Epic To Pandemic: A Perspective On Gender Dichotomy And Conflict With Self (With Reference To Mahabharata And Modern Society)

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ABSTRACT
From the Paleolithic era till the modern times of current Pandemic, human race has witnessed not only biological evolution but also sociocultural one. Gender has always been an important consideration in development of civilizations. Without much change, the world has been perceived only in binary oppositions which consign the social structure only in heteronormative ideal of having an adamant notion of a man or woman, their social practice, behavior and fixed identities. Contemporary Post-modernist Indian writers through their writings shamble the power hierarchy and reconsider these social practices, softening the gender distinctions. Based on these literary texts of gender dichotomy in terms of non-normative sexual identities from the epic Mahabharata presented in the book The Pregnant King, this paper is an attempt to reinterpret the gender transgression and psychological issues which testifies unawareness of a double marginality, a perspective on latent conflict between society and individuals, an inequality felt by the victims in terms of gender from Mahabharata India till today. These complex areas need to be dealt with more conscious interventions, somewhat deconstruction of queerness is required and the ideas that question fixed notions of heterosexual society indicate empirical enquiries. Today’s society seems more sensitive towards understanding the difficult emotions connected to objective sexuality and preferences - a person’s discomfort in accepting gender-based restrictions. Need of the hour is to ponder on the subtle yet significant questions like- What happens if one desires to experience life regardless of his/her gender? Why there is a contradiction on the part of how societies are preaching and practicing value systems which welcome idea of rainbow structure and individual freedom. Though many cultures have moved towards a more egalitarian social system over past centuries but still patriarchy has a strong influence on modern civilization especially in context of India. For improving life satisfaction and promoting happiness, there is need of a more aware society where one has the ability to choose circumstances of one’s life.

Keywords: Indian Mythology, Gender Dichotomy, Non-normative Sexual Identities, Transgression, Pandemic Time.

Introduction
A world which has moved beyond sheer survival instinct because of its ever-growing awareness towards quality of life is more thoughtful having a vision of better living. Factionist, genderization, majoritarianism, conditioning of mind for an order in society, role and power conflicts within social order, dominance of leadership shaping the opinions, meritocracy etc. are the things of past, we are a comparatively enlightened humanity today. The significance of freedom of opinions can be strongly felt on Social media platforms which are facilitating the voices of common masses on these related issues, giants like Instagram, National Geographic channel and others are actively supporting the humanity first and individual freedom expressions helping the mass sharing of common perceptions. Gender Conflict has been one of the critical issues in current era, especially in Indian society. Generally, from ancient times till today the world has been perceived in binary opposition which consign the social structure only in heteronormative ideal (the rigid notion of being a man or a woman, social practices of how a woman or man should behave,
With course of time, the Contemporary Postmodernist Indian English writers have started interrogating the authority, stereotypes, and sexiest values, challenging the foundations of the social practices that brace the old binary model of sex or gender. These writers, through their writings, shuffle the power hierarchy and reconsider these social practices, demulcenting the gender distinctions. The change of sex and gender reversal has been a widespread phenomenon in traditional and modern era and it also has an important place in the domain of Indian mythology and society. This study is based on contemporary literary text from the epic Mahabharata presented in the book The Pregnant King (2008) written by Devdutta Pattanik. It is a contemporary retelling of some tales of non-normative sexual identities and raises several questions which need to be pondered on like - What happens if one desires to experience life regardless of his/her gender? Should a deserving female be denied ruling because of her sex? Can a man, who willingly converts himself into a woman, is accepted as normal by the society? How men, who emotionally feel more like women, are treated? How does society respond, accepted, acknowledged or punished to such deflection from the normal?

It is as an attempt to reinterpret the gender and psychological issues which testifies unawareness of a double marginality, an inequality felt by the victims both in terms of gender and psyche. It redefines the roles and parameters of these underrated characters as a challenge in the society, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power and the status of gender dichotomy in present Indian society.

This paper defines -
The Prevalent Dichotomy

Sex and gender which are often considered as synonyms are in fact entirely different to each other. Sex refers to the biological aspects of an human which is determined by his anatomy, produced by chromosomes, hormones and their interactions while the other term gender defines social constructions which are related to behaviors and qualities related to the concept of fixed gender roles of masculinity and femininity. During the process of socialization, children are introduced to these gender roles typically linked to their biological sex which explain how they are expected to act and how they should behave. These roles are fixed before their birth only, based on social norms and standards. Like in most of the patriarchal culture the roles of males or boys are usually associated with strength, aggression and dominance. While females are restricted to calmness, patience, nurturing and subordinate roles. Being adamant to these roles shows the fulfillment of social expectations but the personal preference is ignored totally. This gender dichotomy also known as gender binaries is the classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of male and female only.

