

Queer Intersectionality

Voices, Struggles, and Identities in South Asia

Edited by

Nizara Hazarika and Namrata Pathak

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Designed cover image: Getty Images

First published 2026

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2026 selection and editorial matter, Nizara Hazarika and Namrata Pathak;
individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Nizara Hazarika and Namrata Pathak to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-041-09735-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-041-09845-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-65207-6 (ebk)

DOL: 10.4324/9781003652076

Typeset in Sabon

by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	x
<i>Foreword</i>	xix
KAZIM ALI	
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxii
Introduction: Queer-ing South Asia	1
NIZARA HAZARIKA AND NAMRATA PATHAK	
Part I	
Queer Embodiments: Identity, Politics, and Ethics	17
1 Metaethics and Aesthetic Nuances of the Transsexual: A Critical Re-reading of Select Mythological Narratives of Hinduism	19
RITU RANJAN GOGOI	
2 The Kitsch and Aesthetic: Masculinity, Authenticity, and Class in <i>Crocodile Tears: New & Selected Stories</i>	35
HUZAIFA PANDIT AND TAKBEER SALATI	
3 Beyond the Binary: Sex Change and Gender Fluidity in Buddhist Narratives	53
DRISHTI KALRA	
4 Neo-liberal Queer Subjectivities in the Bangladeshi Pedagogy: An Exploration of the Transgender Politics in Bangladesh	70
KAZI ASHRAF UDDIN	

- 5 Re-Visioning Willful Subject: Mapping the Genealogies of Pakistani Trans Queer Identity/Sexuality in *When the Moon Was Ours* 88
KHAMSA QASIM

- 6 Intimate Partner Violence: Its Abundance and Absence in Lesbian and Queer Storytelling 97
DEBOLINA DEY AND RAJORSHI DAS

Part II

Queer Imaginaries: Representations in Popular Culture and Digital Media 111

- 7 Code of Courage: Precarity, Queer Narratives, and the Political field 113
SEUTY SABUR AND MASHAEKH HASSAN

- 8 Examining LGBTQIA+ Lived Experiences in South Asia: A Computational Text Mining Analysis 128
YOWEI KANG AND KENNETH C. C. YANG

- 9 Queer Movements and Politicisation in India: Navigating through Digital and Socio-Cultural Histories 143
SIDDHARTH DUBEY AND TANUPRIYA

- 10 Desensitising the Indian Queer Body: Strategies of Queerbaiting in Malayalam Cinema 155
SONY JALARAJAN AND ADITH K. SURESH

- 11 The Evolving Representations of Lesbian Identities: South Asian Queer Narratives in Post-2000 Bangla Cinema 170
SRIJA SANYAL

Part III

Queer Transgressions: Undoing Boundaries and Spaces 181

- 12 Transcending Spaces and Blurring Gender-ed Binaries: Re-configuring Queer Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* 183
ABHILASH KAUSHIK

13	The Dilemma of Public Space vs Gender-Neutral Toilet in India: A Case Study of #NoMoreHoldingmyPee Campaign of Assam	195
	KAUSTAV PADMAPATI	
14	Queer Resonances in Haroon Khalid's <i>From Waris to Heer</i>	210
	DHURJJATI SARMA	
15	Redefining Desires: The Cultural Quandaries of Queerness in R. Raj Rao's <i>The Boyfriend</i>	222
	DHARMENDRA KUMAR	
16	Beyond the Gender Bounds: A Study of Infinite Gender Positions in <i>The Pregnant King</i> by Devdutt Pattanaik	234
	FATIMA SYEDA	
17	Transformation and Liminality in Nepali Queer Literature: Reading <i>The Land Where I Flee</i> and <i>Between Queens and the Cities</i>	242
	SILBA RANGSA MARAK	
18	Negotiating Identities: Queer Activism and Faith-Based Resistance in Contemporary South Asia	254
	JAMIL AKHTAR	
19	Masculine Vulnerability: Exploring Queer Experiences and Intersectionality in <i>The Carpet Weaver</i>	262
	SANJANA CHAKRABORTY AND DHANANJAY TRIPATHI	
	<i>An Epilogue: In the Rubble of the Text, We Still Find Each Other</i>	275
	MOON CHARANIA	
	<i>Index</i>	279

