



EXPLORING THE STORY OF ILA THROUGH JUDITH BUTLER'S GENDER THEORY

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Abstract

The tale of Ila, also known as Ileshwar, presents a unique case of gender transformation and fluidity in Hindu mythology. While contemporary scholarship often references such narratives, few studies have examined of Ila's story through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing Devdutt Pattanaik's retellings of Ila in *The Pregnant King* (2008), *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales* (2014), and *Jaya* (2010), to argue that story constructs gender as a divine performance rather than a biological truth. Using a qualitative, interpretative methodology rooted in Butlerian theory, the paper explores themes of transformation, dual identity, and sacred recognition. The analysis reveals that Ila's myth subverts heteronormative binaries and offers an indigenous sacred model for non-binary gender expressions. This contributes to a broader understanding of queer identities by bridging Western theory with Eastern mythological traditions.

Keywords: Gender fluidity, performativity, Ila, Ileshwara, Judith Butler, Hindu mythology.

Introduction

The story of Ileshwar (also known as Ileshwara) is a lesser-known and intriguing tale from Indian mythological tradition, often overlooked in the main narratives of the Mahabharata. This story is primarily associated with regional folklore and is mentioned in Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An*



Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata, Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you, and The Pregnant King, where he shares many such tales that were not part of the mainstream of Mahabharata. The name “Ileshwar” can be broken down into ‘Ila’ and ‘Ishwara’ meaning the Lord of Ila, who is a unique figure in Hindu mythology with a gender-fluid nature. While there is growing academic interest in queer figures in Indian mythology, the specific case of Ila/Ileshwar remains underexplored through the lens of performativity theory. Most existing analyses focuses on more prominent figures like Shikhandi or Ardhanarishvara. However, Ila’s story presents a deeply cyclical and sacred vision of gender fluidity was once embraced within sacred cosmology. This paper argues that Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity can illuminate the religious and cultural significance of Ila’s shifting roles. Rather than viewing the transformation as metaphorical or incidental, the study interprets it as an example of divine performativity embedded in ritual and myth.

In *The Pregnant King*, Ileshwara, a deity reminiscent of Ila, is celebrated through a magnificent temple in Vallabhi, carved from red sandstone and adorned with intricate depictions of gods, monarchs, sages, nymphs, animals, mythical creatures, and more. This temple stands as a testament to the artisans’ vision of “an expression of God” (Pattanaik, 2008, p.10). The temple of Ileshwara had a significant form of worship. “On new moon nights the deity in the temple is an enchantress displaying fourteen symbols of womanhood” ... “On the full moon deity is an ascetic displaying fourteen symbols of manhood” (Pattanaik, 2008, p.14,15). Ileshwara mirrors the story of Prince Sudyumna, whose curse was rectified by Shiva making him embody both genders cyclically: a woman during the waning moon and a man during the waxing moon. In the book *Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you*, Prince Sudyumna who later got a name Ila, entered a forest where Shiva and Parvati were indulged in love making, and due to a spell Shiva cast to prevent intruders, he was transformed into a woman. His horse also turned into a mare. Unable to reverse the spell, Shiva altered it so that Sudyumna would be a woman when the moon waned and a man when the moon waxed (Pattanaik, 2014, p.126,127). In the book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, Budh’s birth is condemned as an ambiguous gender. Growing up feeling neither fully male nor female, Budh later fell in love with Ila, a former prince named Sudyumna, who also experienced fluid gender. Despite their unique identities, Budh and Ila married, both embodying



