

REVIEW ON DEVDUTT PATTANAİK'S WORK: *THE PREGNANT KING AND SATI SAVITRI*

Livish¹

Department of English,
Faculty of Arts and Humanities,
The ICFAI University, Raipur

Shubhra Tiwari²

Department of English,
Faculty of Arts and Humanities,
The ICFAI University, Raipur

Submitted: 08-10-2025

Accepted: 17-11-2025

Published: 24-11-2025

ABSTRACT

Devdutt Pattanaik is an internationally acclaimed Indian mythologist and author, known for his creative re-imagining of Hindu mythology from a modern perspective and for successfully weaving age-old stories into contemporary social observations and critiques. This research paper examines two of the most important works written by him: the absorbing works *The Pregnant King*, published in 2008, which explores gender fluidity and dharma, and *Sati Savitri*, published in 2024, a collection of myths curated by him from a feminist point of view to debunk deep-rooted patriarchal traditions. It examines closely the summaries, thematic dissections, and insightfully comparative discussions that reveal the manner in which Pattanaik engages in the discourses of gender, questions of identity, and agency in the infinite matrix of Indian mythology.

Apparently, the work *The Pregnant King* upsets traditional notions of gender roles, but actually it subsumes them, offering a subtle critique of gender fluidity. On the other hand, *Sati Savitri* overtly upholds women's intrinsic agency as a dynamic cultural factor, thereby fuelling important discussions about the position of women and their empowerment within mythological narratives. Drawing from a wide array of scholarly critiques and reviews, this analysis shall underline Pattanaik's progressive trajectory toward a more overt feminism, emphasizing the crucial role mythology plays in shedding light on and engaging with contemporary discourses of gender.

Keywords: Patriarchy, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Feminism, *Sati Savitri*, Empowered.

This is an open access article under the creative commons license
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>



INTRODUCTION

Devdutt Pattanaik is a highly acclaimed and internationally known author, writer, columnist, and public intellectual from Mumbai, India, and is considered an asset in the field of 'Indian Mythology.' His critical delve into Indian mythology captures not just the essence of Indian customs, rituals, traditions, and ways of life but also helps to point out their relevance in modern times. He thereby creates the distinct art of weaving ancient stories into present-day experiences that strike a chord with today's generation. Pattanaik's manner of telling is pluralistic and exploratory; it invites readers on a deeper journey across time and space. There are emotionally and socially complicated female main characters who defy stereotypical thinking. They are at the center of his work. He portrays women not just as appendages to male heroes but as thinkers, strategists, rebels, and leaders in their own right. Women are moral guiding stars, appealing for social justice and equality in an ever-changing world. In his narratives, Pattanaik depicts the different roles that women have played throughout history and allows readers a new perspective on their roles and importance. In other words, Devdutt Pattanaik's works are not mere narrations, but act as a bridge between the past and the present. He invites his

readers to ponder the eternal wisdom preserved in Indian mythology and its significance to present society. His search for feminine characters as strong and independent one's challenges conventional telling, thereby enriching our understanding of mythological tales and how they continue to influence our lives.

Devdutt Pattanaik is a highly acclaimed author and mythologist who has been widely recognized for his remarkable ability to explain and interpret complex Hindu myths, rituals, and philosophies, interspersing them with perspectives drawn from other disciplines such as management, psychology, and gender studies. His vast corpus of work includes a series of more than fifty enlightening books, in which he deftly reinterprets and rejuvenates age-old epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to explain some eternal human dilemmas that are felt across generations. One of his noted works, the novel *The Pregnant King*, published for the first time in 2008, is a landmark marking a transition in his career when he tries his hand at fiction. He integrated a lesser-known tale from the *Mahabharata* into a compelling examination of themes surrounding parenthood and identity. This strong narrative is replete with insight to take readers on a thoughtful journey of poignant reflections on these fundamental attributes of the human experience.