16 Beyond the Gender Bounds

A Study of Infinite Gender Positions in *The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik

Fatima Syeda

The division of gender into binaries restricts the inquisition into the possibilities of multiple gender identities. Indian Mythology includes certain narratives that canvas these limitations imposed upon the gender identity and performance in the light of the biology and lineage of a being. Such myths present characters who feel restricted in performing their roles in a society which divides them only into two categories, i.e., male and female. This chapter argues that the concept of gendered binary inhibits the realisation of infinite identity positions possibly already present in any society. Discussing characters from Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008), this paper attempts to earn recognition for all such men and women whose performance is restricted because of the social labelling of gender and the set of rules/duties identified with that gender. The novel is replete with characters who seek social approval for the acceptance of the aspects of their personality that do not match with the assigned significations. Such a reading challenges the social appropriation of human attributes in a being. The softer and delicate feelings are denied to the men and, a forceful, aggressive self is refused to a woman. The study of these multiple characters is helpful in unbinding the rigid stratification of gendered binary.

The Pregnant King is mainly about a war hero from Mahabharata named Yuvanashava. This man is presented as enmeshed in the social and religious (*dharmic*) obligations. The *dharmic* conceptions regarding gender go back to *Ramayana*, a myth that set the standards of an ideal Hindu man in the form of Rama and an ideal Hindu woman in the form of Sita. Rama, in *Ramayana*, is expected to hide his softer self and his tender feelings and love for his wife Sita in order to prove himself as an iconic classic model of Hindutva. John Beynon in his book *Masculinities and Culture* (2002) affirms the idea that manhood and masculinity are performative in nature and this performance is not necessarily in line with the biology of these men, "Men are not born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up; rather it is something into which they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behavior which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways" (Beynon 2002, 2). Rama succumbs to the pressures of the society and asks Sita to give *Agnipariksha* (trial by fire). He is enmeshed in the *dharmic* obligations which direct him to banish his beloved wife from his kingdom

while she is expecting. Being a man, he has to perform in a certain way to be approved by the people around him.

Similarly, Yuvanashava is told by the authorities that he cannot become a king unless he affirms his manhood by marrying and fathering a male child. He has to prove his masculinity in order to qualify for the *dharmic* position. He prays to be a father for 13 years and marries 3 times but to no avail. Desperately looking for the fulfilment of his manhood, Yuvanashava gets entangled in a unique situation. He becomes pregnant after accidentally drinking a potent magic potion prepared for his wives to help them conceive a child. He may be viewed, in the novel, both as a robust and magnanimous king and simultaneously as a conventional mother figure. The concurrence of male and female principles in his body provides a substantial ground for examining the possibility of gender positions beyond the binary. Moreover, his story does not exist in isolation; it is surrounded by the narratives of other men and women who have manifested the possibility of a gendered identity beyond the gender binary defined by *dharma*. The novel depicts gender as both fluid and circumstantial rather than fixed and absolute. The presentation of characters with dual gender traits encourages the concept of gender as fluid and discourages a rigid gender division.