Only Heteronormative is Normal?

Heteronormative refers to a worldview that perceives heterosexuality as the normal/acceptable or preferred sexual orientation. Heteronormativity describes that gender and sex are natural binaries which are reinforced by social institutions and policies in advance.

Can Gender Be Fixed?

Transgendered is a wide term used for people whose gender identities are different from their sex (assigned at birth). A person who is male (sex assigned at birth) might not have same sense of self or internal experience of gender. Or a female can feel internally like male attributes as gender experiences. Transgendered males might feel strong emotional and
psychological connection to the feminine aspects internally and the same parallel connection can be felt by the transgender females. Thus, the social and cultural aspects of being a man or women are not that easy to be defined and understood.

**Gender Queerness**

The term ‘Queerness’ analyses and conceptualizes the existing imposing ideals of social norms and taxonomies. Queer Theory's overarching goal is to be sought out as a tool to deconstruct the existing monolithic ideals of social rules and rigid notions which do not sufficiently explain different attitudes, behaviors, or conditions of individual experiences. It analyzes the correlation between power distribution and identification while understanding the multifarious facets of oppression and privilege. According to Giffney Queer Theory is an applicable concept which provides a platform to explore these issues not in the rigid notion of an identity in the community. Queer as a wide term refers not only to the sexually deviant people but also include those who feel marginalized as a result of standard social practices. Thus according to Giffney it is a site of permanent becoming.

**Methodology**

For this study a systematic review of literature of ancient times *Mahabharata* and the latest research data, papers and trends are considered. Also the status quo and the differences of narrative analysis done in recent translations and retellings are also considered. By screening the titles, keywords and related areas a thorough study of online available material is also done. Also the interviews and feedback available in form of videos on the social sites were included to understand the recent trends accurately.

**Transgression in Gender Dichotomy**

By transgressing the seemingly fixed notions like sexuality and gender, queer theory exposes a revolutionary new way of analyzing human identity itself. Through the works of intellectual theories like post-structuralism and the theorists like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, the queer theory challenges heterosexuality and the fixed notions of sexuality and gender and analysis the human identity in a radical way. In her essay *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity* published in 1993 Judith Butler states that gender don’t ought to be only two. Such biased assumptions of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex and thus gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it only in this narrow perception.

The work raises the questions of gender dichotomy through the character of Shilavati “given a man’s head and a woman’s body” who had a desire and signs of intelligence to become a ruler. But being a victim of gender dichotomy, she was destined to be a wife, a mother, a caretaker but not a ruler. Whereas another character is Yuvanashva ‘a mother in man’s body’ who was forced to rule as a king only.

**A Woman with the Man’s Head**

Shilavati was the eldest daughter of Ahuka, king of Avanti. But inspite being a girl her dreams were quite opposite or queer of what was prescribed for a female by the society. She had the qualities of being a great ruler, but her father and the contemporary society thought it unfit for a female to rule despite of her qualities. On the other hand, Nabhaka, her younger brother, was destined to become a king, but he was least interested in becoming a king. He wanted to pursue music and arts instead of learning dharma shastra. His conflict of duty and desire is expressed by the questions he has raised,

"If my whole life has been decided for me, then why did Prajapati give me a..."

The pain of dreams crushed on the altar of society was unbearable for both. They knew that just as a man’s destiny was bound to his lineage, in the same way a woman’s destiny was bound to her body. Both were determined at birth and was immutable and they had to sacrifice their dreams for the sake of society. King Ahuka’s heart ached for his children. He found himself stucked in a queer situation. His son Nabhaka who did not want to be king and his daughter Shilavati who would not be allowed to be a king. They had to repay their debts whether they liked it or not according to their set roles in society. He told his wife about Shilavati,

“She thinks clearly. She thinks deep. Life has spewed out a twisted fate for my daughter, given her a man’s head and a woman’s body.” (Page 28)

When Prasenjit, husband of Shilvati died early, she got an opportunity to rule the kingdom. But everyone was stunned that how can a female rule!

“A man! How can a woman rule? It is like asking a man to bear children.” (Page 21)

The present scenario witness to the brilliance of women in politics time, and again.