gender fluidity (Pattanaik, 2010, p.13). Then the later life of Ila is explained in the book *The Pregnant King*, Yuvanashva (the protagonist) learns the story of Bhangashvana (also known as Ila or Prince Sudyumna) during his pilgrimage. Ila's story, typically unheard, is shared by the bards with Yuvanashva after his renunciation and moved to the forest (Santhi, 2021). Ila, a prince with many wives and children, is transformed into a woman after entering the sacred Tarini grove. Shiva, unable to reverse the curse, grants Ila a dual form: a man during the waning moon. Ila's alternating gender created turmoil within his family, leading to conflicts, and ultimately the death of his sons. Grieving deeply, Ila seeks a solution from Yama, the god of death, who is forced to choose between restoring Ila's children who call him "mother" or "father". Unable to decide, Ila offers to sacrifice himself in their place, and Yama agrees. All of Ila's children are revived, showcasing Ila's deep love, sacrifice, and the unity of dual identities, inspiring future generations (Pattanaik, 2008, p.311-317).

Literature Review

The document titled "Transsexualism in Hindu Mythology" by Shiva Prakash Srinivasan & Sruti Chandrasekaran, explores the representation of transgender individuals in Hindu mythology, highlighting their historical acceptance compared to contemporary biases in India. The text discusses transformations, such as Arjuna becoming Brihannala and Ila's gender change, illustrating the fluidity of gender concepts in ancient texts. Srinivasan, S. P., & Chandrasekaran, S. (2020). Krishna G. Seshadri's article, "The Curious Case of Sudyumna: A Tale of Sex Reversal from the Bhagavata Purana", explores a mythological narrative through an endocrinological lens. The article delves into the character of Sudyumna examining the possibilities of endocrine disorders to explain the reported sex reversal and the author applies creative license to diagnose Sudyumna with a combination of plausible, yet rare, conditions. Seshadri, K. G. (2013). The article titled "The Genderfluid Deity" from Amar Chitra Katha explores the mythological narrative of Ila, a unique figure in Hindu mythology known for transitioning between genders. This story is rooted in the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*, delves into themes of gender fluidity and identity. (Amar Chitra Katha, n.d.)



The article “Deconstructing the Narrative and Normativity in Devdutt Pattanaik’s *“The Pregnant King”* (2008) by Santhi Krishna analyzes how Pattanaik subverts heteronormative sexuality in mythology by retelling lesser-known tales from the Mahabharata Santhi, K. (2021). The paper “Gender Renaissance: Uncovering Queerness in the Characters of Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Pregnant King* analyzes Pattanaik’s 2008 novel through a queer theoretical lens, highlighting the complexities of Gender Identity and fluidity in a conservative Vedic society. The document emphasizes that characters like Yuvanashva and Ileshwara are clear examples of androgyny Nair, L. (2021). The article “Queer Ideology - A Post colonial Literary Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Pregnant King*” explores gender transgression through a queer and post-colonial lens, emphasizing the cultural specificity of gender constructs Muthukrishnan, S., & Sunitha, V. (2023). The article “Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Pregnant King* as a Postmodern Mini Narrative” by Sharon Alice Christy & Beulah Jeyashree, is analyzed as a postmodern mini-narrative, uniquely interpreting elements from the Mahabharata. The article argues that the novel deviates from grand narratives by subverting traditional themes and structures, using a polyphonic narrative style. Sharon Alice Christy P., & Beulah Jeyashree R. (2023). Mruthula’s “I am a Mother Albeit a Man: A Matrifocal Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Pregnant King*.” – this paper analyzes Devdutt Pattanaik’s novel *The Pregnant King* through matrifocal lens, challenging traditional representations of motherhood in Indian mythology. The narrative centers on Yuvanashva, a king who becomes pregnant, exploring themes of gender fluidity and maternal identity.