The novel uses the mythical frame and legendary characters to problematise the formation of male and female subjectivities in the Indian sub-continent. There is an affirmative registration of resistance against the *dharmic* conception of gender, which challenges contemporary binary understandings, while remaining rooted in Hindu philosophical tradition. Besides Yuvanashava, there are other characters who find themselves fettered by the *dharmic* principles. Puruthalashva, Yuvanashava's father, did not want to become a king in spite of being a man. Yuvanashava's mother, Shilavati, who thinks that she is made to be a ruler, is disallowed to become a king at her father's palace. A *Yaksha* named Sthunakarna offered his manhood to Shikhandi so that she could prove herself a man. The same *Yaksha* receives Somvat's manhood so that he can regain it. Arjuna (another great warrior from the war-epic *Mahabharata*), in this novel, is presented as being castrated by a nymph. Later on, he is seen disguised as a woman. The gods and goddesses presented in this novel also share the blurring of the gender divide as much as the humans do. The gendered identity of Ileshwar Mahadev changes with the size and position of the moon. Yaja worships Adi-Natha, their spiritual mentor, as a male hermit, and Upyaja worships her as an enchantress. This presentation reminds one of half man and half woman deity Ardhanarishvara, a figure in Hinduism that represents the male and female in one body. The presence of masculine and feminine principles in one form signifies the complementary nature of both the principles. None of these can make a whole on their own. Ardhanarishvara's right half represents Shiva (male) and the left half represents Parvati (female). Ileshwar Mahadev is also such a deity that embraces both the male and female principles. All these stories may be linked with the main story of Yuvanashava, who married thrice and is considered

to be an attractive husband by all his wives. As a man, Yuvanashava fathers a baby, but he also gives birth to a baby as a woman does. In all the above examples, the roles played by the characters are not determined by their biological identity.

The theoretical discussions in Gender Studies also challenge the rigidity of gender identity and its binary division. Raewyn Connell, an expert in Masculinities Studies, writes in his book *Masculinities* (2005), "For men, as for women, the world formed by the body-reflexive practices of gender is a domain of politics—the struggle of interests in a context of inequality" (66). He also argues on the inadequacy of the concept of biological determinism in terms of gender. He refers to it as "the rigidities of biological determinism," which, in his opinion, has been caused by "the endless play of signification," yet is challenged by different discursive and performative aspects of gender (65). The points of differences in both the genders, therefore, are essentially normative. He traces back this argument to Sigmund Freud, who writes, "masculine and feminine currents coexisted in everyone" (9). According to Connell, both male and female genders are polarised because of the fixed opposing definitions and sets of rules for either of the gender. Male is considered to be all that is not female and vice versa. This generalised view of gender results in the distortion and deformation of gender representations and practices in a society.

There are multiple male and female characters in the novel who may be seen as fighting against *dharma*, i.e., the social, ethical, and religious obligations specified for their respective gender. Shilavati is introduced in the novel as an intelligent girl who is ambitious and who chooses to marry a prince who is destined to die soon after their marriage. The prospects of becoming a king drive her to avail the opportunity of marrying this prince. She proves to be a great ruler, yet when she dies and has to be allowed to join her ancestors, she is acknowledged only in her feminine roles. There is no acknowledgement of her greatness as a king. Here, the restraining agent, i.e., *dharma* is the "feminine mystique," which disallows a woman to anything which is reserved only for a gender opposite to hers (Friedan 1974, 56). The characters, thus, remain trapped in airtight categories and cannot function outside the domains fixed for them; "Just as a man's destiny is bound to his lineage, a woman's is bound to her body. Both are determined at birth and are immutable" (Pattanaik 2008, 27). Yuvanashava, though holding an important position in the society, finds himself helpless in a situation in which his gender identity restrains him from realising or acknowledging his true feelings. Since the presence of a feminine principle is detested in a man, Yuvanashava's becoming a mother is considered totally unacceptable even by his own mother and other family members. His mother, Shilavati, says, "It is a disease. A child in a man's body" (194). Such a gender performance is inexplicable because it defies the social norms. Even the language fails to describe such an experience. Shilavati says, "How do you explain this? It is an aberration, a disease, a curse" (194). She further reiterates the idea by

questioning the gender of her own son, "A Woman? A half-woman? What?" (195). She can also not accept or even understand the identity of the child born from a man's body, "Women carry children in their bodies. Not men. What men carry can only be monsters. Kill it" (194). There is not one even in the closest quarters, who could allow this "blurring of boundaries" (18). The potential of having a feminine principle in a male body is so threatening to all of them that a grandmother, who has been waiting for 13 years for her grandson, is ready to kill it, considering it to be a monster.

