

**LINGUISTIC DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN MYTHOLOGICAL
REINTERPRETATIONS: A STUDY OF *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS* AND *THE
PREGNANT KING***

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ABSTRACT

*The research paper delves into the intricate interplay of language and gender within the context of contemporary Indian fiction's mythological reinterpretations. Focusing on two remarkable novels, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik, this study uncovers the linguistic strategies employed by the authors to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional gender roles against the backdrop of Indian mythology. The research navigates the multifaceted realm of language as a potent tool for reshaping gender dynamics. It scrutinizes how both novels utilize mythological language, symbols, metaphors, and narrative techniques to challenge and redefine gender norms. This investigation extends to the protagonists' agency through language, emphasizing moments of empowerment and resistance to entrenched gender stereotypes. Through a contemporary lens, the paper explores how these linguistic deconstructions of gender resonate with modern readers and engage with contemporary gender discourse. By anchoring the analysis in feminist literary criticism, this research underscores the authors' deliberate efforts to question and transform gender constructs within mythological narratives. It contributes to the ongoing dialogue on language, gender and agency in literature, shedding light on the transformative potential of narrative language in reshaping gender identities and empowering diverse voices within the mythological tapestry of Indian fiction.*

KEYWORDS: *Language, Gender, Deconstruction, Gender Norms and Stereotypes, Gender Identities.*

INTRODUCTION LIT REVIEW, ANALYSIS, METHODOLOGY

In the realm of literature, the interplay of language and gender has long been a subject of profound exploration and contemplation. Within our societal and cultural contexts, linguistic disparities persist, distinguishing and revealing the perspectives of one gender in relation to the other. To paraphrase Butler, gender may be likened to a scripted performance, a facade or even a confining structure within which individuals of different sexes engage in a complex, asymmetric dance (Butler, 1990, p. 520). Gender is therefore, a socially constructed concept that goes beyond mere biological differences between male and female. It involves the roles, expectations, and behaviors that society assigns to individuals based on their perceived gender, often perpetuated through language and cultural norms. It can be seen as a performative aspect of identity, where individuals are expected to conform to certain roles, behaviors, and expressions associated with their perceived gender. These expectations can be limiting, akin to a costume or facade, and can restrict the individual's freedom and agency. It is not a fixed or innate characteristic but rather a dynamic and culturally influenced concept that can vary

across societies and time periods. As Beauvoir observes that “one isn’t always born, but particularly becomes, a lady” (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 301).

Moreover, gender relations are often marked by inequality and power dynamics, where one gender’s attitudes and perspectives may dominate or restrict the other. This inequality is embedded not only in social structures but also in language, which can reinforce and perpetuate these disparities. As Foucault posited in his seminal work *The History of Sexuality*, language and discourses play a pivotal role in the construction and regulation of gender norms. His concept of ‘discourse’ underscores how societal institutions and language shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. In this way, language operates as both a tool of power and a site of resistance in the ongoing negotiation of gender identities and relations.

In this context, the research gains particular relevance when the attention is turned to two remarkable novels, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik. These literary works serve as illuminating case studies within the exploration. They not only challenge the entrenched gender norms and stereotypes inherent in the mythological narratives they draw upon but also vividly demonstrate the extent to which language can be harnessed as a transformative force. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni’s narrative voice offers an intimate and reimagined perspective on the Ramayana, primarily through the eyes and experiences of Sita. The analysis of this novel reveals the linguistic strategies employed by Divakaruni to deconstruct the traditional roles assigned to female characters within this epic saga. Within the novel, a rich tapestry of language, symbols, and metaphors becomes the canvas on which traditional gender norms are reshaped and renegotiated, showcasing moments of empowerment and resistance. Similarly, *The Pregnant King*, authored by Devdutt Pattanaik, embarks on a narrative journey that challenges conventional masculinity within the Mahabharata. King Yuvanashva’s unique predicament, explored through Pattanaik’s lens, provides a compelling opportunity to dissect linguistic strategies that deconstruct and reconstruct notions of masculine and femininity. Much like *The Forest of Enchantments*, the novel engages with mythological language, symbols, and metaphors to provoke thought and stimulate dialogue on the fluidity of gender identities.

Within the pages of these novels, protagonists assert their agency through language, refusing to conform to established gender stereotypes and redefining their roles within the mythological narratives. An analysis of these texts aims to reveal how these linguistic deconstructions of gender resonate with modern readers and contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender, language, and agency in literature. The paper’s significance lies especially in its exploration of language’s profound role in challenging and deconstructing traditional gender norms within contemporary Indian literature’s mythological reinterpretations. By scrutinizing novels such as *The Forest of Enchantment* and *The Pregnant King*, the paper illuminates how linguistic strategies empower characters to break free from entrenched gender stereotypes. Anchoring its analysis in feminist literary criticism, it not only underscores the author’s deliberate efforts to reshape gender constructs but also highlights the resonance of these linguistic deconstructions with modern readers and their engagement with evolving gender discourse.

