



The Sacred In-Between: Hybridity and Androgyny in *the Pregnant King*

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL4-Mar26-ES-008

Subject: English Studies

Received: 18.12.2025

Accepted: 08.01.2026

Published: 17.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bjisi.v10si4.26.Mar008

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Abstract

The Pregnant King (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik presents the themes of gender, divinity, and social identity by centering around the story of King Yuvanashva whose unintended pregnancy threatens the social order that he is supposed to protect. This paper discusses the novel in terms of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the third space, which views identity and culture as a hybrid, fluid and negotiated space. Beyond the Westernization of gender performativity, this paper places the transformation of Yuvanashva in a marginal zone of cultural and religious crossbreeding, in which dichotomous differences between male and female gives way to fruitful ambivalence. By reprocessing the incidents of Indian mythology in the context of a modern narrative, the novel itself is a hybrid discourse, the transfer of sacred tradition into the current issues of identity, morality, and embodiment. This paper discusses that *The Pregnant King* constitutes body and narrative as *Third Spaces: places of negotiating meaning and conflicting truths*. Yuvanashva experiences androgyny, which comes to represent Bhabha's notion of in-betweenness and a revival of indigenous pluralities that patriarchal epistemologies have worked to suppress. By exploring intersections between myth and modernity, ritual and transgression, Pattanaik demonstrates the so-called sacred in-between as a metaphor of the negotiation with one's own self which is never-ending according to the Indian cosmology. Ultimately, the novel alters the meaning of hybridity as the spirit of human and divine life; in which contradiction itself becomes sacred and identity is a constant becoming.

Keywords: third space, hybridity, liminality, androgyny, cultural negotiation

Introduction

Androgyny occupies a complex position within both mythic and theoretical discourse, at once a symbol of divine wholeness and a challenge to social intelligibility. The androgynous figure in Indian mythology is not a deviant, but a symbol of the cosmic balance, the unity of masculine and feminine forces. The iconic figure of this equilibrium is Ardhanarishvara, the embodiment of Shiva and

Parvati: even the creation itself relies on the unity of seemingly opposite things. Androgyny in Hindu myth, as Mohapatra, Panigrahi, and Behura note, "androgyny in Hindu myth is not subversion but equilibrium; it represents a state where the self transcends the binaries that structure worldly experience" (Mohapatra, Panigrahi, and Behura 2019).



The Pregnant King (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik revises this metaphysical tradition in a contemporary perspective. The novel draws from *Mahabharata* and narrates how King Yuvanashva accidentally consumes a fertility potion that was supposed to be consumed by his queens and gets pregnant. The occurrence initiates a profound reflection about identity, desire and dharma, turning myth into a discourse of the in-between- the sacred and the social, the biological and the symbolic, the places where the two constantly collide. “They call me King,” Yuvanashva laments, “but I am also Mother. What am I supposed to be?” (Pattanaik 2008). His question captures the anguish and insight of inhabiting what Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha 1994) terms the *Third Space of enunciation*, the zone of meaning that exists between fixed identities.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that “it is that Third Space... which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (p. 37). It is not essence that creates identity, therefore, but a process of negotiation, a process of contradiction and rearticulation. This concept of hybridity as an interstitial process provides a useful way of interpreting *The Pregnant King*. The novel itself enacts what Bhabha calls “the temporality of cultural difference”, where meaning emerges through continual translation rather than permanence.

The majority of the previous interpretations of the text have been based on the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler (1990) that considers gender as a repetitive practice that is maintained by societal conventions. This paper argues that Bhabha’s hybridity transcends the narrowness of performativity in its emphasis on performance to look at how identity is negotiated on the epistemological level. When Butler unveils the instability of gender, According to Bhabha, “The intervention of the Third Space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority” (Bhabha 1994). It is the body of Yuvanashva which turns out to be this place of negotiation, a sacred one in which kingship and

motherhood cohabit redefining the grammar of gender and power.

Reddy (2020) similarly notes that “the androgynous figure embodies dialogic tension, revealing identity as an ongoing translation rather than a fixed state.” Yuvanashva’s pregnancy thus reconfigures reproduction and sovereignty, suggesting that the sacred resides in *becoming* rather than *being*. The myths of Ila and Shikhandi, and others that Pattanaik imparts support this point: each of the retellings is a performance of what Bhabha refers to as performative translation (Bhabha 1994), a translation of inherited symbols into languages of new knowledge. The hybrid nature of the novel, the scripture as an oral resonance, and the analysis of the modern fiction, is the Third Space itself.

