woman’s. Let us both be cured of it.”(PK,278) Loss and sense of pain is tremendous on both the sides and Shilavati accepts her reality, but for Yuvanashva the void gets wider day by day and the silence louder. Coaxed and insisted by Somavati and Sumedha, Yuvanashva asks Mandhata what should a king be addressed as who has given birth to a son and whether such a son has any claim on the throne. Mandhata replies that such a son should call the king his ‘mother’ but he would not have claim on the throne. Their own truth is revealed and rejected by Mandhata who refuses to call the king his mother even in the privacy of the royal chambers. His sense of insecurity and a threat to his claim over the throne starts troubling the boy. Counselling by his grandmother, Shilavati, he abducts Shikhandi’s daughter Amba and becomes kin of the mighty Pandavas and soon becomes a father as well, thus, proving his virility to be a king. Clinging to his truth, Yuvanashva declares publicly Mandhata to be an aberration and so, unfit to be a king. This further expedites the coronation ceremony of Mandhata as Yuvanashva is declared to be losing his sanity. Disconsolate at the turn of events, he renounces his throne and leaves his kingdom for the forests.

Here begins his journey of purgation and self-realization. He realizes how difficult it is to face the reality himself and let others acknowledge it publicly when the Yaksha accosts him calling mother-in-law of his daughter. He also realizes how his fixation towards his son Mandhata made him ignore his younger son Jayanta’s unconditional love and dedication towards him. Inspired by the unadulterated freedom and wisdom, he starts his journey in search of Adi-natha. His meeting with hermits whets his desire to pursue true and absolute wisdom as he finds them prejudiced against female bodies and has no clear answers for his situation. He is asked to seek answers from Siddhas who advise him to look beyond the flesh and limited experience, free from the constricting social vocabulary. His awareness of the fact that “Within you is your soul, Adi-natha as Shiva, silent, observant and still” and “Around you is matter, Adi-natha as Shakti, ever-changing, enchanting, enlightening, enriching, overpowering” (PK,336) liberates him from all the fleshly

bondages and gender biases. He attains true knowledge and freedom realizing “that men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are ultimately nothing but souls wrapped in different types of matter. *He* was nothing but soul wrapped in flesh, an unusual flesh that had created life within itself and outside.”(PK,338-39) Though he has come face to face with the reality of the universe, yet in his heart of hearts he longs to be accepted by his son as his mother without hesitation. He still wants understanding and acceptance from his people. His existence is a riddle, his reality a possibility that is possible only in the mind of God. The Angirasa Rishis want to worship him as Nilakantha Bhairavi who has kept his reality as poison within him like Shiva, Ardhanarishvara. He finally feels liberated with the realization “I am the terrifying embodiment of society’s unspoken truth. I am also yet another of nature’s delightful surprises. I am the soul. I am also the flesh. This is who I am.”(PK,343)

Ardhanarishvara, meaning ‘The Lord Who is Half Woman,’ a composite androgynous form of Shiva and Shakti symbolizes the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies, the inseparability of the male and female principles of the divine, and the balance of opposites in the cosmos. The concept emphasizes the importance of both genders in the cosmic order, embodying the idea that the male and female principles are not oppositional but complementary and interdependent. This union represents the perfect balance and harmony of the universe. The form challenges rigid gender roles and emphasizes the fluidity of gender, presenting a divine androgynous figure that transcends binary concepts of male and female.

Yunanashva’s final realization of the unity of masculine and feminine aspects and energies in his body liberates him and he is now pregnant with the wisdom and knowledge which the Rishis aspire for. His body has been the vehicle to reach the final truth. He finally understands how *Manava* limits the possibilities of self-realization under the false pretext of gender roles. Thus, along with Yuvanashva, the reader also gets enlightened and realizes that the pregnant king is not queer, rather than a complete being, a reflection of Ardhanarishvara.

Conclusion

Yuvanashva’s odyssey through self-discovery and societal norms underscores a profound exploration of gender and identity, revealing the complexities embedded within patriarchal structures. His initial struggle with societal expectations and personal inadequacies unfolds into a deeper understanding of the fluidity of gender roles and the interconnectedness of masculine and feminine energies.

Yuvanashva’s journey from a king constrained by traditional gender norms to a being who embraces the divine synthesis of Ardhanarishvara illustrates the transformative power of self-realization. His ultimate realization—that both masculine and feminine aspects coexist harmoniously within him—challenges rigid binary conceptions and highlights the necessity of integrating these principles to achieve true balance and enlightenment.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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