



Reimagining Gender beyond the Body a Posthumanist Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King

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Abstract

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (HarperCollins 2008) retells the story of King Yuvanashva who unknowingly impregnated himself, as narrated in the Mahabharata, to challenge traditional gender binaries via a Posthumanist viewpoint. "The image of the male body as a fluid location for motherhood, fatherhood and cosmic androgyny antithetical to humanist ideals of stable identity, sex and dharma— (Ardhanarisvara like) is what has been disrupted by the novel. It also demonstrates, drawing on posthumanism's focus on interconnected, composite subjectivities and the deconstruction of norms in queer theory as well as mythological elements from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata, that gender is a spectrum that goes beyond biology. Yuvanashva's movement from a patriarchal king to a "whole being" like no other denounces the demands of society and re-asserts the nature of an identity in relationship, malleable and transcendent of the body.

Keywords: Posthumanism, gender fluidity, *The Pregnant King*, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ardhanarisvara, queer theory, Mahabharata, non-binary identity, dharma, mythic retelling.

Introduction

Devdutt Pattanaik's novel *The Pregnant King* (2008) retells the Mahabharata's tale of King Yuvanashva, who "accidentally drinks a fertility aid intended for his queens" and becomes pregnant^[1]. Set in a deliberately anachronistic epic context (Yuvanashva lives alongside the Pandavas^[2]), the book weaves together threads from both the Mahabharata and Ramayana traditions^[1].

Pattanaik is out and open about the distortion "of stories from the epics" that this represents^[2], which then enables him to mix-and-match mythic motifs (e.g. the domestic deity Illeshvara, who switches between male and female forms) to illuminate themes. The book explores the breaking points of rigid gender roles, patriarchy duty and identities (dharma) when a king turns into a mother^[3, 4]. In the sense that it is well suited for a Posthumanist reading there: *tojelia* is read as a novel in which the body as fluid site of identity exceeds all fixed humanist categories^[5, 6]. Yuvanashva's miraculous pregnancy, resulting finally in the "impossible" delivery and birth of Mandhata from his thigh, compels a radical interrogation of biological determinism by which the king's body itself plays both father as seed-carrier and mother as container. This hybrid form of embodiment reflects a key Posthumanist challenge to anthropocentric binaries, showing that identity is not some essential or pure essence but an ongoing play between myth, culture and nature in excess of

dualistic categories.

Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism Meets Gender Fluidity

Posthumanism is a critical lens that "calls into question traditional boundaries between human and non-human", in which the notion of humans as closed, self-enclosed entities is critiqued

^[5]. It draws attention to the network of connections among body, mind, and world in an effort to "disrupt biological and social hierarchies," demonstrating that humans are "interconnected in body, behaviour, and mind with other species and with the environment"^[7]. In gender theory, posthumanism disrupts the notion that an inborn identity is contingent upon a specific physical characteristic. Instead, it encourages us to consider identity as "reciprocal, hybrid and flexible", in conversation with culture and nature. *The Pregnant King* also endorses this outlook: Yuvanashva's body bears a foetus, leaving the reader to wonder where maleness stops and femaleness begins. Reading the novel post humanistically, however, comes to entail regarding) means treating

Yuvanashva, not so much as a "man" but rather as an becoming-body whose sex is commingled. Blurring the dichotomy of father-mother, human-divine Pattanaik re-develops queer sense as transcending embodiment in keeping

with the Posthumanist project [5, 8].

Interwoven Epics: Hindu Mythic Context

For instance, figures such as Illeshvara (related to Śiva/Sakti) or others resonate with wider Hindu mythology. Pattanaik himself confesses that he "deliberately manipulated" history to make Yuvanashva a contemporary of the Pandavas [2]. This conflation of timelines and myths enhances the book's universality: it pools from the Indian mythos to interrogate issues that are bigger than any single story. In fact, Ramayana themes (like divine gender reversals) are as significant for the story as Mahabharata ones are, which place Yuvanashva in a pan-Indian mythic context [1].