There have been influential female political leaders like Sushma Swaraj, Sheila Dikshit, Soniya Gandhi, Mamta Banerjee, Jayalalita, Mayawati, Vasundhara Raje and many more who have contributed to the development of the country. Why can't women rule the world? The Patriarchy has always confined women to domestic roles and disallowed authority in the public domain. The lead positions in society, politics, religion or economic sector were and have been considered suitable for males only. How can such system allow Shilavati to rule? But while no other choice left, she was made the regent to the throne till her son was ready to rule. The deep roots of women's subordination in the patriarchal civilization are always supported by binary gender categories and roles. And anything other than these prescribed roles was taken as a threat or transgression to the society so were/are sanctioned, suppressed or threatened.

Queer theorist Michael Warner defines about these Social reflections that they are carried out in such a manner which tends to be creative, fragmentary, and defensive, and leaves us perpetually at a disadvantage. These utopian claims misled easily in support of these particular tactics. But still a lot of work remains to be done as the queer practices constantly raise the range and seriousness of the problems. Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, that queer struggles not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts.

As a ruler Shilavati took very effective steps to improve the economic and political status of Vallabhi. Her supervision earned her the respect and affirmation of all the elders of Vallabhi who at first had thought that she would only be a mute figurehead. Once when Shilavati took his seven-year-old son to meet her father in law Pruthalashva in the forest, he was very contented with her rule and complimented her that, “Men are foolish. We actually believe that just because someone has a moustache they make better kings than someone with breasts.” (Page 65)

But afterwards when his son Yuvanahva grew young they taunted and accused her that she had prevented her son from becoming king. Shilavati broke down on these accusations. She was brought in Vallabhi to be used and as soon as she served their purpose, they spit her out. Though she had been a great ruler, but her
gender had distanced her from her subjects,

“The people needed their king, their male king. Shilavati kept sobbing, feeling sorry for herself. Mandavya left her chamber in rage thinking he had misjudged her, she was made corrupt by power. She was a woman.” The Angirasa laughed at his thoughts and said – “He thinks a woman should respond differently to the corrupting influence of power” (Page 180)

Even after her death her life was recorded by Yama as a dutiful daughter, obedient wife and mother of Yuvanshva without considering her long and peaceful reign as a ruler. Being curious when Yuvanshva asked the ghosts that how did Yama describe his mother in his account book? They replied-

“As a dutiful daughter of Ahuka, loving sister of Nabhaka, obedient wife of Prasanjit and doting mother of Yuvanshva.”

“That’s it?” a deep pain gripped Yuvanshva’s heart. “No mention of her long and glorious reign.”

“No. That would make her a king and confuse Yama.”(page 206)

**King Yuvanasha: A Woman in Man’s Body**

King Yuvanasha on the other hand accidently drank a magical potion and became pregnant and gave birth to a son Mandhata. But being a male, he was forced to rule only. As a result, Yuvanashva painfully distances himself from his child. His entire life becomes a quandary of whether he should act like the mother or father or a king. The irony of the story is that the king who tried to be the epitome of manhood and upholder of Dharma longed till his last breath to be called ‘mother’ by his son. He fails to make sense of the rigid social constructions and norms spread around the human body in the form of only two gender roles - man or woman. Swinging in the two directions of perceiving himself as man or a woman, mother or a father or be a king, he had to submit to his duties as a king over his emotions and affections. He had to live a dual life between himself and the world. No one ever accepted his present reality or his personal self for the society and dharma. Even when his son came to know about this fact, he rejected Yuvanashva as a mother and brutally criticized him and left him alone there without showing any pity to his small but queer desire of calling him mother. This study through these characters raises the questions - What if one had to live as the opposite sex? If a man is forced to dress in frocks and makeup or a female is forced to wear shapeless clothing and not show emotions. They will feel uncomfortable, trapped in some stranger's body. Same queerness was felt by both the characters to behave according to gender, ignoring their ‘self’. The deep rooted patriarchy which don’t even let males cry can never let nurturing or motherhood normal for a male. In 2015, availing a two-month paternity leave by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was quiet shocking for most of the world, and in India it is still a matter of shock even today. India is still among the 90 out of the 187 countries in the world that do not have national policies for paternity leaves and many of them shy away from even availing such facilities. It is more about the mind set than the law. It serves to future the divide between man and women, especially when India needs it's people to step away from the traditional entrenchment and bifurcation of male and female's roles in society. Through this gender bending characters the instances of transsexual transformation of a man to a woman or from a woman to a man are placed forth. According to Foucault,” Sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather biological origins”.

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Why Reaching A Rainbow is so Complicated?