On the other hand, Pattanaik's work *Sati Savitri*, published in 2024, represents a rather different yet no less fascinating collection of "untold" stories from the weft of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. Not only does it point to the telling and retelling of many of these often-overlooked tales, but also, it acts as a beacon to re-examine the role of feminism within the context of Indian folklore, repositioning it essentially as an inherent and continuous strand that has been woven into the tapestry of Indian cultural history, rather than something foreign and borrowed from the West. By giving these stories a new perspective, Pattanaik carries on his tradition of questioning conventional views and invites his readers to re-assess these stories, along with their deeper appreciation for complexities and nuances hidden within the age-old tales.

He does not confine femininity to a fixed dimension or rigid parameters of tradition or novelty but treats it as a fluid, versatile phenomenon. Characters like Sita and Draupadi in Indian epics are re-introduced, not as passive sufferers of destiny but as intelligent beings, each having their codes of ethical conduct and spiritual depth. His explanation compels readers to take another look at the roles and challenges in the patriarchal narrative that have mounted in these stories across different eras and generations. By humanizing mythological women, revealing their autonomy even within conventional marriages and crafting a domestic framework, Pattanaik crafts a compelling vision of feminism rooted in cultural continuity and not just disarrangement.

Most of his works demonstrate the importance of gender and empowerment concerns within traditional narratives. His narrative is essentially hinged on empowered womanhood through the invocation of figures such as Shilavati in *The Pregnant King* and Savitri in *Sati Savitri*-women representing courage, wisdom, and agency. They break the barriers of traditional gender roles and question societal expectations. Pattanaik brings out the layered nature of these characters, making them thoughtful, ethical, and emotionally immersed in their stories. His retellings are actually modern feminist reinterpretations based on India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage. He connects ancient mythology to modern debates on gender. Thus, he is a contributor to the broader current debate on feminist identity and representation.

Empowered Womanhood: A Mythological Framework

The idea that women's empowerment can take many forms and it need not be strictly confined to social activism and limited only to political revolutions or some sort of violent conflict with the patriarchal structure, is something that Pattanaik's work constantly articulates. Empowerment lies within the inner virtues of allegiance, intellectual acumen, spiritual enlightenment, and emotional tenacity. The idea of womanhood, as espoused by Pattanaik, is neither confrontational nor reactionary; it lies deep down, essentially in its spiritual and ethical aspects. In the mythological

retellings of Devdutt Pattanaik, women have empowered qualities not because of divine grants or serendipity but lived through experience and personal choice.

The Pregnant King - An Overview and Analysis

Plot Summary

The Pregnant King by Devdutt Pattanaik dwells on the interesting story of Yuvanashva, the king of Vallabhi, who is faced with an uphill task to ensure that his lineage does not get disrupted due to the absence of an heir. His distress makes him seek help from the sages Yaja and Upayaja, when an unexpected turn of events occurs in the form of his unknowingly drinking a magical elixir prepared for his queen, leading to the miraculous pregnancy of Yuvanashva, which eventually sees Mandhata being born to him - a situation that catapults him into the complexities of fatherhood and motherhood. As the story unfolds, we come across Yuvanashva's deep desire to take care of his child with much affection. Besides, the story intertwines several subplots, which unfold gender prejudice and fluid identities within ancient Indian society. The work relates same-sex relations, gender transformation, and the hazy boundary between masculinity and femininity through the tales of the lives of Shilavati, Somvat, Sumedha, Sthunakarna, Prince Shikhandi, and Arjuna. These wove their way through a multitude of sub-stories to raise profound reflections on the meaning of dharma and its ever-shifting nature, against the background of the epic Kurukshetra War. *The Pregnant King* is thus the story that challenges traditional concepts of gender and parenthood, inviting readers to reflect upon the richness of human experience and the richness of moral imperatives.

