



“Gender-Bending in *The Mahabharata*: Questioning Fixed Notions of Identity”

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Introduction to the Authors:



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Abstract:

In the Indian story telling tradition, either orally or textually, stories have been passed down from one generation to the other with certain ideological and socio-political modifications. These versions differ from each other based on the time, geography and social structure of the community they are created in. The Postmodernist Indian English writers demolish authority, stereotypes, icons and sexist values. This paper seeks to examine how notions of victimhood and agency are playfully dealt with, in these modern retellings of *The Mahabharata*. Our reading reveals how rewriting epics gives voice to the subordinated speakers and also analyses the ways in which individuals of this age resist hegemonic notions of gender and class. It appears that the queer might not be an aberration but a figure of empowerment. Even when apparently they appear victims, they slyly manipulate situations to their own favour.

Keywords: Agency, Mythology, Queer, Retelling, Victimisation.



History is witness to the suppression of voices who refuse to subscribe to the existing social codes of conduct. Human beings perceive the world in of binary opposition - good/bad, white/black, man/woman so on and so forth, and whatever fails to conform to this binary structure is relegated to the margins and in due course obliterated. We live in a society where we are repeatedly told that there is only one kind of acceptable desire - heterosexual. Social structures further define and defend what we call the hetero-normative ideal: rigid notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. Any given culture has a set of expectations and rewards, inscribed through institutions, social practices for how men and women should speak, act and internalise their identities. All those who dare to think outside the box are considered threats to society at large. The realities of non-normative experiences - gender identities, sexual identities, sexual practices which contest heterosexuality have, however, always existed and still continue to do so.

This chapter focuses on *The Mahabharata* as retold by Devdutt Pattanaik. Uncomfortable with issues related to sexual, gender deviation, has the Indian identity always treaded contours of rigid binaries? Did mythology not accommodate the central and the peripheral alike? What constituted norms? Was identity all about air-tight compartmentalisation? Pattanaik, in his retellings, plunges deep into the past, digging out answers to all these questions and more. He shuffles power hierarchy, blurs gender distinctions, reconsiders social practices. In a style, very Foucauldian, Pattanaik narrates the body from the peripheries. He points out how with the gradual passage of time, Hindu mythology too has undergone rigorous pruning, leading us into ignorantly believing of a past that boasted of virility, respected structures and was purged of everything carnivalesque. Devdutta Pattanaik revisits the rich and complex domain of mythology, driven by a contemporary sensibility, with an urge to deconstruct. He points out how in this area, constant references are made to queerness, the idea that questions fixed notions of masculinity and femininity.

There are stories of men who become women, and women who become men, of men who create children without women, and women who create children without men, and of creatures who are neither this, nor that, but a little bit of both. It is common to either deny existence of such fluidity in our stories, or simply locate them in the realm of the supernatural or point to law books that, besides endorsing patriarchy and casteism, also frown upon queer behavior (Pattanaik, 12).



From this huge oeuvre, he deliberately sieves out playful, touching and often disturbing tales that are overlooked, stories that celebrate queerness. He takes liberties in distorting history, crumpling geographies, weaving fictional characters into the yarn. “*The Mahabharata* is one of the definitive cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in India...” (Brodbeck and Black, 12). But gender is not an essence, nor does it constitute a stable identity. Rather, gendered identities are tenuous and provisional, and can never be demonstrated once and for all; they exist, as Judith Butler emphasises in her *Gender Trouble*, only so far as they are performed and re-performed. If gender is one of the foundational pillars upon which the elaborate edifice of dharma rests in *The Mahabharata*, interesting alternative possibilities emerge as well. A way in which normative gender roles are subverted and challenged is through *The Mahabharata*’s several gender-bending characters. The most well-known cases of gender bending are instances of transsexualism – transformation of a man to a woman, or from a woman to a man – rather than the assumption of a third-sex identity¹. Moreover, the gender transformations that take place in *The Mahabharata* are often only temporary. Arjuna’s appearance as a eunuch dance instructor at the palace of King Virata in the thirteenth year of their exile² is only a temporary guise. Amba³, reborn as Shikhandini, makes a deal with a *yaksha* to switch sexes only for a limited time; and Krishna becomes Aravan’s⁴ bride only for a night. In other words, these episodes do not challenge the foundations of the social practices that reinforce the rigid binary model of sex/gender. Interestingly, female-to-male transsexuality is a much rarer occurrence in the epics and the *Puranas* than male-to-female. Accordingly, even though Amba pursues a life of austerities and finally immolates herself in the fire to be reborn a man – Amba is actually reborn as a woman, and only achieves sexual transformation with the help of a sympathetic *yaksha* after her guise as a male has been revealed