The paper analyzes Devdutt Pattanaik’s novel *The Pregnant King* (2008), highlighting its exploration of gender identities and LGBTQ themes within the framework of Indian mythology Prashant P. Dharmadhikari, K. G. Joshi, & N. G. Bedekar College. (2019). The paper by Bhavani, K., & Prabhakar, A.A.J “Retelling Indian Mythology Through the Novels of Devdutt Pattanaik”, explores the retelling of Indian Mythology through the works of Devdutt Pattanaik, particularly focusing on his novels “Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata” and “Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana”. It argues that these retelling rejuvenate ancient epics, imparting moral and ethical lessons relevant to contemporary issues. Bhavani, K., & Prabhakar, A. A. J. (2021). Sakshi Mishra’s ‘Comparative Study of Devdutt Pattanaik’s “Jaya” (2010) and Chitra Banerjee’s “Palace of Illusion” (2008), examines two retellings of Mahabharata. The study



highlights how these differing narrative approaches enrich the understanding of gender dynamics, societal constructs, and the complexities of human nature within the epic, ultimately showcasing the enduring relevance of these stories in contemporary discourse. Mishra, S. (2024). The paper 'Imprints of Mythology in Devdutt Pattanaik's: Jaya- An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata' by Rochana Roy analyzes Devdutt Pattanaik's "Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata", emphasizing the significance of Indian mythology in contemporary society. The study advocates for embracing mythology to understand the world and its truth. Rochna, R. (2019).

Li He's paper, "The Construction of Gender: Judith Butler and Gender Performativity", examines Judith Butler's theory of gender and its impact on gender studies, contemporary political philosophy, and ethics. The paper aims to trace the development of Butler's theory of gender to fully grasp the dynamic process of her thought Li, He. (2017). The study by Raninta Salwa Prilia Ginano's "What is Gender Performativity?", explores the concept of gender performativity, as introduced by Judith Butler, to enhance anthropological understandings of gender Ginano, R. S. P. (2022). The article titled "Judith Butler on performativity and precarity: exploratory thoughts on gender and violence in India" by Annamma Joy, Russel Belk, and Rishi Bhardwaj, examines the vulnerability of women in India through the lenses of Judith Butler's theories of performativity and precarity. The authors argue that gender performativity- where individuals enact behaviors dictated by societal gender norms- significantly influences women's identities and agency in India. This performativity, coupled with precarity- a state of existence marked by unpredictability and insecurity- renders women vulnerable across all social strata, irrespective of class and caste. The study highlights that while lower-class and lower-caste women face heightened risks of sexual assault, women of higher social status are immune to such vulnerabilities. Joy, A., Belk, R., & Bhardwaj, R. (2015). The article titled "Gender Fluidity Reflected in Contemporary Society" by John A. Gosling, explores the evolving concept of gender fluidity and its expression in modern society. It examines how individuals who identify as queer challenge traditional binary gender identities, offering alternative perspectives that transcend conventional norms. (Gosling, 2018)

Although Indian mythology contains numerous references to gender-diverse and non-binary figures, such as narratives have often been overlooked or marginalized in mainstream



interpretations that emphasize rigid gender binaries. The story of Ila/Ileshwar, a profound gender-fluid character from Indian mythology, is one such tale that challenges traditional gender theory. This neglect creates a gap in understanding how ancient texts can reflect and affirm queer identities. The problem lies in the lack of scholarly engagement that bring modern theoretical frameworks- such as Judith Butler's concepts of gender performativity and fluidity- into a dialogue with culturally rich stories like that of Ila. The study addresses the gap by reinterpreting Ila's transformation and dual existence through Butler's lens revealing how gender is performed, socially constructed and fluid within the myth. In doing so, it not only uncovers the queer potential within Indian mythology but also reclaims space for non-binary narratives within religious and cultural traditions, bridging Eastern mythology with Western queer theory in a way that affirms the universality of gender diversity.