Beyond Binaries: Sex and Gender

Today, "sex" is commonly understood as the biological features (chromosomes, hormones, anatomy) that categorize an organism into male-Ish and female-Ish columns. Female, or intersex, whereas gender refers to the social roles, behaviours, and identities that a culture assigns or that an individual personally identifies with [9, 10]. Importantly, gender is not limited to a binary. One overview explains that gender "is not made up of binary forms. Instead, gender is a broad spectrum" and that individuals may be situated anywhere within the spectrum (outside or inside) [9, 11]. According to this definition, someone's gender identity can be at odds with the sex assigned at birth. The difference between the two is dramatized in *The Pregnant King*. Yuvanashva is biologically male at birth (his sex is male), but his life story complicates that fact. After his experience of gestation he "craves the title 'mother' from his son [12]. In his tortured self-inquiry, he actually says, "I do not believe I am a man. ... I have generated life external to my own, as men do. But I've also made life inside me, as women do. What does that make me?" [13]. He wonders audibly in one moment- could it be that he lives as a manly person who carries womanly substance, or the contrary? " [4]. That question holds tension: his physical form says one thing while his inner sense of self speaks another, standing at once as parent to both sides. From the lens of gender theory, Yuvanashva does not fit neatly into either box - he exists beyond binary lines. Here, the book pulls apart what people assume about bodies versus identity: when life bends rules on its own, old labels lose their grip.

Queer Subversions in The Pregnant King

Starting from the edges, queer theory questions who decides right or wrong when it comes to love and being a man or woman. Instead of accepting rules about sex and identity as natural, it treats them like ideas shaped by culture over time. Because of this view, boundaries around gender often seem less solid than they first appear. One writer puts it plainly - this approach looks closely at how social systems label some ways of living as acceptable while pushing others aside. As an example, expectations tied to bodies and desire get examined under bright light. [14]. With that in mind, reading Pattanaik's book using these ideas brings hidden assumptions into focus. King Yuvanashva carries life inside him - something few rulers do. Because of this, boundaries blur where they once seemed solid. Male companions form unions beyond what custom allows. Gods shift forms as if clothing were being changed mid-step. Such moments drift past clear categories without asking permission. A reviewer notes how these choices expose rigid gender norms as fragile. Instead of reinforcing old molds, the story bends them until they crack. What emerges lives outside tidy boxes. Expectations tremble

when a man bears a child. Roles dissolve like salt in warm water. Stability feels less certain here. The narrative slips through fingers trying to classify it. What if rules were never meant to stick? Dharma cracks open when figures such as Somvat and Sumedha tie themselves together outside old customs. Biology stumbles at Śikhaṇḍi's shift across form. Watch Arjuna slip into skirts, Illeshvara flicker between shapes - fluid lives breathe easily here. The world scolds those who drift, yet stories lift them high. Truth hides where behaviour is not policed. Stories once told find new breath through Pattanaik, showing how gender has always flowed beyond two shores. By reading epics sideways, old lines bend toward fairness, escaping male-centred views. Meaning shifts when voices long silenced begin to speak between the verses. What was rigid now moves, shaped by those who live outside boxes. Ancient words turn into quiet demands for space, where being different is simply living.

Notable Examples of Gender Fluidity in the Novel Include:

- **Somvat and Sumedha:** Two young men from Brahmin families live together as a married couple. Through the magical intervention of the Yakṣa Sthunakarna, one of them, Somvat, assumes a female form. Despite both having been assigned male at birth, they choose to remain together as husband and wife. Their bond persists even in the face of royal disapproval. Their relationship defies rigid definitions—challenging the idea that marriage must be between opposite sexes and questioning the notion that gender is strictly binary.
- **Sthunakarna and Sikhaṇḍi:** Once Sthunakarna gives up his manhood, Sikhaṇḍi - who was raised as a girl though born male - takes on that form for a time. Later seen fighting as a woman warrior in the great tale, Śikhaṇḍi becomes key to bringing down Bhisma. The moment shows how gender might shift, proving such roles aren't fixed, especially when gods get involved.
- **Arjuna/Adi-Natha:** A time came when Arjuna lived far from home. He took on the shape of a woman, called Adi-Natha, teaching dances to Princess Uḍḍītārā. Not as a warrior, but as an instructor in rhythm and grace. His usual way of being shifted completely then. Old tales remember him not only with bow and strength, but also in flowing robes, soft gestures. Such moments hint at flexibility woven into identity itself. Even those praised in songs were allowed different masks. The past holds space for what does not fit fixed forms.
- **Illeshvara (Lord of Illusions):** A figure shifts through time in Vallabhi - moonlight shapes its form, male when the sky fills, female when it empties. Such change mirrors making itself, like half-man, half-woman fused in one body.
- **Shilavati:** Even without shifting genders, Somvati, mother of King Yuvanashva, holds royal rule during her son's minority. Still, since custom declares a woman cannot occupy the throne permanently, she gives up power. What happens shows how fixed ideas about leadership tie into sex - and leave fairness behind.
- **Yuvanashva:** Buried deep inside stands the king, ending up - once everything unfolds - not only as a figure of rule but also as one who carries life. This change in shape makes clear how queerness functions here: rigid names fall apart too easily.