The Pregnant King and Bhabha’s theory converge on the principle that truth and identity are hybrid constructions. As Bhabha observes, “the interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 1994). Pattanaik’s narrative embodies this interstitial passage: divinity arises not from purity but from coexistence, from the sacred tension between man and woman, law and compassion. Yuvanashva’s experience reveals hybridity and the divine art of contradiction, a condition of holiness where meaning is always born, made and lived.

Discussion

Negotiating the In-Between: Hybridity, Ambivalence, and Cultural Translation

The idea of Third Space as a negotiation between fixed systems of meaning redefines identity as fluid and a negotiated construct. Bhabha states, “It is that Third Space, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (p. 37). The creative tension that enables new meanings is called hybridity by Bhabha. The cultural hybridity process yields something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new field of negotiation of meaning and representation



(1994, p. 113). Instead of making opposites come together, hybridity creates meaning by ambivalence and interaction, and contradiction in itself is a process of creation.

The concept of translation by Bhabha explains the working of this process in the mythic and literary discourse. He asserts that translation is the performative character of cultural communication, which generates hybridity through articulation of the in-between (1994, p. 228). This logic of renewal is exactly the way myths work, every retelling redefines inherited cosmologies to answer new ethical and cultural situations. According to Sreedharan (2021), “Mythic retelling performs the labor of translation, transforming inherited cosmologies into languages of contemporary identity.” Similarly, Singh (2022) describes myth as “a cultural palimpsest where memory and imagination overlap, generating meanings that are neither timeless nor transient but continually renewed.”

Within this framework, Devdutt Pattanaik’s *The Pregnant King* becomes a text that performs hybridity both thematically and structurally. By reworking ancient narratives within a modern idiom, Pattanaik enacts what Bhabha calls “the interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (1994, p. 4)—a discursive space that “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.” His narrative fuses myth, philosophy, and ethics in an open dialogue rather than a closed synthesis.

In this context, *The Pregnant King* serves as a text which practices hybridity in the thematic and structural levels. The novel employs myth, philosophy and ethics in an open-ended conversation instead of a closed synthesis. *The Pregnant King* can be said to be a performance of the theory of The Third Space by Bhabha, whereby the sacred and the human, masculinity and motherhood are in an active tension. In this light, hybridity becomes a sacred negotiation of opposites which makes myth a living dialogue.

Embodied Hybridity: Androgyny and the Sacred In-Between in *The Pregnant King*

The Pregnant King transforms Third Space into embodied experience. Gender, divinity, and morality collide and intersect at the body of Yuvanashva. Devdutt Pattanaik hybridizes Yuvanashva through his conception, as he is in-between, the state between cultures that is defined as the space that bears the burden of cultural meaning (Bhabha 1994). The unnatural state of the king draws a breakdown of established conceptions of masculinity and power, exposing identity to be a constant negotiation as opposed to being an inevitability.

Yuvanashva’s lament, “They call me King, but I am also Mother. What am I supposed to be?” (Pattanaik 2008), captures what Bhabha refers to as temporality of *cultural difference* (Bhabha 1994). It is the rearticulation of meaning through time. His query is not purely existential but rather epistemological, how to live in contradiction with no answer. As Sharma observes, “Androgyny in myth functions as an epistemic condition, destabilizing hierarchy and enabling a vision of coexistence” (Sharma 2020). The misery of Yuvanashva becomes revelatory, he is a hybridity as a divine becoming, in which divinity is a tension and no longer transcendence.

Pattanaik draws on Hindu mythology, where androgyny is a sign of balance and not deviation. As Mohapatra, Panigrahi, and Behura (2019) note, “Hindu androgyny locates divinity not in the transcendence of opposites but in their embodied coexistence” (Mohapatra, Panigrahi, and Behura 2019). This state of cosmic balance is made human and fallible in Yuvanashva. His hybrid body is also characterized by fighting and self-doubt, unlike the peaceful union of Shiva and Parvati. But this flaw is just what renders his transformation significant. His pregnancy redefines *dharma* as interpretive and relational which is less of a fixed law than a continuous act of negotiation between competing truths.

Bhabha’s insight that “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable (Bhabha 1994), is the direct reflection of the metamorphosis of



Yuvanashva. His pregnancy does not fit with either masculinity or motherhood, rather it forms a new ontology in which they coexist. According to Reddy (2020), the mythic androgyne is an act of dialogic space where identity and desire are reconstituted over and over. It is this dialogic space that this king makes his body this performative translation of categories that seemed impossible to reconcile. This experience illustrates the so-called performative nature of translation as referred to by Bhabha because, in his existence, his being actualizes the in-between and does not abolish the boundaries of it.