Scope of Research

This study delves into the intricate ways in which the protagonists in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “*The Forest of Enchantments*” and Devdutt Pattanaik’s “*The Pregnant King*” exercise agency through language. By exploring the characters’ linguistic expressions, the research aims to dissect moments of empowerment and resistance within the

narratives, deciphering their contribution to the deconstruction of deeply rooted gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the analysis extends to the reinterpretation of gender within these mythological narratives, shedding light on how these reimagined roles contribute to a more inclusive and diverse representation of gender identities within the rich tapestry of Indian fiction. Through a focused lens, this research explores the nuanced interplay of language, agency, and societal norms, providing valuable insights into the transformative potential of narrative language in reshaping gender perceptions within contemporary literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her work *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly writes, “patriarchy appears to be everywhere” (Daly, 1990, p.1). Along the similar lines, Henley observes that the presence of a hierarchical gender binary is embedded within the words and language that often overlook, belittle, and narrowly confine the experiences and identities of women. According to a British sociologist Giddens, sex refers to the biological and anatomical distinctions between males and females, while gender encompasses the psychological, social, and cultural distinctions between men and women. In simple terms, gender is a societal attribute, something that is acquired or formed through an individual’s interactions with others and their adherence to specific cultural norms and expectations (Giddens, 1990). There is much research that supports the fact that often when students are made to engage in discussions related to gender diversity, they learn to question gender structures that are limiting. In addition to that, they are also able to expand their horizons and become more accepting and inclusive (e.g. Ryan, Patraw and Bednar, 2013). Tannen delineated six distinct dimensions in his framework along which the language of men and women exhibits differentiation. These dimensions encompass: the interplay between status and support; the balance of independence and intimacy; the distinction between offering advice and fostering understanding; the prioritization of conveying information versus expressing feelings; the differentiation between giving orders and proposing ideas; and the dialectic of conflict versus compromise (Tannen, 2005).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis will be anchored in feminist literary criticism, drawing inspiration from the perspectives of two influential feminist theorists- Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Their seminal works offer invaluable insights into the exploration of gender dynamics, language, and female agency within literature. Beauvoir’s pioneering work, notably *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 2015), serves as a cornerstone of the theoretical framework. Her existentialist feminist perspective helps in critically examining the agency of female characters in literature. Her concept of women as “the other” within patriarchal systems calls attention to the importance of subverting traditional narratives. Similarly, Judith Butler’s groundbreaking theory of performativity, as articulated in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), provides a complementary perspective. Butler contends that gender is not a fixed identity but something performed and reinforced through language and behavior. Her insights can be applied to investigate how characters in the selected novels perform and subvert traditional gender roles through their linguistic expressions and actions. By synthesizing their ideas, the research will illuminate the intricate ways in which language is employed as a transformative force to challenge established gender norms and stereotypes in contemporary Indian fiction’s mythological reinterpretations.

EMPOWERING NARRATIVES: GENDER DECONSTRUCTION IN *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*

Reimagining Sita as A Multifaceted Heroine

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* stands as a contemporary masterpiece that reimagines the timeless Indian epic, the Ramayana, through the lens of Sita, its often overlooked and marginalized heroine. In this novel, Divakaruni employs a rich tapestry of language, symbols, and metaphors to Devon and reconstruct traditional gender roles within the mythological narratives. Through the eyes and experiences of Sita, a profound exploration of gender dynamics and female agency is presented, all within the backdrop of an ancient and revered tale. Divakaruni's use of language serves as a potent tool for challenging the entrenched gender norms prevalent in the Ramayana. She employs a narrative voice that delves deep into Sita's thoughts, emotions, and experiences, giving her a voice that was largely muted in the original epic. This linguistic strategy allows readers to connect with Sita on a personal and empathetic level, challenging the traditional portrayal of women as passive and submissive.

