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MARGINAL IS MARKETABLE: A STUDY OF DEVDUTT PATTANAİK'S
SHIKHANDI AND OTHER TALES THEY WON'T TELL YOU

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Abstract:

There have not been many mythological works dealing with the theme of homosexuality in Indian English literature. Devdutt Pattanaik brings forth this topic in his books and tries to convey the message that homosexuality was not so unacceptable in the ancient culture as it is in the modern world. But the present age witnessed a trend of inclusion of the various marginal categories into the mainstream. The paper studies how this trend of social inclusion works as a marketing strategy for Pattanaik.

Keywords: marginal, marketing, queer identity, mainstreaming, myth retelling

This paper is a study of the treatment of the topic of homosexuality in the work *Shikhandi and Other Tales They won't Tell You* by the popular Indian English writer Devdutt Pattanaik with an emphasis on the marketing trends. The writer got immense popularity with his queer stories of Indian mythology and this

factor points to the recent trend of inclusion of marginalised sections into the mainstream. The novelist did not face any issues with his queer identity as well. He is the first Indian English writer to openly admit being homosexual. He is a marketing expert who utilised the favourable cultural climate which is one of the main marketing segments, to write on a topic that had been considered unholy until recently.

Devdutt Pattanaik, though a medical physician by education and business consultant by profession is rather known for his popular works on Indian mythology. He has written about six hundred articles and thirty books on mythology. His popular works include *Jaya, Sita, Myth=Mithya, the Book of Kali, The Book of Ram, 7 Secrets of Vishnu, 7 Secrets of Devi, The Business Sutra* etc. He reaches out to his audience regularly through the television programme *Devlok with Pattanaik*. The author Devdutt Pattanaik has established himself as a brand name for mythologist in India. He is appointed as a consultant by India's leading business group called Future group to give motivational classes based on Indian mythology for their employees. He has you

RESEARCH ARTICLE

tube channels and appears regularly on television talks on mythological matters. Like Amish Tripathi, Pattanaik is also a writer who has become the most popular mythologist of India. He writes according to the impulse of the market to make his books bestsellers. He has adopted many marketing strategies for this purpose. The present article studies the book *Shikhandi and Other Tales They don't Tell You*, which was being marketed vociferously in social media and became a bestseller though dealing with a topic-homosexuality-considered taboo in conservative society and which did not find a place in popular literature in India until recently.

The theories of the cultural critic Stuart Hall discuss about the role of the marginalised sections in popular culture. Stuart Hall in *Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'* (1981) points out that in the context of the post modern fascination with difference within culture, marginality “though it remains peripheral to the broader mainstream, has never been such a productive space as it is now”(midnightmediamusings.wordpress.com). His notion is relevant even today though after a period of three decades. In contemporary literature, representing the silenced marginal has been the trend. We can see this practice especially in the many mythological re workings from Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) to the recent *Sitayana* (2019) by Amit Majmudar.

According to Hall, “popular culture is a site of both containment and resistance”. Even though means of production are often controlled by the dominant groups, popular culture especially today, allows producing discourses that represent the dominated and marginal groups as well. Black popular culture is an example for this trend which has become a part of the chart toppers of music industry and today Black singers and the wild rhythm of their music is a part of mainstream music. Scholars of popular fiction studies have also become increasingly conscious of issues related to racial and ethnic representation. “For instance, as the extensive media coverage surrounding the debut of the Pakistani-American (and proudly Muslim) Marvel comics super heroine *Ms Marvel* in 2013 demonstrates, genre fiction in all of its modes and formats is still dominated by white authors and white protagonists, to the extent that a break- out star such as Kamala Khan becomes of even greater significance to readers who might otherwise have felt excluded from mainstream media representation” (Murphy, 106).

There have been social media campaigns demanding variety in books like the US based ‘We Need Diverse Books’ movement that started for greater diversity within children's and young adult books. But the movement attracted “ a great deal of supportive media coverage and online clamour for publishers to engage with more diverse and racially inclusive range of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

readers and authors” (Murphy, 106). Devdutt Pattanaik’s book with queer stories getting commercial success is a testimony to the fact that Indian readers have also imbibed this postmodern concept of inclusion.