Thematic analysis

Devdutt Pattanaik delves deep into the concept of gender fluidity through his exploration of pregnancy as a metaphor for discussing issues related to blurred parental roles and the fluidity of the dharma. The character of Yuvanashva sparks debate regarding the clash between biological sex and cultural concepts of gender, begging the question of whether the experience of motherhood challenges conventional expectations of masculinity. Even as the story incorporates transgender elements, such as the transformation of Sthunakarna, it underlines the inherent queerness in Hindu mythology, pointing towards theories of queerness in the contemporary world. Critics hail Pattanaik's approach as a "counter-discourse" effective in dismantling the binary constructs, especially in its celebration of maternal instincts across all genders. More poignantly, the novel is a commentary on the oppression forced upon individuals by societal mores in the form of rigid ethical codes that marginalize them for failing to fall within the binary divide of male and female—a reality that is well representative of the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community of today in its fight for acceptance and equality.

Upon closer reading, however, it becomes clear that stereotyping is inherently part of the text. Using a postcolonial approach, this paper argues that Yuvanashva's unconventional pregnancy at first challenged the norm but was finally made object-like by the end as his adoption of feminine features diminished his agency in losing his royal powers to rule, free speech, and his masculinity too, putting him into a state of invisibility symbolizing womanhood as subservient and passive; further, the three queens Simantini, Pulomi, and Keshini were objects of reproduction and were blamed for their infertility. These character roles are shown as envious and compliant, reinforcing their objectification; further, queer characters uphold traditional values without ever transcending from mainstream societal perceptions; Further, the characterization of queer elements reinforces this argument as far as the helpless female is concerned, sliding further into servitude. This was an intricate object/subject relationship concerning gender roles, which was furthered by Pattanaik's attempt to interpret the character roles through a Vedic perspective depicting gender roles as a social creation with a hint of unrest as an object that needs to be controlled. Reviews of the work have praised its readability and graphic elements while being simultaneously dense as a full-fantasy philosophical treatise. Coming across to some as a form of political writing, to be read several times to unravel the many levels of

sexism, sliding out of the usual Western queer construction of queerness while trying to construct an indigenous paradigm related to dharma cosmology.

An Overview and Analysis of *Sati Savitri*

The plot summary and structure

Sati Savitri: And Other Feminist Stories They Don't Tell You is a comprehensive compilation of the myths that intricately tell the stories of women asserting their dharma independently, fearlessly challenging established male-defined norms. The title itself derives from the iconic characters Sati and Savitri, symbolic of resilience and defiance within the narratives. The collection flows through different eras, weaving together stories from ancient scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Buddhist*, and *Jain* literature. Each story encompasses distinctive elements of female empowerment-from the struggle of Urvashi with marital ennui to the tragic tale of how the apsaras Menaka ensnared sages and abandoned their offspring. Other important stories are the saga of Jabala's son Satyakama, an epic where he is feted for his commitment to truth despite ambiguous parentage; the narrative about Kunti and Madri's autonomy before marriage; Parvati's deep penance to attract Shiva; Sita's brave decisions as an act of free will-her choices of exile and the trial by fire (agni pariksha); Draupadi's devastating experience of disrobing (chir-harana); Radha's unstinting love for Krishna; Sulabha's enlightening philosophical debate with Janaka-all exemplifying the many contours of gender and spiritual spaces as told in these stories. Chief among them was the emergence of Krishna as a definitive feminist icon, ushering in a paradigm change in truly liberating women from the shackles of stifling society and tradition.