One after another, these figures ignore rules like straightness

or fixed gender roles - showing how identity shifts through action rather than being set in stone ^[14, 15]

Ardhanārīśvara: Symbol of Cosmic Unity

Half woman, half man - that's what Ardhanārīśvara means, a figure standing at the heart of Hindu tradition. Split down the middle, one side Shiva, the other Parvati, joined yet distinct. Not balance, but fusion - maleness and femaleness held together like breath and body. Into this shape steps Yuvanashva, his story shaped by such merging. Seen through this lens, he becomes more than king, more than fatherless father. One reading points here, to this form, as key. Not metaphor, not just myth - but structure ^[22]. "Ardhanārīśvara, meaning 'the Lord Who is Half Woman,'... symbolizes the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies... emphasizing that the male and female principles are not oppositional but complementary and interdependent."

Calling on this image turns what seemed wrong into something honored, tied to the holy instead of set apart. Still, it pushes forward the idea of life beyond fixed forms: Yuvanashva's form mirrors a universe neither male nor female. Instead of separating man from god, Pattanaik links them through shared fluidity - showing existence outside strict categories isn't strange, just sacred ^[6, 24].

Out of nowhere, Yuvanashva rises, shaped by a symbol older than words - half man, half woman fused under one sky. Instead of power through force, stillness speaks louder when paired with care. One breath breaks old lines; what was torn inside finds peace without winning or losing. Not either-or, but both-at-once - the body knows balance before thought begins. Stories shift quietly once we stop asking who leads and start seeing how they move together. Old gods show up not to preach, yet simply exist - one face laughing, another weeping, never separate. Healing does not mean fixing, rather allowing space where broken parts rest side by side. Time folds back: future selves wear ancient skin, unafraid of change because it has always been this way. Duty grows deeper when it stops denying halves, choosing instead to walk forward doubled, whole. Harmony is not built - it shows up when judgment steps aside.

Gender Fluidity in The Pregnant King

Nowhere in the story does gender stay locked in place. People move through identities like changing rooms, never settling on one form. Even Illeshvara, worshipped as a king's god, swaps between male and female without pause. Lines blur again and again - when Somvat turns believer and marries, when Sthunakarna gives himself up, when Yuvanashva carries a child inside him. These moments prove something clear: what seems certain about sex can always bend. A critic summarizes Yuvanashva's crisis this way: "This gender fluidity brings him to the crossroads of established gender roles," as he "wonders whether he is man in a woman's body or a woman in a man's body. In other words, Pattanaik literalizes fluidity at the level of the body." ^[4]

Even so, how folks stand in society blurs too: Shilavati holds power as both queen and caretaker, folding duties into one. "Lines around who you are don't stay clean," admits Yuvanashva plainly; "they blur, spread out." Unlike rigid either/or labels, characterhood what slips away often mirrors how we change. Much like moments in daily existence, transformations of who we are rarely show clean lines. Blurred edges appear instead, overlapping without warning. Unlike rigid either-or categories, selfhood here moves across shades. It drifts, reshapes, refuses stillness. This looks like

ideas from gender studies: here, gender shows up as a range, and some folks sit beyond its edges ^[9, 11]. Through that lens, Pattanaik's story puts spectrum thinking into motion.

Social and Biological Pressures on Yuvanashva

Pressure mounts on Yuvanashva as tradition demands he uphold royal duty through fatherhood. Not until he fathers a boy will Queen Śilavati allow the Kurukshetra conflict to proceed. Thirteen long years pass while he prays alongside his three wives at Illeshvara's altar, hoping for offspring. Words echo around him - kings must have sons - or else their rule lacks strength. ^[26] Doubt creeps in; each silence from the god's chips at his confidence in being a true man. Seeking answers beyond prayer, he turns to mystics, those who mix potions and whisper spells under moonlight. What happens when a king ends up pregnant? That twist hits hard because people tie manhood so tightly to strength and fathering sons. Yuvanashva's role, shaped by old rules, locks him into acting like any other ruler - until he swallows the wrong drink ^[28]. Suddenly, his body does what only women are supposed to do. Now tradition pulls one way; biology seems to say another. Everyone waits for a baby prince, yet the source of life grows inside someone never meant to carry it. This clash isn't accidental - the story builds it slowly, just to shake loose rigid beliefs.