¹ “The third sex is a category comprising a wide variety of non-normative biological, gender role and socio-behavioural traits”. As quoted in Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black eds., *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 19.

² After the Pandavas lost to Duryodhana at the dice game, they had to leave the palace in keeping with the terms of the game. They had to spend thirteen years in exile; twelve years in a forest and the last one, in disguise.

³ Spurned by Shalva, her lover and also her abductor Bhishma, Amba had vowed revenge before she self-immolated herself. She was born to King Drupad, as Shikandini. In order to fulfill her vow of killing Bhishma, she had to exchange her genitalia with a *yaksha* and become a man.

⁴ Aravana was Arjuna’s son born of the Naga princess, Ulupi. Aravan agrees to be sacrificed for the victory of the Pandavas before the great battle, on one condition that he be married before he dies.



by her bride on her wedding night. But even after the swap has occurred, and the status of Shikhandini's genitalia confirmed, the authenticity of his masculinity remains in question. Thus, Shikhandi, a female, who "thought like a man and felt like a man and had always been treated as a man" (Pattanaik, 14). Even after undergoing a sexual transplantation, Shikhandi, at best, is considered a castrated male, never really being able to reach the illusory fullness of the phallic. Devdutt Pattanaik, in his retellings too deals with such episodes from *The Mahabharata* that is based on the power of gender and the gender of power.

In *The Pregnant King* (2008), Pattanaik delivers a riveting story is that of Yuvanashva, the king of Vallabhi. Though *The Mahabharata* is considered to be an epic revolving around the Kuru clan, the enmity amongst the cousins and the catastrophic eighteen-day long Kurukshetra battle, in this retelling, that aspect is completely brushed aside. Here we hardly get to hear of the politics of the Hastinapur court. On the contrary, the protagonist here is the much lesser known story of Yuvanashva, who, on failing to sire an offspring, despite having three wives, is denied the throne. His widowed mother, Shilavati acts as a powerful regent. Helpless, Yuvanashva seeks the help of two *Siddhis* – *Yaja* and *Upajaya*. After a ritual spanning several days, they concoct a potion meant for the wives. Yuvanashva accidentally drinks the potion and gets pregnant. He gives birth to Mandhata. The fact that he has given birth to Mandhata is kept under wraps. Later Yuvanashva is able to impregnate his second queen who gives birth to another son, Jayanta. Yuvanashva has both 'fathered' and 'mothered' sons. How is he then to be labeled? His image as the king, a virile husband and that of a nurturing mother craving to suckle his baby seem strikingly to be at odds. The fluidity of his biological gender intrigues us. He flamboyantly refuses any social labeling. *The Pregnant King* is, therefore, a tale of a mother who rules and a ruler who mothers. Pattanaik, however does not just stop with Yuvanashva's tale. The novel narrates several other tales that similarly explore the problematics of sex and gender as also the blatant suppression of voices that swerve away from socially affiliated codes of conduct. The novel for instance, narrates Arjuna's experience as a eunuch Brihanalla, at the court of king Virat, as also the story of Somvat who metamorphoses into a woman to get married to his best friend. It also narrates the story of Aruni, the god of dawn, who masqueraded as a woman and was forced to accept the seed of both Indra and Surya. We come across Ila, who experienced both fatherhood and motherhood. Society sees gender