Despite the presence of numerous gender-diverse figures in ancient Indian mythology, mainstream interpretations of these texts have historically upheld rigid, binary understandings of gender. Stories like that of Ila/Ileshwar- which depict gender fluidity, transformation, and dual identity- are often sidelined or interpreted metaphorically, rather than explored for their profound insights into non-binary and queer experiences. In academic discourse, particularly within South Asian cultural studies, there remains a significant gap in applying contemporary gender theory- such as Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and fluidity- to these mythological narratives. The study bridges the gap between Western gender theory and Eastern mythological narratives by analyzing the story of Ila through the lens of gender performativity and fluid identity, the study offers a fresh, theoretically grounded interpretation that validates queer identities within Hindu mythology. By doing so, it challenges binary interpretations of gender in Indian mythology and demonstrates that performative and fluid understandings of gender are not just modern constructs but are deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions.

Despite scholarly engagement with Pattanaik's novels and Butler's gender theory, few works have centered the Ila/Ileshwar myth as a sacred articulation of performative gender. Much of the existing literature addresses gender transformation as psychological or symbolic, but this study focuses on the ritual and divine aspects of gender fluidity. By applying Butler's theory to Ila's myth, the paper



bridged contemporary queer theory with culturally embedded, sacred expressions of identity-marking a new path for decolonizing gender discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in queer theory and literary analysis. It applies Judith Butler's frameworks of gender performativity and fluid identity (Butler, 1990: 2004) to analyze the mythological narrative of Ila/Ileshwar as portrayed in Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008), *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014), and *Jaya* (2010). These texts were selected for their queer-inclusive interpretations of Hindu mythology, offering a rich narrative foundation for examining gender beyond binary norms. Through close textual reading, the study identifies recurring themes of gender transformation, dual identity, social recognition, and ritual performance. Butler's theories serve as a lens to interpret how these elements operate within the myth, revealing the culturally sacred construction of fluid gender identities. The analysis emphasizes symbolic, performative, and emotional dimensions rather than seeking empirical generalization.

Result & Discussion

Judith Butler, a pivotal figure in feminist theory, argues that gender is a social construct rather than an innate characteristic, as articulated in her influential work "Gender Trouble". Butler introduces the concept of "Gender Performativity", positing that gender identity is formed through repeated social performances rather than pre-existing identities. The study shows that Judith Butler's ideas about gender—especially the idea that gender is something done through actions and roles not something occurred by nature—can be clearly seen in the story of Ila/Ileshwar. In this myth, Ila changes between male and female, not because of a personal choice or inner feeling, but because of a divine event. Yet, in each form, Ila performs the roles expected of that gender: as a king, a father, a woman, a wife, and a mother. This supports Butler's idea that gender is created and understood through repeated actions, not fixed biology. What's more powerful is that the story does not shame Ila for these changes— instead, Ila is respected, even worshipped, showing that ancient Indian myths may have actually honored gender fluidity rather than rejected it. This means



that Indian mythology, when viewed through Butler's theory, can offer strong examples of how gender diversity has always existed and been meaningful—even sacred. So, the study states that Butler's theory helps to see how Indian myths, like the story of Ila, challenge modern-day ideas of fixed gender and offer older, more inclusive ways of thinking about identity.

The analysis of the Ila/Ileshwara myth through Judith Butler's gender theory reveals that ancient Indian mythology not only recognized between male and female, mirrored in the shifting symbols of Ileshwara, reflects Butler's idea that gender is performed and not biologically fixed. The myth presents gender diversity as sacred and essential to creation, rather than as deviation. This challenges modern binary understandings and offers future generations a spiritual framework that celebrates fluid identities as part of divine order.

Gender as performativity

Judith Butler (1990) proposes that gender is not a fixed trait but a continuous performance shaped by repeated acts. In the story of Ila, formerly Prince Sudyumna, gender is not an internal essence but an identity expressed through roles and behaviors – male during the waxing moon and female during the waning moon. When transformed back into a man, Ila resumes a masculine role, fathering children. Ila performs gender based on external divine forces, not innate identity, aligning with Butler's assertion that gender is socially constructed.