Thematic Analysis

Sati Savitri: And Other Feminist Stories They Don't Tell You is a comprehensive compilation of myths that detail women claiming their dharma on their own and, unflinchingly, standing up against established male-defined norms. The title, of course, comes from the archetypal figures of Sati and Savitri themselves - symbols of resilience and defiance within the narratives. The collection travels through various ages, weaving together stories from ancient scriptures like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Buddhist* and *Jain* texts. Each story told has something unique to offer in terms of feminist relevance: from Urvashi's marital ennui to the pathos in the depiction of apsaras like Menaka, who ensnare sages with their charms and leave behind their offspring. Noteworthy stories include the saga of Jabala's son, Satyakama, known for his commitment to truth despite the ambiguity of his parentage; the pre-marital autonomy of Kunti and Madri; Parvati's intense tapas for the love of Shiva; Sita's brave decisions, like her choice of exile and trial by fire; Draupadi's painful disrobing, Radha's all-consuming love for Krishna, Sulabha's enlightening philosophical debate with Janaka-all differently framed elements touching upon gender issues and spiritual domains. Meanwhile, Krishna's character turns out to be a definitive feminist icon a harbinger of change that fights for women's freedom from the shackles of society and from rigid traditions.

The feminist elements come to the fore in the display of women's defiance through these mythological characters: the acumen of Savitri's sharp intellect over blind devotion, the brave self-imposed exile of Sita as a statement of independence, and the portrayal of Radha as playful eroticism that challenges traditional norms. Devdutt Pattanaik examines prevalent misinterpretations in contemporary discourse, such as reducing the complex figure of "Sati" to a mere symbolic representation of widow immolation, thereby covering up her act of defiance in the face of the most oppressive form of societal compulsion. Similarly, the figure of "Savitri" is usually underestimated for her deep wisdom and extraordinary strength, which was way beyond simple marital loyalty. The concept of *Vedanta* takes us forward with the revolutionary notion of the genderless Atman, which urges us to rise beyond the conventional bias of the body for a more inclusive interpretation of the human form. The mythical character of Krishna is also discussed as being representative of androgynous freedom, snubbing common social taboos and restrictions. Reviews of the work have

come forth with appreciation for its depth of research in bringing forth greater insight into the relevance of coexistence over progress alone, though at the same time admitting that its heavy theme may be a challenge too difficult to conquer for the casual reader. In general, the narrative enables worldviews to be inclusive by giving greater voice to the marginalized and opens up routes for moving toward a more equal world that would stand on the grounds of complete gender equality.

Shilavati: Governance, Endurance and Principled Leadership

The Pregnant King by Devdutt Pattanaik takes the perspective of Shilavati to discuss gender and identity. Shilavati possesses a woman's body and a man's head, which symbolizes her intense desire for power. As much as she is ambitious and qualified to be king, she is not entitled to this position simply because she is a woman. She is uneducated but learned in the 'Dharma Shastra.' When Shilavati marries Prasenajit, she follows him and learns archery among other skills. That is her passage from home to political life. When her husband died, Shilavati became regent, a man's job. She presides over her kingdom with much wisdom as a widow, proving that she is far better than the men in her life. Shilavati juggles her character as both ruler and mother, shaping the character and decisions of her son Yuvanashva. Her navigating between authority and compassion really cuts through her complexity. Shilavati gains strength in her ability to turn negatives into positives, thus enabling her to endure challenges and continue to lead.

She breaks societal chains by being an active participant in governance, shattering stereotypes about women. Instead of trying to make up for her gender, she wins respect through her capabilities. Shilavati allows the welfare of the kingdom to come before her feelings, which is a clear indication of ethical dilemmas. Her story is one of empowerment through moral conscience, making her an icon of leadership and moral command in a typical patriarchal society. She depicts the potential of females as sovereign decision-makers in Indian mythology.

Intellect, Reverence, and Rhetorical Strength - Savitri

Savitri is a well-known character in the *Mahabharata*, believed to be the embodiment of wifely devotion to her husband, Satyavan. Pattanaik's rendering of *Sati Savitri* extends this and adds that she is indeed intelligent, brave and eloquent. She is often considered the epitome of Pativrata Dharma, or devotion to her husband, but her story is much more than that. Her story is not about marital devotion alone but also about the triumph of the human spirit. Her narrative is about resistance, negotiation and intellectual power.