identity to be inseparably entwined with one's anatomical constituents – a male is undeniably masculine and woman, feminine. Whenever someone threatens acculturation of the body to its allotted gender, s/he is meted out with punishments. In the concerned novel several such cases are narrated where one's failure to adhere to the corresponding gender role is duly punished and inevitably silenced. It is in this context that we need to study Yuvanashva's trial, his desperate attempts at negotiating with his fractured sexual and gender identity, and his relentless struggle against society's repeated efforts at gagging the non-normative truth. His pregnancy is completely relegated to the domain of the unnatural. Yuvanashva's mother, Shilavati treats his pregnancy disparagingly. In utter disgust of the life that grows within his son, she strips it off its humanity and decides to kill it. "What if it is a monster? A parasite...Cut it out. Get the monster out of his body" (Pattanaik, 194). Yuvanashva faces persecution in the hands of his other family members as well. In the first instance, he is denied the knowledge of having given birth to a child and finally when he comes to know about it, he is denied access to the child. On Shilavati's strict instructions the child is taken to the woman's quarter and its door is closed against Yuvanashva to "let motherhood remain with the women" (Pattanaik, 194) in faithful adherence to the heteronormative codes. Heteronormativity, as Jillian Todd Weiss puts it, is a "power to define our place in the hierarchy....To step out of the hierarchy is to lose power and control, to lose congruity. To separate sex and gender is to disassemble the coiled binary structure from which our power, control, and sense of congruity derives (Weiss, 2001). Finally Yuvanashva is allowed his wish of nurturing his child, but only in secrecy. He desperately seeks historical instances to resolve the dichotomy he experiences but history rarely documents such singular cases that resist its homogenising and universalising tendencies. Even if it does, it concludes in the rejection of the concerned persons, as in the case of the children born of Aruni, the god of dawn. The children were given away to the monkeys, implying as the bards in the text reveal "children born of a man are fit only to be raised as monkeys" (Pattanaik, 218). Their very lineage make them unfit for human society. To avoid a similar fate with regards to the little prince Mandhata, tales are fabricated at his felicitation ceremony to facilitate his public acceptance. He is publicly introduced as the son of Yuvanashva and Simantini, his first queen, with Yuvanashva being addressed as the father.

Myth thus is not a chronicle of absolute truths, but realities that have been tampered with, for social convenience. Facts that have the potential of jeopardising the very foundations of



society if not distorted are at best systematically effaced from records. The bards, Yuvanashva comes across in the forest of Kamyak claim to have forgotten the story of Bhangashvana, the man who was addressed both as father and mother by his children – the story that they actually knew but pretended ignorance only because, as they themselves revealed, such things are never appreciated as truth but treated as mere fanciful constructs. This story was supposed to be known by only Bhishma who passed it on to the Pandavas on his deathbed. Desperate to validate his position, Yuvanashva attempts to extract⁵ it from Arjuna. Arjuna refuses any knowledge of it and remarks “Some stories are not meant to be remembered” (Pattanaik, 264), but on Yuvanashva’s provocation ends up recounting his own experiences as Brihanalla. As he himself confesses, he wishes to obliterate it from his memory: “Please don’t ask me to remember that year”, comes his earnest exhortation, “...It is terrible to appear as a woman and still have a man’s heart” (Pattanaik, 264). Society provides no room for the innumerable spectrum of possibilities that tend to lie between two mutually exclusive constructs of the masculine and the feminine. This compartmentalisation enforces strict conformance to actions and expressions deemed suitable for the respective sex, so much so that violation of the same often lead to infamy. Arjun recounts how Uttara, the son of Virat, objected to his sister’s inclination towards archery claiming it to be a masculine feat. To this, Uttari retorted that his brother’s penchant for dance should also be condemned, given its status as feminine. Archery for male and dance for female can be seen as, what Butler calls “the various acts of gender” which “create the idea of gender” without which “there would be no gender at all” (Butler, 1988). Hence to pursue their desires, they swore secrecy to each other. Secrecy was also maintained with regards to Krishna’s temporary appropriation of a female body, Mohini, during the Kurukshetra war: “Sanjaya who saw the whole war with his mind’s eye...did not see this” (Pattanaik, 265), reveals Arjun. Society that considers the man/woman categorisation as watertight compartment refuses room to any knowledge of such flux of sexual identity. But for those who refuse voluntary submission, society has its own way of choking their voices. When Yuvanashva, for instance, expresses his desire of being addressed as mother by Mandhata, Simantini, his first wife warns him of dire consequences. She cautions him against scandal, then dangles the bait of kingship, positing his parental status as mother, which is strictly feminine,