“Ila returned home and found that he was more male when the moon waxed and more female when the moon waned. On full-moon days he was a complete man, enjoying the company of his wives. On a new moon night, he was a woman, a beautiful woman that Budh, god of the planet Mercury, fell in love with. Ila fell in love with Budh too. They made love. Budh gave Ila children, both sons and daughters. They called Ila “mother”. The Devas asked Ila's father, Prithu, if he thought of Ila as son or daughter. Prithu replied “Ila is my child. Son or daughter, how does it matter? I love my child anyway.” So it was that Ila came to be both son and daughter, man and woman, husband and wife, father and mother.” (Pattanaik, 2008, pp.313,314).

Butler argues that gender is not something is, but something one does, an identity constituted through repeated performance. The story of Ila demonstrates how gender is not an innate essence



but a socially imposed performance, aligning closely with Butler's notion of gender performativity. Ila is not born a woman or chooses to become one; instead, their transformation occurs through an external force- Shiva's curse and is sustained through ritualistic and temporal cycles. Ila performs femininity as a wife and masculinity as a ruler and father, indicating that gender identity is constructed through roles and behaviors, not biology. The analysis reveals that Ila's alternating gender roles- performed as a king, husband, mother and wife- illustrate Butler's claim that gender is constituted to repeated performances rather than biological determinism. The divine recognition of Ila's fluid identity, including worship in a temple, suggests a cultural space for non-binary and sacred gender expressions in Hindi thought. The narrative also reflects social tensions around recognition and belonging, echoing Butler's concerns about the limits of livable gender identities.

Gender Fluidity: Beyond the Binary

After riding into a forest, Prince Sudyumna found out that he entered into a place where Shiva and Parvati were making love. Shiva had cast a spell that made everyone who entered the forest transform into a woman in order to prevent unjustified incursions by sages who would humiliate his spouse. Thus, the forest was full with does but not of bucks, lots of cow-elephants but not of bull-elephants and lots of peahens but not of peacocks, The spell affected both Sudyumna and his steed. His horse changed into a mare, and he transformed into a woman. Sudyumna pleaded Lord Shiva to undo the enchantment. "As spells cannot be reversed, only modified, Shiva decreed that the female Sudyumna, or Ila, would be a man when the moon waxed and a woman when the moon waned. Sudyumna had no choice but to accept his fate of shifting genders" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.126).

The narrative elevates gender fluidity to a divine and spiritual realm. Rather than being punished or pathologized for their transformation. This challenges notions of gender nonconformity as a subversive or marginal. In contrast, within this myth, dual-gender identity is celebrated and even sanctified that fluidity was once part of a sacred worldview.



Butler (2004) critiques the binary model of gender, advocating for a fluid understanding of identity. Ila's existence as both male and female, without permanently identifying with either, disrupts binary norms. Ila's fluidity is sacred and cyclical, reflecting an identity that moves across a spectrum rather than settling at one pole. Budh, a gender-ambiguous deity, falls in love with Ila, reinforcing a non-binary narrative of love and identity (Pattanaik, 2010, p.13).

The Transformation of Ileshwara: Fluidity as a sacred one

“On new moon nights the deity in the temple is an enchantress displaying fourteen symbols of womanhood, Red sari, unbound hair, bangles, nose rings, pots, parrots, sugarcane. As the moon starts to wax, each symbol of womanhood is replaced by a symbol of manhood, one each day. On the first day, the unbound hair is replaced by a curled mustache. The next day the red sari gives way for a white dhoti. Then the pot is removed and the bow put in its place. Gradually the parrot becomes the peacock, the sugarcane becomes the spear, turmeric becomes ash, so that on the full moon when only men enter the temple, the deity is an ascetic displaying fourteen symbols of manhood. Ileshwara makes men fathers. Ileshwari makes women mothers.” (Pattanaik, 2008, p.14,15).