Shilavati is not the only parent presented in the novel who is ready to kill to conform to the ideals of gender. There is Drupada who wanted his six sons to fight the Kurus and restore his kingdom. As men, it was their duty to protect the land. Their survival depended upon the success of their gender performance. Their failure to perform resulted in the end of their lives. Drupada's wife Soudamini says, "My husband said they were useless. Disappointments... So he slit their throats like a farmer who destroyed diseased crops" (Pattanaik 2008, 16). The lack of manly performance in war is referred to as a disease here. The six sons of Drupada had to sacrifice their lives because they could not perform according to the social role defined for men. This social imposition of rigid gender categorisation is challenged by a divine intervention when Drupada's child is born with both male and female attributes in a single body.

Men, considered to be the privileged gender, also suffered in this and many other ways. For instance, Pruthalashva felt bound by the obligation to be a king. He waited patiently for his son to marry, beget a son and then become a king so that he could retire from this obligatory position. He says, "I have been fettered long enough" (Pattanaik 19). Having performed his role in the best possible way and according to the dictates of *dhrama*, he now wishes to "seek the true meaning of life beyond the delusion of civilisation" (19). Shilavati's brother, Nabhaka, was burdened with the responsibility of becoming a king when all he wanted was to become a poet. His father explains this to him, "You must be king because I, your father, am king. All men are bound to their lineage" (25). Nabhaka, however, was not satisfied with this explanation. He challenged his predestined life and asks, "Then why did Prajapati give me a heart? Why did he make me dream?" (26). The fear of breaking away from the norms and unravelling the very fabric of the society stops one from following one's heart and desires. Ahuka, Shilavati and Nabhaka's father, realises, "The children had to repay the debts whether they liked it or not" (28). He advised them, "Change your mind, not the world. It's easier. Simpler. Safer" (44). No matter how much and in what ways do they suffer, the characters cannot go beyond the roles specified for their gender. Raewyn Connell writes, "Gender is a scandal, an outrage, from the point of view of essentialism" (2005, 72). It seems as if Drupada's obsession with essentialist identity leads him into an oblivion where he cannot tell a man from a woman and vice versa. John Beynon, a theorist in Masculinity Studies, highlights the contradictory nature of rigid gender bifurcations. In

"Understanding Masculinities" (2002), he argues that the specification of gender performance for men and women is problematic in nature. He discourages the concept of gender determination in which "Traits are treated as something that can be accurately measured and scientifically proven to be the defining features of gender" (Beynon 2002, 56). David D. Gilmore, another masculinist, affirms in his book *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1990) that men are as much "nurturers as women are." According to him, all depends upon the way one approaches the subject, "men nurture their society by shedding their blood, their sweat and themselves... this, too, is nurturing" (Gilmore 1990, 230). Therefore, there may be an overlap and replication of the roles assigned to each gender. This signifies the superficiality of gender classification. Furthermore, one may not find any logical connection between a gender and the attributes associated with it.

The roles specified for each gender may be referred to as social truths, *dharma*, laws, or ethical and religious dictates. Rites, rituals, and rules are far more important than the truth of one's existence. Different religious scriptures have confirmed the fixation of gender identity. In the Bible, for instance, the men are directed to act like Men, "Quit ye like men, be strong" (Corinthians 16:13). There are other instances such as, "Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!" (Samuel 4:9) and "Be strong, and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God" (Samuel 10:12). The above quoted references from Bible encourage the enactment of masculinity which is usually associated with aggression, violence, nobility, and bravery. In each of the above instances, there is a suggestion that masculinity has to be enacted and is not something that comes naturally to men. Connell comments upon the role of religious manuscripts. He writes, "The gender order is ordained by God, and like other parts of the moral order, is perilous to tamper with" (5). This moral and religious conformation further consolidates the social institutionalisation of gender. Writing about the gender constructions, John Beynon in his book *Masculinities and Culture* (2002) affirms, "Men are not born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up; rather it is something into which they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behavior which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways" (2). This cultural appropriation ensures the classification of gender into two strict categories.