The book *Shikhandi and Other Tales They don’t Tell You* was released in 2014, at the right juncture when the LGBT struggles for dignity came to the fore in India. Pattanaik, through this book argues that homosexuality has existed in our culture even in the ancient age. The book is a collection of short stories on the theme of queerness and gender fluidity. Pattanaik remarks that “queerness isn’t only modern, Western or sexual” in the book’s author’s note. He argues that queerness had been present in our culture even in the ancient times and our epics and mythology contained such stories. In the ancient days our culture was tolerant towards such queer persons which we now consider aberration. The book opens with the author’s note to the readers with a mention of queer sexual behaviour as depicted in various cultures across the world. Pattanaik remarks that the soul has no gender. He explains this idea in the thirty stories on gender fluidity, sexual identity and queerness from the Hindu mythology. These stories reveal that the society then embraced queerness. He puts forward the idea that it is an irony that the modern people in India worship these immortal figures who have queer nature but are not willing to accept the mortals for their queerness.

In the present socio- political context the marginalized are given voices in the mainstream media and this trend of inclusion is the key marketing aspect of the book. This tendency is a reflection of the present readership of English popular fiction in India who is informed on the topics of caste and gender issues. Target marketing is the strategy employed by Pattanaik. His books are targeted at an educated and urbanised Indian youth who are tolerant with divergent views on traditional beliefs. Pattanaik is writing for a society informed on the literary and cultural aspects like marginalization, gender and caste. His target readers are the urban Indians who are tolerant to the contemporary concept of inclusiveness.

LGBTQ people belong to the category of marginalized group in all domains of social life. But following the trend of inclusiveness, the representation of queer people and queer topics in mainstream media has increased over the years. The most visible example for this is the growing recognition received by queer themed films in Oscars and other prestigious platforms like the Cannes. Since the last two decades, it has become a little cliché for actors to be given Oscar nominations for playing queer characters and characters with some disabilities. More than fifty actors have been nominated for playing LGBT characters.

But queer movies were not given best film awards until recently. In an earlier

RESEARCH ARTICLE

film about the mathematician John Nash named *A Beautiful Mind*(2001), all traces of his bisexuality were removed and the film got Oscar award. In 2017, the movie *Moonlight* became the first LGBT themed film to win the Best Picture Oscar. It was a rare incident as a queer film managed to break through into the mainstream with many positive reviews and award nominations. It beat the blockbuster movie *La La Land* to achieve the Best Picture award. The queer movies *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Blue is the warmest colour* (2013) won the Palme d'or at Cannes.

The 91st Annual Academy Awards in 2018 is a landmark year for LGBTQ films especially queer women films. Almost every category had nominations from LGBTQ movies. Five films with queer plots or sub-plots – *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *The Favourite*, *Green Book*, *A Star is Born* and *Vice*- were nominated for Best Picture award. The film *Favourite* got ten nominations and became the first ever queer female – centred film to get most number of nominations. The fact that number films with queer characters and plots are getting mainstream attention emphasizes that audiences and critics have become more inclusive towards queer sexuality.

Coming to the Indian context, homosexuality had been a criminal offence until recently. Section 377 of IPC, which was introduced during the British rule in

1861, declared homosexuality illegal. There have been agitations all over the world against the injustices meted out towards the queer community like the Rainbow Revolution. In 2009 Delhi High Court described Section 377 as violation of fundamental rights and removed the ban. But in 2013, the Supreme Court cancelled the Delhi High Court order and restored the ban on homosexuality. However, after years of legal war, the Supreme Court cancelled its own earlier verdict and in 6th September 2018 the Section 377 was abolished thereby making homosexuality legal.

It was during this period of legal debates and media attention on the topic of LGBTQ people that Devdutt Pattanaik published the book *Shikhandi and other Tales they won't Tell You*. Following the abolition of the law that criminalised homosexuality, Pattanaik for the first time acknowledged himself as gay in the interview with CNN News 18. After having coming out as gay, Pattanaik has been frank about the LGBTQ revolution in India. He had to hide his sexual identity from the society because of the society's prejudices against homosexuality. The legality of his sexual identity gave him the courage to reveal his gay sexuality. He says "the validation of law is an important element for removing prejudice from the minds of people, especially friends and family members"(TOI,22 July 2018).