At the temple of Ileshwara in Vallabhi, the divine does not remain static; it flows, like time, like moonlight. On new moon nights, the deity manifests as Ileshwari, the enchantress- a radiant presence adorned with fourteen symbols of womanhood: a red sari rusting like fire, unbound hair cascading like rivers, shimmering bangles singing of joy, nose-rings that glint like the moon, and offerings of pots, parrots, sugarcane, and turmeric. Each object is not mere ornament, but a sacred mark of fertility, desire, nurture and life. As the moon begins to wax, transformation begins- not in haste, but in reverence. Day by day, the symbols shift: unbound hair gives way to a curled mustache, the sari becomes a dhoti, the pot is replaced by a bow, and the parrot becomes a peacock. Sugarcane hardens into a spear, turmeric becomes sacred ash, until the full moon, the deity is wholly Ileshwara- an ascetic, powerful and silent, embodying all fourteen symbols of manhood.

Ileshwara makes men fathers; Ileshwari makes women mothers. But more than creators of life, they are expressions of balance- a divine acknowledgment that gender is not fixed, but cyclical



and cosmic. In a world that insists on boundaries, the temple teaches fluidity. It reminds us that divinity embraces change, and that creation itself is born from the interplay of opposites. In this sacred space, gender is a spectrum, not sentence, and every phase of the moon is a phase of the self. Worship here is not only an offering to God, but a recognition of the shifting god within.

The story and symbolism of Ileshwara offer a profound and sacred lens through which gender fluidity is not merely accepted but celebrated as divine. Through the shifting forms of Ileshwari and Ileshwara, adorned alternately with the symbols of femininity and masculinity in harmony with lunar cycle, the myth communicates that gender is not fixed but fluid- cyclical like the moon, sacred like the temple, and essential to the rhythm of life itself. This transformation is more than ritual; it is an embodiment of cosmic balance and a reverent acknowledgement that both motherhood and fatherhood emerge from the same divine source. By placing gender transformation at the heart of divinity, the myth does not view gender diversity as unnatural or marginal, but as central to creation and continuity. Ileshwara becomes both god and goddess, ascetic and enchantress, father and mother- symbolizing that fertility, life, and spiritual power flow through gender diversity, not in spite of it.

Tension Between Recognition and identity

Ila's duality caused great confusion and envy among his family and subjects, ultimately leading to conflicts where his sons fought and killed each other. Devasted by the loss, Ila grieved for twenty-one-days, half as a mother and half as a father and one as a parent. Prajapati, (Ila's father) moved by Ila's suffering, instructed Yama, the god of death, to restore the children. However, Yama insisted that cosmic balance required only group to return: the children who called Ila 'mother' or the children who called Ila 'father'. The sages advised Yama to restore all the children, but Yama demanded a sacrifice in return. Ila determined to save both groups of children, offered himself as a sacrifice. Ila words, "Take me in their place in the land of the death" (Pattanaik, 2008, pp. 316).

As Butler (2004) discusses the pain of not being recognized within existing gender frameworks. Ila's children, unsure whether to call their parent "mother" or "father", reflect the social and emotional strain of existing beyond the binary. Ila's eventual sacrifice – offering their life to save



their children – symbolizes the cost of inhabiting an identity that defies normative categorization. This tension illustrates the pain that can accompany non-binary identities in rigidly gendered societies. Butler emphasizes the importance of being recognized within cultural frameworks of identity. Ila's inability to conform to a single parental identity leads to deep personal grief, culminating in a self-sacrificial act to restore harmony. Ila's dual roles cause familial tension, especially when their children struggle with what to call their parent: mother or father. This emotional conflict underscores the societal difficulty in accommodating non-binary or fluid identities.

Disruption of Heteronormativity

According to Butler (1990), heteronormativity enforces a rigid alignment between sex, gender, desire. Ila's narrative challenges this norm. Rather than reversing the spell on Ila, Shiva blesses them with cyclical duality, framing gender transformation as sacred rather than deviant (Pattanaik, 2008, p.10). Their transformation into a woman and subsequent marriage to Budh illustrate a divine same-sex union that questions the idea of "natural" heterosexuality.