The stories of Ila and Shikhandi are other indicators of hybridity as religious bargaining. Ila, alternately male and female by divine will, embodies identity as cyclical and dynamic. Their transformation is the implementation of the temporality of the in-between and selfhood is rhythmic rather than being static. As Sreedharan states, “Fluid bodies in myth transform identity into narrative motion, redefining being as becoming” (Sreedharan 2021). The hybridity of Ila is a continuum of transformation that is an endless unending oscillation of selves that reject closure. Shikhandi, born female and later made male to fulfil destiny stretches the concept of hybridity to the mortal world. Their existence questions *dharma* as an absolute and reframes righteousness as context-dependent. Singh describes such figures as “liminal vessels of meaning, where binaries lose rigidity and yield to relational truth” (Singh 2022).

Yuvanashva, Ila and Shikhandi together represent a theology of hybridity - three forms of the sacred in-between. Yuvanashva is a hybridity as existential revelation, Ila is fluidity of time, and Shikhandi is transformation of morality. All of them disrupt the logic of purity which organises the patriarchy as well as metaphysics and demonstrates hybridity as the principle by which the divinity appears in human shape. The vision is supported by the narrative style used in Pattanaik: the combination of oral rhythm characteristic of the epic narrative and the interiority of the modern fiction, this narrative does the hybridity it talks about. As Sreedharan notes, “Pattanaik’s prose mediates between collective

cosmology and individual consciousness, fusing oral tradition with modern self-reflection” (Sreedharan 2021).

The Pregnant King employs Bhabha’s claim that “hybridity is the sign of the productivity of meaning” (Bhabha 1994). Yuvanashva’s body, like Ila’s and Shikhandi’s, becomes a text of continual translation, a space where contradiction births knowledge. As Sharma (2020) writes, “The hybrid body becomes the moral text through which the divine articulates plurality.” In *The Pregnant King*, hybridity is neither subversion nor anomaly, it is ontological divinity, the process by which divinity and humanity are in unending conversation. *The Pregnant King* transforms myth into a meditation on the sacred in-between, revealing that meaning, like life itself, is generated through negotiation rather than resolution. Hybridity, as it is affirmed by both Bhabha and Pattanaik is not a condition to overcome, but a fact to live peacefully, a constant becoming where divine and human do not have hierarchy.

Conclusion

The central character of *The Pregnant King* Yuvanashva, whose body emerges as the living enactment of the Third Space, a place where meaning is created out of negotiation instead of creation. The pregnancy of Yuvanashva is not merely a form of breaking the rules of gender; it is a philosophical fulfilment of hybridity, in which, the act of identity is undertaken as translation. The in-betweenness of his existence is summarized in his lament, “They call me King, but I am also Mother” (Pattanaik 2008) the continuous creation of a consciousness that is not unified and divided, but rather recreated through experience. Bhabha’s formulation that “the interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 1994) illuminates Yuvanashva’s predicament. His transformation displaces the symbolic structures of kingship, patriarchy, and divine order, exposing the fluidity of all that appears absolute. Within him, the masculine and maternal coexist without resolution,



generating a sacred ambivalence that refuses containment. His body thus becomes “the space that carries the burden of cultural meaning” (Bhabha 1994), a vessel through which contradiction attains revelation. Yuvanashva’s journey is not toward resolution but toward recognition that the self is not unique and fixed but is being made in translation. His experience is dramatized in such a way that it is what Bhabha calls the performative nature of cultural communication whereby every articulation; corporal, emotional, or spiritual, generates hybridity through uniting opposites. This act of translating, of making the biological metaphysical, the personal universal, is done in the body of Yuvanashva, through pregnancy. In this sense, *The Pregnant King* envisions hybridity as the very condition of divinity. Yuvanashva’s liminality mirrors the cosmos itself which is endlessly cyclical, inclusive, and self-renewing. His suffering is not tragedy but epistemic awakening, a recognition that truth and identity exist only in motion, never in purity. When his dual-self breaks down the boundaries between man and mother, king and nurturer, human and divine, he is the embodiment of Third Space. Yuvanashva tells of the greatest lesson of the novel: the sacred does not exist outside contradiction but inside. To be a dweller of the hybridity means to engage the creative process of being coming to be in the Third Space in which the difference is a divinity.

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