⁵ Yuvanashva allows the *Ashwamedha* horse run through his kingdom only when Arjuna agrees to share his experiences of living the life of a eunuch in the thirteenth year of their exile.



against his social status as king, indubiously masculine. When Yuvanashva says he would like to be both, Simantini argues that such shuffling of gender roles is forbidden, owing to their social construction as mutually exclusive where functioning in one entails a specific sexual identity that invariably precludes the person from roles assigned to the opposite sex. “To be a mother you must be a woman. Are you saying you are a woman Arya? If you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne” (Pattanaik, 258). This is the very reason why Yama’s account book, as Yuvanashva later comes to know, has no record of his mother, Shilavati’s identity as an efficient ruler who directed her kingdom to prosperity on the death of her husband and her father-in-law, as that would amount to transgression of gender stereotypes. She is described only in her feminine roles as “the dutiful daughter of Ahuka, loving sister of Nabhaka, obedient wife of Prasenjit and doting mother of Yuvanashva” (Pattanaik, 337). Even after several admonishments, when Yuvanashva refuses to relent, Simantini cautions him against the punishments that await such men like him, a fate that he himself effectuated with regards to Sumedha and Somvati, and a fate from which even he can’t escape if situation so demands. At this juncture the story of Sumedha and Somvati needs mention. Somvati was initially Somvat, a young Brahmin boy. Sumedha and Somvati’s marriage were fixed with the two daughters of a woman named Kaveri. The woman however had one condition. They were required to get a cow for themselves. While Sumedha managed to get one, Somvat could not. To get out of this problem, the two friends hit upon a plan. They set out for the cow giving ceremony of Yuvanashva posing as a Brahmin couple. Their fraud was detected and they were thrown into prison. Their crime was heinous as they tried to hoodwink the royal family, but what was more terrible was their pretension as a married couple being of the same biological sex. On the night of their incarceration, Somvat terribly lamented his manhood. He thought that had he not been a man they would have been let off with minor punishment. At that instance, Sthunakarna, a *yaksha* came to Somvat’s rescue and took away his manhood. But next morning the situation, however, worsened. When Somvat’s transformation came to light he was even more vilified. His womanhood, though glaringly explicit, was completely denied owing to its negation of the biological sex with which he was born. Yuvanashva proclaims “The *dharmashastra* say that roles and responsibilities of a *Manava* are determined at birth by his biology... You are born a man...You are forever a man” (Pattanaik, 147). The sexual identity with which one is born becomes the sole determinant of the gender roles one would be performing in society, by which