The characters from both genders in the novel fall victim to the normative gender definitions, yet use the same policing to control other people around them. For instance, the *dharma* that initially forbade Shilavati to become the king is used by her when it is her son's turn to become a king. He has to father a son and prove his virility before claiming kingship. There are multiple reminders given in this regard to restrict his performance in the society, "These Pitrs will ask you if you have done your duty, repaid your debt to your ancestors..." (Pattanaik 2008, 3). His childhood friend, Vipula, is able

to see the gender politics involved in keeping Yuvanashava away from kingship. He says, "Your mother has turned your masculinity against you..." (4). Yuvanashava is disarmed by using dharmic elaborations, "'I have no choice, Vipula,' said Yuvanashava, a wistful smile on his lips" (5). He accepts his destined life and does all that he can for 13 years to prove his manhood so that he can claim kingship.

The society accepts only the ones who coincide with its regulations, and rejects, rather destroys, what conflicts with it. Yuvanashava, after becoming a mother, yearns for the acceptance of the truth of his gender identity. He wishes to be called "mother." No one, however, supports him in his search for truth. Even Mandhata, his son born from his body, does not fulfil his wish to be called his mother, "... he let out a wail, in a voice of deep agony, of a creature yearning for accommodation and validation" (341). Yuvanashava's pursuit of the truth of gender enactment and biological determinism is aimed at realising the true potential of a soul trapped in a body. The presence of a fetus in Yuvanashava's body, the overflowing milk from Yuvanashava's breast, and tears in Mandhata's eyes, all confirm the negation of rigid gender bifurcation. All the above-mentioned signs of femininity in male bodies are totally rejected and ignored by the society. The priest turns his face away to pretend that he has not seen Mandhata, the future king, crying. Sominiti avoids looking at milk overflowing from Yuvanashava's breasts. There is a clear and stubborn lack of flexibility in the compartmentalisation of the two genders. Connell writes, "Everyday life is an arena of gender politics, not an escape from it" (3). So, the different characters keep on playing in this arena, performing all the time within the rules set by the social forces around them.

There are certain factors that make the recognition of truth all the more difficult. Angirasa deliberates on a possible acceptance of truth which "... will evoke discomfort, because you will shatter their certainties" (341). An acceptance of truth will mean a collapse of the social structures. It is for this reason that the only response from the society is retaliation, "In retaliation, they will attack you or pretend you don't exist" (341). The existence of a being depends upon the level of conformity to the social rules by the same. Yuvanashava's realisation, "... I have failed as a man" (112), is a statement on the subjection of men and women to societal pressures. This subjection is not just in terms of gender but also in terms of other social, moral, and cultural identities. The coding system in all these domains is strict and inflexible. Yakhsha says the same, "No one is free in this world. Even men are fettered to their lineage" (135). Mandhata confirms the same, "Our duty, what we are supposed to do, how we are supposed to behave, is fixed at the time of birth. For birth reveals our biology and our lineage, the two cornerstones of *dharma*" (290). For instance, Somat's birth as a male gender in a *Brahmana* family entraps him in a difficult situation. He is told by the king, "You can never ever give up being a man or a Brahmana. You are forever a man and a Brahmana" (159). The society around them also believes in conformity as a noble attribute. "You must conform" (160), he is told by the people.

Conformation to *dharmic* values is as significant as conformation to the caste system. Ironically, Yuvanashava is captivated by the same desire of being accepted as that of Somvat and Sumedha. During their trial in Yuvanashava's court, they pleaded, "All we ask you is to accommodate them (Somvati and Sumedha) in your kingdom" (160). Their plea, however, is utterly rejected by Vipula, "Dharma is not wet clay to be moulded for comfort... you ask the king to break the pot to accommodate you. That is impossible... you must conform" (160). The ones who protest against dharma must "suffer the consequences" (160). The consequences, in the opinion of the upholders of Dharma, are much more serious. Such deviations may result in chaos and uncertainty. They are made to see the selfishness of their desires, "By demanding that the rules of social conduct be modified for your feelings, you challenge the very foundations of civilisation..." (160). Later in the novel, Angirasa elaborates on this further in response to Yuvanashava's anguish at not being accepted as a "mother."