"One day, Budh, lord of the planet Mercury, descended from the sky seated on a strange creature called Yali ... and expressed his desire to be Ila's husband". Budh was cursed to be born as a intermediate gender, "Neither a man nor a woman you shall be, So it came to pass: Sudyumna who was both man and woman married Budh who was neither man or woman. When Sudyumna turned man, Budh was his wife and when Sudyumna turned woman, Budh was his husband" (Pattanaik, 2014, p.126,127).

The love story between Ila and Budh, both gender-fluid or non-binary beings subverts traditional heteronormative frameworks. Rather than rejecting such a union, the myth validates it, thereby queering not only gender but also romance and lineage. The myth implicitly critiques the assumption that legitimate love or reproduction must emerge from a binary male-female union.



Myth as Queer Theory

Myth often serves as mirrors of social norms, and Butler encouraged us to reinterpret these narratives to reveal their queer dimensions. Ila/Ileshwar is worshipped in a temple. The temple of Ileshwar, built in their honor, stands as a symbol of sacred queer identity- a divine figure embodying both male and female, challenging the “naturalness” of binary gender roles. The temple of Ileshwar attracts devotees seeking for child. Even the bard says “If Ileshwara wishes mangoes can grow on banyan trees and eunuchs can father sons” (Pattanaik, 2008, p.11,12). Even they had a pattern for visiting the God to seek blessings.

“men on full moon days and women on new moon nights, men dressed in white, women in red, men with garlands of white dhatura flowers and women with garlands of red jabakusuma flowers” (Pattanaik, 2008, p.12).

The narrative positions gender variance within the divine order, offering a powerful model for queer theology. Ileshwar’s temple stands as a monument to duality, and the myth invites a rethinking of Indian mythology as inherently queer-inclusive. Butler’s theory, applied here, helps reclaim and reinterpret these myths as active tools for understanding and validating fluid identities in both past and present contexts.

The myth, deeply embedded in the sacred geography of Vallabhi, offers a powerful model for inclusive worship. It opens space for future generations to see themselves reflected in divinity, especially those who live beyond the boundaries of binary gender. The temple becomes more than a place of devotion- it becomes a space of validation, where sacredness is not confined by gender but expressed through its fluidity. In honoring Ileshwara/Ileshwari, that inherit a spiritual framework that embraces transformation, celebrates difference, and sanctifies the entire spectrum of human identity. The myth, therefore, is not a relic of the past, but a timeless call to recognize and revere the divine in all forms- male, female, and everything in between.

The analysis reveals that Ila’s alternating gender roles- performed as a king, husband, mother and wife- illustrate Butler’s claim that gender is constituted to repeated performances rather than biological determinism. The divine recognition of Ila’s fluid identity, including worship in a



temple, suggests a cultural space for non-binary and sacred gender expressions in Hindi thought. The narrative also reflects social tensions around recognition and belonging, echoing Butler's concerns about the limits of livable gender identities.

Conclusion

The story of Ila/Ileshwar vividly illustrates Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance, not essence. Ila's transformation from prince to mother to mother, and from ruler to wife, resists fixed gender categories and instead reveals identity as fluid, sacred, and cyclical. What distinguishes this narrative is not merely its portrayal of gender change, but its theological context- Ila is reversed, not rejected. Through Devdutt Pattanaik's retellings, we see how Hindu mythology preserves models of gender that transcend binaries and affirm diverse identities. By bringing Butlerian theory into dialogue with these sacred myths, the study challenges the notion that queer theory is inherently modern or secular. Instead, it demonstrates that fluid identities have long been part of divine storytelling and cultural practice. Future research could further explore similar figures- Shikhandi, Mohini, Ardhanarishvara- to map a more comprehensive, queer-inclusive reading of Indian mythology.

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