requirement Somvati is to marry a woman. But given Somvati's present sexual identity, it is unacceptable to her. She on the contrary goes on asserting her womanhood and her conjugal nexus with Sumedha. Disregarding the repeated warnings of others when they refuse to surrender, they are sentenced to death by Yuvanashva. The genitals one is born with becomes the sole determinant of the gender roles one would be performing in society, going by which requirement Somvati is to marry a woman. But given Somvati's present sexual identity, it is unacceptable to her. She on the contrary goes on asserting her womanhood and her conjugal nexus with Sumedha. Disregarding the repeated warnings of others when they refuse to surrender their marital status, they are sentenced to death by Yuvanashva. Society that treads on neat paths has no provision for accommodating such flexible identities. Hence Simantini's warnings "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" (Pattanaik, 168). It is quite ironical that Yuvanashva who has so vehemently perpetuated its workings, himself falls within its vicious trappings. However, Yuvanashva's final rejection comes at the hands of his son Mandhata, that very son for whom he was ever ready to put his social reputation at stake. In firm assertion of prevalent gender stereotypes Mandhata vehemently dismisses Yuvanashva's appropriation of maternal identity. He desperately tries to affirm its non existence. "Nothing had changed. The conversation [where Yuvanashva confessed his identity as Mandhata's mother] in the *mahasabha* had not taken place. He tried hard to forget it" (Pattanaik, 230). So much is Mandhata's obsession with social codes that even when Yuvanashva decides to renounce the world, never for once does he budge to address him as mother, which would in all probability have halted his march. Yuvanashva's ostracisation is complete. After years of self imposed silence finally when he utters the truth he is publicly dismissed as mad. Even Shilavati, who has full knowledge of the truth, to safeguard the reputation of the royal family joins others in confirmation of his son's psychic derangement. The bards are right to point out that such stories as Yuvanashva's never get the attestation of truth and will "soon be forgotten" (Pattanaik, 291), just as the story of Ila. At this juncture the bards finally reveal to him the story of Ila or Bhangashavana as they deem his mind to be ripe enough for accepting the truth. "We have one last story for you...The story we never told you. The story we never tell....We finally have an audience who will not laugh" (Pattanaik, 268).As the story runs, Ila was born a man but under the effect of a very strange spell, turned into a woman. When he pleaded Shiva to undo the spell, it being incapable of



revocation was modified. It was decreed that Ila's masculinity would wax and wane with the moon, implying, he would by turn manifest the traits of both the male and the female: "He would be all male on full-moon days and all female on new-moon nights" (Pattanaik, 42). Accordingly Ila became both father and mother. But just as Aruni's children were accorded the status of beasts, Ila was escalated to Divinity. The bards pertinently point out, that just like Ila, Yuvanashva's story too would efface from human memory.

Thus Pattanaik's novel can be said to be a powerful delineation of society's repeated attempts at silencing disparate sexualities that confound the sexual and gender binaries. The strategies employed are various - ranging from voluntary submission to forceful oblivion and punitive measures, but all are aimed at sustaining the existing power structure. But the very fact that a story like this has been chosen for a retelling bespeaks of the changing perceptions of gender and sexuality of contemporary times. While women, even till date are considered the "field" (Pattanaik, 18) which the husband "owns", it is interesting to note how Yuvanashva, a male becomes the field in which the powerful potion (seed) concocted by two men is received. What makes things even more quirky is that the field seems to be owned by the woman here. It is Simantini who provides Mandhata the stability of normative life. Devdutt Pattanaik, in this retelling, therefore blurs all the distinctions between what constitutes male and female, masculine and feminine, thereby truly upholding the subtleties of terms like gender and sexuality.