Demolishing authority and stereotypes these characters represent the overlooked disturbed tales which celebrate queerness concluding that gender is not an essence or a stable identity but is provisional and can never be demonstrated once and for all; they exist, as Judith Butler emphasis in her Gender Trouble, only so far as they are performed and re-performed. Being social being, human being wants stability and assurance of knowing their position in relation with others. When someone challenges the status quo of the society, this transgression is named as anti-social. It is important not to overlook the importance of individual's liberty that is willing to choose an alternative way of understanding the world. These gender stereotypes influence the mind of individuals in such manner that it dictates their future behaviour too. Therefore, anyone who has different opinion then these gender specific roles, they are subjected to ridicule if they emulate characteristics that are traditionally based on gender roles. Not only in cinema but advertisements and television shows can also seen promoting these toxic ideas. To think that women are the only victims of such pervasive attitudes is a gross misconception. It also affects a man's mental health, overall well-being and restricts their behaviour. Instead of teaching man to 'menup', cultivating these qualities could go a long way in raising males as more responsible and wholesome individuals. These gender stereotypes expect men also to fit into preconceived boxes of being the strong, resilient ones, sans emotions. Men who show the instincts to care and nurture are ridiculed. Though things are changing but still most people remain wedded to the ideas of traditional gender roles. These stereotypes gradually embed themselves in the impressionable minds of children from their birth only. Dividing them on basis of colours, the society stealthily teaches them gender dictum. The real self or identity is diluted in these preconceived notions and to societal expectations.

Covid Situation: Usher in Gender Equality

If we talk about the situations in present India after the Pandemic lockdown, a lot difference can be seen. The Covid-19 crisis could be seen as an opportunity to challenge socialdynamics in a way that benefits both woman and men, pointing to the need for a gender focused strategy in the Covid-19 response to mitigate the psychological and others effects of this pandemic. Not only the films but also television advertisements which are the most popular form of publicity, are full of such ads which shuffles these gender dichotomies. Now a would-be father can be seen cooking for the family, or a boy being taught how to wash cloths by a mother or man discussing about the ergonomic advantages of spin mops, can be seen. Though the change is not very devastating, yet a remarkable beginning can be seen. During the lockdown husbands, fathers, sons or brothers can be seen actively participating in domestic chores of cooking, cleaning or looking after the kids, ignoring the heteronormative roles of gender. The work from home strategy has normalized the household chores for man, who earlier thought it to be not cool to do or even discuss them. Though it is ironical to make the other sex (male) feel great or applaud for them to do their own work which females have been doing since ages as if it is an essential and normal thing for them like breathing or eating. But still any change or realization in the rigid dead ideals in the name of gender dichotomy is worth mentioning as they are bringing important changes. This pandemic might usher in an equality revolution at the homes of Indian society, changing the
gender equations. If continued this pandemic might result in more aware society free from gender influence. Similarly, the phrases like- “I am helping my wife” or “I am feeding my child” would become a normal statement not a matter of applaud for the males. It will also bring an unintended consequence that is the effect on the young minds who see their parents equally participating in responsibilities irrespective of gender. They will grow into more empathic, liberal beings breaking the long prevailing tragedy in the society. As Oscar wild has quoted that “All women become like their mothers that is their tragedy. No man does. That is his.”

Whatever the reasons may be, but the good thing is commencement of change. But this transgression is not that easy. There are many instances where the gender inequality has been intensified. While the social media has a flood of males working in kitchen and enjoying it, on the other hand there have been many cases of violence and sexual abuses against woman, which have intensified globally under lockdowns, excusing in the name of economic or pandemic stress. According to The World Bank research that because of pandemic more than 12 million Indians will be driven into poverty and women being unpaid or irregular workers are going to represent this poverty which can result in the feminization of income poverty. Without any better policies, this situation will only deepen the existing social and economic inequalities for Indian Women. Past researches show that domestic violence cases have risen tremendously because of lockdown fostering more tension, strain in the household over security, health and jobs. According to the report by organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), women perform nearly 6 hours of unpaid work each day, while men spend a paltry 52 minutes. The present situation has increased this burden as Indian man continues to not help them in household chores. As a result of neglecting these unjust practices, grave consequences are faced by the females in this stressful time. According to a survey by OXFAM India, horrible results were seen where 41% of participants accepted it to be normal to beat a woman if she fails to prepare a meal for the man and more shocking was that one out of three man thought it or to punish a female who fails to care for children. In the report 'Mind the Gap' defining the state of employment in India the social security of female workers is identified much lower than among male workers.