The "Impossible" Birth of Mandhata

Out of nowhere comes Prince Mandhata, born in ways stories can't quite explain. Science says one cannot father a son from oneself - it defies every rule we know ^[29]. Yet myths do not care for rules; there, it's seen as something guided by higher forces. His name, meaning "the one drawn in" or simply "baby," hints at how odd his beginning truly was. What if seeing something unbelievable could shift how we think about bodies? Pattanaik points to this so-called impossible birth, urging a pause on rigid thinking. Though unlikely, Mandhata's entrance pushes everyone - characters, readers alike - to rethink physical limits. Beyond just biology, it hints at transformation without saying so outright, a father holds the role of King. What seems impossible actually reveals what we silently accept about gender, bodies, usually without noticing. Out of nowhere, Yuvanashva bursts from a thigh - no womb involved. Bodies shift, blur, merge; posthuman thought sees them fluid, never locked in place. Myths tangle with flesh, culture seeps into bone, nature pulses beyond control. The king bears a child - life twists where it should not grow. Suddenly, birthing isn't just women's work, nor is manhood only seed and strength. When Mandhata shows up, ideas about duty and self-start shifting. Biology stops being the only truth once Pattanaik brings wonder into the picture. Assumptions about what people can be begin to crack open. A broader lens appears - where flesh reveals mysteries, mixing tough protection with gentle care inside a single form. Wholeness finds its way back to Yuvanashva through this child. Labels fall short when life shapes itself in deeper ways than expected.

Masculinity and Motherhood Intersecting

In Yuvanashva the traditionally masculine role of king and the maternal role of mother converge in one person. As noted in the review, "So, Yuvanashva is both father and mother." ^[20] Such overlap unsettles beliefs that manliness cannot meet nurturing. Power in rule stays intact while drinking feeds life like only mothers do. One day he asks his boy to say "mother" when speaking to him. Still, his own mother,

Śilavatī, holds quiet strength in both care and command - she shapes a ruler yet cannot wear the crown, simply due to being born a woman^[19]. That clash sits bare in the story. At times she says flatly, “Mothers cannot be kings,” showing how tightly roles are fixed around her^[30]. A man steps into mothering while a woman carries kingly wisdom without claim. Through them, Pattanaik lets traits like guiding others and tending needs blur across bodies where we least expect it. Not blending, not balancing - just being, outside old rules. A different kind of making shows up in Yuvanashva’s voice when he says he forms life beyond his skin, like men often do, yet also holds it within, much like women. This story lays out how being a mother or a father doesn’t stick to one body alone - when things shift in the flesh, what once seemed fixed begins to blur.”^[13]. A story like this shows something quiet but deep: what we call mothering or fathering does not belong to one kind of body alone. When the physical world bends in rare ways, those fixed lines begin to blur. A person once seen as one thing may carry what was thought meant for another. Biology shifts, so do roles - without announcement. Not everything fits where it used to. What matters grows outside old labels.

Inside, Yuvanashva carries Mandhata as mothers do. Outside, he leads as kings are expected to. Śilavatī holds royal insight, though tradition keeps her from power. Lines blur, thanks to Pattanaik’s quiet reshaping of roles. Strength appears not in rigid forms but where opposites meet. Neither figure fits neatly into what people expect. Together they show a fullness that skips past labels. What matters is not body or role, but presence. Care flows through them both, untouched by old rules. The story quietly suggests one truth: raising life belongs to everyone. Not split by birth, nor claimed by one kind alone.

Conclusion: Transcending the Binary

When *The Pregnant King* closes, Yuvanashva has changed deeply - so much that former labels fall away like shed skin. His body, once questioned, now feels like a path toward deeper knowing, breaking free from what others demanded^[8]. Some observers point out he begins to mirror Ardhanārīśvara: inside him, male and female settle into balance, shaking up fixed ideas about gender”^[24]. Instead of fighting the clash, he holds it gently, seeing motherhood not as error but as unity. One interpretation insists - far from being unnatural, the king becomes whole, shaped like Ardhanārīśvara, neither split nor lost”^[23].

This turn matters, seen one way through story, another through idea. Through the tale, shame slips away from Yuvanashva: he sees now he carried Mandhata rightly, steps forward as king once his sense of self has fully shifted. From an abstract view, the outcome supports a vision where bodies do not lock identity, nor does old custom - instead, who we are moves, connects, reshapes through relation. His path shows - not loudly, but steadily - a grasp of how gender bends, blends, how male and female forces weave together.”^[15]. What grows inside him is more than a child; it holds insight^[31] - True understanding means stepping past rigid social divisions. All things considered, *The Pregnant King* draws on ancient tales to show gender as fluid - not fixed - where bodies shift and identities blend like currents in water. Near the end, it quietly invites reflection: what if duty made space for every way of being? Much like Ardhanārīśvara, balance may come not from erasing contrasts but holding them together^[8, 24].

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