In the novel, there is a poignant moment during Sita's exile in the forest with Lord Rama. Traditionally, Sita's role in the Ramayana is often reduced to that of a dutiful and obedient wife who follows her husband unquestioningly. However, Divakaruni reimagines this moment in a way that empowers Sita and highlights her emotional depth. As Sita and Rama navigate the challenges of their Forest exile, Sita experiences a range of emotions, including loneliness, fear, and frustration. In the original epic, these emotions are often left unexplored or overshadowed by Rama's heroic journey. However, in the novel, Divakaruni takes readers deep into Sita's thoughts and feelings. Through her narrative voice, she allows the readers an access to Sita's inner turmoil and her struggle to find her own identity amidst the trials of exile. For example, Divakaruni writes about Sita's inner thoughts during this period of hardship in a passage where her language allows readers to connect with Sita's personal and emotional journey. Sita's realization that she is more than just a passive follower challenges the traditional portrayal of women in the Ramayana. Divakaruni's narrative voice grants agency to Sita, emphasizing her inner strength and her ability to redefine her role in the face of adversity.

Per formative Resistance in the Novel

The novel also subverts traditional gender roles through its portrayal of Rama, Sita's husband and the hero of the Ramayana. Divakaruni's Rama is a complex character, one who grapples with his own vulnerabilities and insecurities. One example is when Rama, despite his noble and heroic status, shares his inner doubts and fears with Sita. He confides in her about the weight of his responsibilities and the moral dilemmas he faces as a prince and a husband. This portrayal humanizes Rama and reveals his vulnerability, allowing readers to see him as more than just a traditional epic hero. By presenting Rama in this light, the author challenges the conventional masculinity associated with epic heroes and highlights the performative nature of gender.

Throughout the novel, Divakaruni crafts moments of empowerment and resistance that are central to the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Sita's agency, as vividly portrayed when she confronts the challenges and injustices that befall her, resonates with Beauvoir's existential feminism, which underscores how societal expectations often define women's existence in relation to men. Her decision to accompany Rama to the forest is not one of passive obedience but a conscious choice driven by her agency and determination to be with her husband. This act redefines Sita's character from a meek follower to a woman with her own desires and convictions. Beauvoir's idea that women have historically been relegated to the status of "the other" within patriarchal systems resonates with Sita's refusal to conform to the patriarchal norms. Her refusal to undergo the Agni Pariksha, the trial by fire, is a powerful moment of resistance. This trial is traditionally depicted as a test of her purity and chastity. Sita's rejection of this test, her assertion that her purity is not determined by fire, is a bold act of resistance against the patriarchal norms and expectations placed upon her. Her refusal is

a performative assertion of her identity and autonomy, highlighting how language and actions can be used as tools of resistance. Butler's theory illuminates how Sita's verbal and behavioral performances reshape traditional gender roles and contribute to the deconstruction of entrenched stereotypes.

Divakaruni's reinterpretation of the Ramayana contributes significantly to a more inclusive and diverse representation of gender identities within the tapestry of Indian fiction. By providing Sita with a voice and agency, she challenges the one-dimensional portrayal of women in traditional mythological narratives. Sita emerges as a multifaceted character with her own desires, dreams, and struggles. Furthermore, the novel encourages readers to question the rigid gender roles and stereotypes perpetuated by ancient epics. It invites us to reflect on the performative nature of gender and the societal pressures that shape an individual's roles and identities. In doing so, this novel initiates a dialogue on gender and agency that resonates with contemporary readers and challenges them to reevaluate their understanding of gender dynamics.

GENDER AMBIGUITY AND AGENCY: UNRAVELING NARRATIVES IN *THE PREGNANT KING*

Challenging Traditional Norms

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* is a thought-provoking and unconventional reimagining of Indian mythology that challenges and deconstructs traditional gender roles within the context of the Mahabharata. Through a unique narrative and a rich tapestry of language, symbols, and metaphors, Pattanaik explores the complexities of gender identity and agency, highlighting the transformative potential of mythological reinterpretations. His novel is a masterpiece example of how language can be wielded to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional gender norms. The narrative unfolds through the perspective of two protagonists, Yuvanashva and Shilavati, both of whom grapple with questions of gender and identity. Yuvanashva, a king, becomes pregnant through a divine boon, challenging the traditional binary understanding of gender and parenthood. Pattanaik's linguistic strategy is to introduce ambiguity of Yuvanashva's gender. This linguistic choice forces readers to question their preconceived notions of gender and identity, compelling them to engage with the novel's central themes.

Throughout the novel, Pattanaik creates empowering and resisting moments that are pivotal to the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Yuvanashva's journey toward self-discovery and acceptance of his unique identity is a profound exploration of personal agency. His decision to embrace his pregnancy, despite societal expectations and judgment, showcases his determination to define his own path. Shilavati, on the other hand, exemplifies resistance against the constraints of gender roles. Her transformation from a traditional queen to a warrior challenging gender norms is a testament to her agency and resilience. Her quest for self-realization and her willingness to question societal norms resonate with contemporary readers as it underscores Butler's assertion that gender is a performance. Yuvanashva's embodiment of pregnancy and Shilavati's transformation into a warrior demonstrate how individuals can perform and challenge gender roles within societal contexts.