Somvat and Sumedha decide to leave the world which rejected the truth of their gender identity. When given a choice by the State to choose between conforming to its laws or death, they bravely chose death. They say, "We will not live a lie because it is convenient to your dharma" (Pattanaik 2008, 160). Yuvanashava, when denied his status as a mother, was also given a choice. He could not be both a man/king and a mother. Simantini tells him, "If you are a woman, you have no right to sit on the throne" (258). Shilavati asserts, "Let motherhood remain with the women" (202). All the family members joined their hands to subdue and stifle his motherhood. Yuvanashava is advised to conform, "Let the world see you as it wants to see you. A great king, with three wives, and two sons virile and strong and obedient" (259). Yuvanashava, however, sees it as a rejection of his identity. He tells Mandhata that he feels "reduced to be your (Mandhata's) father" (292). It is at this point that he decides to leave his kingdom and enter the forest, which he hopes will accommodate his truth. In both cases, these individuals preferred to affirm their truths instead of seeking social approval.

The removal of the individuals who threaten *dharmic* values is welcomed by the spirits of the ancestors of Vallabhi, "What a brilliant lie! Order had been restored. The family tree was in full bloom. Its honour intact" (259). A society in which lies are celebrated, the truths famish and starve. Vipula warns Yuvanashava against disclosing his truth, "Don't! Every civilisation needs its delusion" (283). Language is another social institution that serves the purpose of retaining and accommodating all that conforms. Yuvanashava cannot even express the truth of his existence, "What truth should I tell my son? It escapes my tongue. Defies the structure of language" (276). He realises "the amorphous nature of the world and the limitations of language and the law" (286). This limited language, therefore, captures only half the truth. In other words, it is able to present social truths and defy personal truths. Angirasa tells this to Yuvanashava, "Because you terrify us with the infinite possibilities of the world. Tell us there is always something we do not know."

You demand that we widen our vision and our vocabulary, so that we make room for all, and are frightened of nothing" (343). Instead of widening their horizon, which is terrifying for them, they prefer to make the individuals suffer.

Yuvanashava's decision to renounce the world belies the inability of the society to acknowledge the complexities of gender identity. He registers his protest against this when he leaves behind him all the signs of civilisation, including his clothes, which he removes as he enters the forest, "They don't see me. The real me. Why then should I stay?" (305). In rejecting the world, he rejects the non-acceptance of the existence of his truth and the stratification of gender in binaries. On the other hand, Mandhata, who decides to follow *dharma*, is subjected to a life in which he will never be able to realise his true identity or feelings. At the end of the novel, he is unable to speak when he is asked the name of his father, "A tear rolled down his cheek" (348). His tears, which a man is disallowed to shed, are not acknowledged by anyone around him, "Embarrassed, the priest looked away and pretended he had heard the answer..." (348). Mandhata's decision to disown his true mother (Yuvanashava) and to be a king is a decision to conform to the normative ideals of the society. His decision is ideal and will be helpful in preserving the social image of masculinity and manliness. In contrast to him, Yuvanashava fails as an ideal man, yet proves true to his own self. His refusal to accept the complete reality truth of his existence helps the reader generate a debate on possible gender identities that go beyond the stereotypical gender bounds reflected in the literary, historical, cultural, and other social discourses and may lead to infinite gender positions.

References

- Beynon, John. 2002. *Masculinities and Culture*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2005. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. California: University of California Press.
- Friedan, Betty. 1974. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: DELL Publishing.
- Gilmore, David D. 1990. *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. 2008. *The Pregnant King*. New Delhi: Penguin.