The second book that has been included in this section is *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) authored by Devdutt Pattanaik again. Simultaneously marginalised by the nation-state and mainstream cultural discourse, the figure of the queer in India has been, by and large, written out of history and visibility. The queer subject is considered a deviant. There, however, are stories that take place in the fault lines between our conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. The author carefully sieves out such tales from Hindu mythology that celebrate queerness. *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*, unlike the other texts that have been dealt with, in this dissertation, is not a novel. It is a mosaic of different episodes from the *Puranas*, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and regional folklores. Since it is *The Mahabharata* that is being dealt with, this sub-section will be focusing only on those episodes from the epic. The first story is that of Shikhandi. Shikhandi's story is one that spans two lifetimes. In his previous life he was the princess of Kashi, named Amba. Bhishma had



abducted Amba along with her two sisters⁶ for his step-brother Vichitravirya. But when Bhishma learnt that Amba was in love with King Shalya, he sent her back to her betrothed lover. King Shalva, however, refused to accept a woman who had been carried away by another man and had been tainted by his touch. She came back and pleaded Bhishma to accept her as his wife but was refused by him as well. “Amba thus epitomises the no-win situation of a woman, tossed like a shuttlecock between two men” (Brodbeck and Black, 218). Enraged, she promised herself that she would avenge this humiliation in her next lifetime. Accordingly, even though she pursues a life of austerities, receives a guarantee from Shiva, and finally immolates herself in the fire to be reborn a man, she is actually reborn as a female. She is taught all the skills reserved for men. She grows up believing she is a warrior. She is even given a wife. It is only on her wedding night that she confronts her femininity for the first time. Depressed and dejected, she goes to a forest where a sympathetic yaksha agrees to swap genitals. He accedes to lend out his manhood and also accepts Shikhandi’s female sexual organ. “It is easier to go down than up, in gender as it is in caste” (Brodbeck and Black, 217). Women are hardly ever cursed to manhood, the way men are cursed to femininity. Finally, in the battle of Kurukshetra when we find Shikhandi and Arjuna discharging arrows against Bhishma – we notice an alliance of two transsexuals⁷ against a father figure, who being a celibate was himself a symbolic castrate. *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don’t Tell You* also recounts the story of the other transsexual, Arjuna. The virile Arjuna had visited the heavenly palace of his father, Indra. It was here that he was approached by the nymph Urvashi. Urvashi’s liaison with Arjuna’s ancestor Pururava is well known. He therefore rejects the sexual advances of a woman he looks upon as a mother. Thus spurned, the nymph curses Arjuna to lose his manhood and become a *napumsaka*. Indra intervenes on his behalf and modifies the curse. Its effects would only last for a year. “Arjuna thus having refused the sexually voracious mother and having been cursed to sexual impotence [symbolic castration] for it, is rewarded for this gesture by his father who restores him his phallus, with only a traumatic trace of the original punishment to live out” (Brodbeck and Black, 216). While the punishment that Arjuna faces lasts only for a year, the

⁶ The three princesses of Kashi were Amba, Ambika and Ambalika.

⁷ While Shikhandi had exchanged his genitals, Arjuna, owing to Urvashi’s curse, had lost his manhood for one year.



punishment that Samba⁸ faces proves far too grave. He once disguised himself as a pregnant woman and mischievously approached a few sages, asking them if he would deliver a baby boy or a baby girl. The sages saw through his deceit and cursed him. Samba experienced excruciating pain and finally delivered an iron mace. The elders of the community advised the iron mace to be pounded and then thrown into the sea. Unfortunately, the iron powder had deposited itself on the beach and had turned into sharp blades. During a certain heated argument amongst the members of the Yadava clan they started striking each other down using these razor sharp blades. An apparent harmless prank worsened things to the point where an entire clan gets perished. The entire prank seems to suggest that the consequences of symbolically castrating oneself and hinting at overt homosexuality⁹ might lead the entire clan to their doom. This is how their punishments would be meted out. Interestingly, this text also narrates one episode based on an oral tale from the Tamil *Mahabharata* – the story of Vijaya.¹⁰ Like Samba, Arjuna, along with Krishna had feigned femininity, too. While Krishna disguised himself as an old woman, Arjuna bedecked himself as a ravishing maiden named Vijayampal. Together, they duped a sorcerer’s son, Pormannan and convinced him to kill his father¹¹. Bewitched by Vijampal’s beauty, Pormannan did as he was asked to. Interestingly, though Krishna and Arjuna are found masquerading in female attire, they are not punished. On the other hand, this ensures their victory. Unlike Samba’s prank, this act has been propelled by a very masculine motive – that of winning a war. “Since the cause is noble, the cross-dressing is not frowned upon” (Pattanaik, 135).