Linguistic Ambiguity and Social Commentary

The novel contributes significantly to a more inclusive and diverse representation of gender identities within the genre of Indian literature. By reimagining the Mahabharata through the lens of gender ambiguity and fluidity, Pattanaik invites readers to confront their own biases and preconceptions about gender. Throughout the novel, he employs linguistic ambiguity in pronouns and titles when referring to Yuvanashva. This linguistic strategy reflects the uncertainty

surrounding Yuvanashva's gender and challenges readers to reconsider societal norms. It demonstrates that identity can transcend traditional categories. The novel challenges the idea that gender is fixed and binary, presenting a narrative where identities are more complex and multidimensional. In the novel, several dialogues and conversations revolve around questions of identity. Characters discuss what it means to be a man, a woman, or a king. The character Yuvanashva's journey is a prime example of this complexity. Yuvanashva's transformative pregnancy challenges the traditional binary understanding of gender and parenthood. It challenges the notion that women are solely responsible for childbirth and parenting, aligning with Beauvoir's call for women to break free from limiting definitions. Throughout the narrative, as he grapples with the physical and emotional aspects of pregnancy, readers witness a profound exploration of the complexity of identity.

Moreover, the novel engages with contemporary gender discourse by highlighting the struggles and triumphs of its characters in a society that often imposes rigid gender roles. The novel encourages readers to reevaluate their understanding of gender dynamics and the performative aspects of identity, resonating with ongoing discussions on gender and agency. The text examines societal norms and expectations related to gender and sexuality. The nature of the world is amorphous and language and law places a lot of limitations on identity. It critiques societal expectations and patriarchal structures that dictate what is considered "normal". It highlights the limitations and constraints imposed by these norms on individuals and their personal fulfilment. For instance, Sumedha and Somvati were forced to get into the pyre as they were wedded against the societal norm. The only type of wedding considered sacred in the society is of a man and a woman. Any other gender relationship affiliated to each other romantically is considered as sin. It therefore becomes interesting to note the extent to which society can jeopardize the lives of people because of its rigid norms. Pattanaik not only presents before the reader a situation which is in fact a terrible reality of the society, but implicitly conveys an important message through his narratives. The king protagonist, who ordered the death penalty of the homosexual couple in the novel, is then tormented in his own life. It is only when he himself becomes a mother, he realizes the sanctity of their relationship which he had condemned to be an abomination erstwhile.

As it is mentioned in the text, "The truth is not poison. It is our inability to handle it that makes it poisonous." (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 342) By questioning societal norms, the book encourages readers to critically reflect on the impact of these norms on personal identity and relationships. It challenges the notion that there is a singular "normal" way to be, inviting acceptance and celebration of diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. Moreover, it goes on to comment on general human identities as "nothing but souls wrapped in different types of matter...soul(s) wrapped in flesh". (Pattanaik 338) While articulating characteristics like masculinity and femininity, it is highly imperative to look beyond binaries as both the features are present in almost all human bodies to varying degrees. This disposition does not necessarily correspond to one's sexual orientation. The king protagonist for instance, who remains sexually oriented to women throughout the novel, also eventually regrets when he is being denied his femininity. Femininity is an attribute associated with not only women but men. It is important to accept "the truth of the moment, rather than the truth of birth". (Pattanaik, 2014, p. 290) By portraying a range of sexual experiences and desires, the text prompts readers to expand their understanding of diverse sexual orientations and challenge assumptions about what is considered "normal" or "acceptable" and embrace a more inclusive view.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this research journey through the realm of contemporary Indian literature's mythological reinterpretations, as exemplified by the given novels, has unveiled the transformation power of language in challenging and reshaping traditional gender constructs. By navigating the linguistic strategies employed by these authors, the deconstruction of entrenched gender norms, the celebration of moments of empowerment and resistance, and the emergence of a more inclusive and diverse representation of gender identities has been witnessed. Anchored in feminist literary criticism, this exploration underscores the deliberate efforts of these writers to disrupt gender hierarchies and engage with contemporary gender discourse. Furthermore, it accentuates how narrative language not only reflects but actively participates in the ongoing dialogue on gender, illuminating its capacity to redefine, empower, and celebrate the multifaceted tapestry of gender identities within the literary and mythological landscape. This research invites scholars to further delve into the transformative potential of language and its profound role in reshaping societal perceptions of gender in literature and beyond.

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