Pattanaik has written about the presence of the queer and at times its

RESEARCH ARTICLE

celebration within the Indian myths. He wrote about the theme in 2008 in his only novel *The Pregnant King*. The novel offers a retelling of a minor episode in Mahabharata that tells the story of king Yuvanashva who under strange circumstances produced two sons- one within his body like a mother and one outside his body like a father. He had to suppress his maternal longings for his son whom he even breastfed in secrecy. He was not sure whether he was a man or a woman. Pattanaik added some imaginary plots to the story to produce a counter discourse to the hetero normative concepts of gender and sexuality which reduced human beings to mere reproductive machines. Pattanaik's novel was adapted by Theatre worms Productions in the form of an English play titled *Flesh* in 2017. The play was directed by Kaushik Bose and it echoes contemporary concerns about gender and sexual identity. There are many stories within the story and they speak about the queer characters of mythology. These stories throw light upon the conflicting gender identities that some people experience. Priestesses of Bahugami are men who castrate themselves and dress like women. They are impassionate, sexless and serve as the priestesses of the goddess. Another story narrated is that of Nar and Narayan who produced the nymph Urvashi when Indra tried to distract them from their tapa. There is the story of the dawn god Aruni taking the form of a woman and giving birth to two sons by Indra and Surya respectively.

Arjuna too had to experience the life of a eunuch by the curse of Urvashi. Arjuna turned into a woman called Brihanalla for a year and taught dance to a princess. After a year he regained his manliness. The story of Shikhandi is also narrated in the novel. Shikhandi was born as a woman but raised as a man. His father makes him marry a princess but the wife discovered that her husband had a woman's body. With the help of a Yaksha, Shikhandi gets a man's body but his mind always remained that of a woman's. He had to lead a life of dual personality with the body of a man and mind of a woman. The story of Iravan took place during the Mahabharata war. Iravan was to be sacrificed for the victory of the Pandavas. As a last wish, he wanted to marry a woman for a day and the next day she should mourn for him as his widow. As no women were ready to be a widow after a night's marital relationship, Lord Krishna became a woman- Mohini- and married Iravan and fulfilled his wish.

Pattanaik wrote the same stories in a short story format and published it as a short story collection under the title *Shikhandi and other Tales they won't Tell You*. There are the stories of Shikhandi who transformed into a man to consummate the marriage with her wife, king Bhagiratha who was born out of the love of two women who were the widows of a late king, king Yuvanashva who was both a mother and a father, Iravan who married Krishna cross-dressed as Mohini, Lord Vishnu who cross dressed as Mohini and gave birth to Lord

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ayyappa from Lord Shiva and almost all other stories on gender fluidity and queer sexuality mentioned in the earlier novel Pregnant King. The only stories that are not mentioned in the earlier novel are that of Bhagiratha and a woman named Chudala who transformed into a man to impart knowledge to her husband as he would not be a disciple to a woman. The very fact that the same author reproduced the same stories in another format shows the market demand for the stories in that time.

On the cover page, the font size of the author's name is bigger than the title. The publisher is trying to sell the book by the name of the author. Devdutt Pattanaik has already established himself as a popular mythologist in India. There is a tag- line "India's bestselling mythologist" beneath the name of the author on the front cover. All these are marketing tactics which is aimed at attracting the target audience. In this book there are too much of footnotes by the author as if to exhibit his scholarship. In some places, the footnotes are longer than the stories. This gives the impression that the author is trying to validate his argument rather than convey the emotion by which the readers can draw their own conclusions.

Hence the approach to the subject is rather superficial. Yet the book was commercially successful due to two main reasons. First is that, the book was produced at a time when the topic was getting media attention and there was a

general tendency of main steaming the marginal in the international cultural scenario as shown in the case of the queer films. The second reason for the book's success is that it was written for the face book generation who wants to read everything in the capsule form and who are too busy to invest their time in reading lengthy novels. Hence the author ventured to sell the same wine that he sold some years ago in a new bottle. The open confession of the author about his queer identity also is a result of the social condition where there is more inclusiveness and where he need not fear banning or public outrage. To conclude, the commercial success and popularity of a queer writer and a collection of queer stories from Indian mythology is a testimony to the trend that marginal is marketable in the present socio- political scenario.

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