We therefore come across a wide range of transsexual characters and cross-dressers in the epic. Though a queer subject has always been and still is looked down upon, Pattanaik’s stories offer a fresh outlook. Gender ambiguity need not necessarily stem from a curse. It can be empowering as well. Shikhandi becomes a man and gains entry into the male domain of warfare, thereby fulfilling his pledge to kill Bhishma. Arjuna and Krishna dress up as women and knavishly gain access to an impenetrable world of the sorcerer. Finally, decked up as a transsexual, Arjuna manages to escape the prying eyes of the Kauravas. In the thirteenth year of

⁸ Samba was Krishna’s son.

⁹ By disguising himself as a pregnant lady Samba seems to suggest his willingness to be impregnated, to become the field for one’s seed.

¹⁰ Arjuna is addressed as Vijaya in Tamil literature.

¹¹ This sorcerer possessed a few sacred objects which the Pandavas needed to ensure their victory at the battle of Kurukshetra. But this man lived in an impregnable fort and could be killed by none other than his own son.



exile, the Pandavas had to live in disguise. But how could someone as virile and handsome as him remain unnoticed? His manly demeanor, his battle-scars would have proved too strong evidences against him. He dresses himself up as a eunuch and thereby escapes suspicious looks. Given the queer-phobia prevalent in society, none could imagine that a hyper-masculine man could sport himself as a eunuch and lose the exalted privileges of the phallic. Even in marginalisation, they emerge triumphant.

Composed ages ago, *The Mahabharata* still continues to be retold in various literary, graphic and visual media. In the hands of the postcolonial Indian English novelist the mythological past takes different shapes. Unlike retellings of previous centuries, these novels do not view the epic as a mere tussle between *dharma* and *adharma*. The novelists re-narrate their past but from a different perspective. They demolish authority, stereotypes, icons and sexist values. For a new generation, mythology is catered with interesting twists and in even more interesting forms. “Uncritical idoli[z]ing of the epic tends to mask its ugly blotches, deflects serious scrutiny, pre-empts uneasy questions and lurking doubts.” These retellings therefore do away with any such uncritical adulation and provide radically new ways of talking about the content. As our reading suggests, rewriting epics gives voice to the subordinated speaker, analysing the ways in which individuals of this age resist hegemonic notions of gender and class. The queer, usually, seen as a figure who endures social rejection is depicted in a new light. S/he is not an aberration. The contemporary retellings that we have dealt with showcase a remarkable departure from the normative notion. Their status as queer often aid them in accomplishing certain feats that would have been otherwise impossible for them to achieve. What we look upon as victimhood, as curse is often nothing but an apparent façade. Thus, the often gendered opposition of agency and victimhood gets collapsed in these retellings. Victimhood, therefore, attains layered meanings. To quote Mats Utas (“Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman’s Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone”, 2005), these retellings describe more a state of “victimcy” - a term proposed to describe “the agency of self-staging as a victim and deploying it as a tactic...effectively exercised under trying, uncertain, and disempowering circumstances that confront actors....”



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Another question we must ask is how is it possible to claim these approaches to identity are truly arguing for a social construction of agency, given that they theorize identity from essential (that is, pre-political) or fixed categories constructed from given attributes - e.g., woman, African-American. The newly celebrated but fixed categories of identity and self-realization to be newly problematic, regardless of their being informed by the traits of the previously excluded, is. Finally, and perhaps most worrisome, we must question the slide from the gendered distinction between a moral and a normative notion of relationality (women are "relational," men are "autonomous") to a gendered distinction in the degree of analytic.