Conclusion

Talking in respect of 21st century's vision, global societies seem more heterogeneous in structure yet more accommodating providing a naturally conducive ambience in respect of harmonizing individual polarities and freedom. In India too, there seems to be some signs of narrowing the gender gaps, increased men's participation in housework and childcare in this pandemic time, but still a long route is left untraveled before they reach to this transgression. From the ancient times of Shilavati, mentioned in the pregnant king by Patnaik, till today females are hardly seen without the biased glasses of dictum. Such transgender identities are subjected to criticism in ancient time till now. Simply because their gender expression is different from the normative set patterns, they are forced to go through emotional trauma of open discouragement and severe victimization. The pain and depression they face is much higher than the norms which make it difficult for them to breath. With time the understanding towards gender role is developed which feels no harm with such transgression. The modern man has likely embraced the idea of gender equality. Their changing attitude towards normative
gender roles can be easily seen even in Indian houses. Modern man with his good education, financial independence has started understanding the gap on the domestic front, though dealing with the mentality of adult or aged men, is still a herculean task. The lockdown, in this sense has provided an opportunity to sensitively the males towards gender equality. Though this transgression of identities and gender role is not that much easy but is not that much impossible at the other hand. The need of the hour is to talk on this matter and understand it. This transgression is not for fighting with the man but to sensibly understanding both the sex and their necessity. This going off the rails is not concerned about 'being man' or 'being woman' but is about 'being human'. This lockdown has provided much opportunities to man to stay at home and observe how much the other sex has to work on the name of gender, while he has so much spare time that he has to search on internet, "How to kill time". Many men started helping their female members just to show their children that they are not a couch potato but a decent guy who loves and cares to help in the household work. But still this change is negligible. That is the reason why Judith Butler explaining the difference between biological sexuality and psychological gender explains that gender can't be fixed by birth, but is and can be created by a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance. These set expectations are fixed from birth. Even today there are still unwritten rules that are expected to not overstep. A female can debate and challenge the gender roles, can work outside the house but ultimately must compromise everything preserving her femininity, appearance, marriage, family honor and maternal duties. But this is not complete liberation, just few broken parts of patriarchy.

The transgression and its acceptance as normal will surely benefit everyone not just women and girls. It will also provide more chances of sound mental health, education and social protection. The need of the hour is to address gender equality and advance gender parity in education and society for these investments in qualitative human development programs that address these gender disparities and create equal opportunities should be strengthen only than the dream of progressive, healthy society will be achieved.

While a lot efforts and policies are developed to reduce gender inequality, ore research needs to be done in this area. There has always been a need of representing these thought process presenting forth a more abstract and fluent understanding of human bodies, beyond the flesh to rationale human existence and revisit the tangled area of mythology with a contemporary sensibility, to deconstruct the queerness, the ideas that question fixed notions of heterosexual society.

This study helps in understanding and uprooting social structures that confined individuals into normative gender roles as well as the discrimination against transgender (queer) people who are not fit for the patriarchy's insistence confined to binary categories on sex, gender identity or sexual orientation understanding the patriarchal roots of modern civilization also serves a broader social justice agenda, and more egregious versions of oppression. By transgressing seemingly fixed notions of sexuality and gender, it demonstrates a revolutionary way of analyzing individuality over society Masculinities and femininities are being made and remade as polarized species. It is high time to unlock the secrets of gender identity and solve the conflict between conservative and liberal values over gender inequalities.

This paper tries to show the association between gender dichotomy and its effect on mental health of males and
females. The household settings where gender inequality becomes insinuated in the cover of social life, traditions and conventions, which need to study in broader perspective of society, politics and mental health. The paper analysis that gender-dictum practices and lack of independence are interrelated to present mental health and raises a need of questioning the gender stereotypes and develop independent thinking and behaviour. Unities both man and woman believe these arrangements as unjust, in any form, it is unlikely that gender inequalities will disappear in less time. There is clearly demand of eradicating these gender disparities in this crucial time of pandemic for India to maintain its position as a global growth leader, more potential and effective efforts are required along with the attitudinal shift and education of gender equality from an early age. There is a need of a society which does not view its status based on black and white of dichotomy, but which welcomes the rainbows. A world where each human celebrates his/her real existence, what he/she is, access to equal opportunities to grow, study and prosper. The direction of further research should not be the area of conflict and power struggle but scope of harmonizing the minor individual freedom which is subtle. The emphasis should not be on labelling and bifurcations the queer behavior, rather we as an aware society must look carefully with unifying vision.

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