She is often considered the epitome of Pativrata Dhrama, or devotion to her husband, but her story is much more than that. Even after learning or knowing the truth of her impending death, she does not turn away from the plan of getting married to Satyavan. She prepares herself through atonement, fasting, and meditation/introspection, actions that are often misinterpreted as blind obedience. However, in Pattanaik's retelling, they represent spiritual discipline and inner resolve. On the day of his fate, she accompanies her husband into the forest, witnesses his death, and then follows Yama, the god of death, into a far more philosophical discourse. Savitri's confrontation with Yama is one of the most empowering moments in mythology. Through her judiciousness, endurance, and influence, along with a convincing colloquy, her narrative is about resistance and negotiation-things of intellectual power. Her intellectual approach and logical reasoning were much more tactful than violence or trickery. Her empowerment lies in her ability to reason, her emotional strength, and her unwavering commitment. She symbolizes agency in a society that often reduces women's roles to passive obedience or submission. Her role in mythology has influenced generations of women. Her philosophical debate underlines the interrelationship of duty, love, and justice. She does not beg; she reasons. This difference is crucial, important to understanding her empowerment. She managed within the constraints of her societal role but expanded its meaning. She conforms extrinsically, but her resilience redefines the expectations of womanhood. Her narrative challenges the dichotomies of

traditional vs. modern, submissive vs. empowered, and shows that empowerment can exist in various forms.

An Analysis of Comparative Factors

Devdutt Pattanaik's work *The Pregnant King* (2008) and *Sati Savitri* (2024) investigate the complex theme of fluidity as a means to explore gender dynamics and women's empowerment through male pregnancy and queerness on the margins. If the first novel places female agency and the persuasiveness of feminism as an eternal force in cultural narratives, the latter puts more emphasis on women's autonomy, full of the threat of dismantling systems of patriarchal control. As both novels illustrate, Dharma assumes the dual quality of being malleable yet bound by the reinforcement of traditional binaries, while affording spaces for reinterpretation and subversion. While this element of subversion is more subtly inferential in *The Pregnant King*, since it automatically blurs the demarcation lines related to conventional gender roles, *Sati Savitri* does this more explicitly by appropriating myths for empowerment and challenging set stereotypes. The critiques surrounding these works are different, with some ambivalence coming forth about the way femininity is represented in *The Pregnant King* as the possible loss of power, while on the contrary, in *Sati Savitri*, women's choices are hailed as issuing from a "wise mind." Through Hindu epic-cultural looking glasses and indigenous queerness, Pattanaik's narratives provide a complex investigation of gender identities and their empowerment. Further, the use of various traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, resting on Vedic origins in *Sati Savitri*, allows the perspective of an understanding of these themes within the multicultural ambit of these traditions.

One may trace the evolution of Pattanaik as a writer through the power of an unstoppable trajectory of thematic engagement. From the very male-centric queerness of *The Pregnant King*, at times reproached for latent sexism, his narrative evolves into a more nuanced, woman-led storyline in *Sati Savitri*. Here, the story moves from the traditional conformity often associated with ancient myths to one of autonomy and the importance of individual agency and self-determination. Both works use the concept of Dharma very effectively as a subtle yet powerful tool for reflecting on the eternal struggle between anger and wisdom in the human condition.

It is, however, in this latter work that one clearly sees the thematic maturity of Pattanaik. With *Sati Savitri*, he is able to resolve those tensions in his earlier narratives and push the reader toward some sense of liberation or empowerment. This shift in focus reflects the author's own growing emphasis on feminist themes—a timely response to the evolving discussion surrounding gender equality and empowerment, particularly against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement.

In a great sense, Pattanaik's work as a whole speaks to the continued relevance of mythology. By affording his readers the freedom to interpret these time-transcending stories in a manner that encourages equity and inclusivity, he offers a powerful message about the nature of storytelling and its place in our world. Framing his narratives with a lens of choice and agency, he calls us to engage critically with the stories making up our cultural landscape and positions us actively within the ongoing dialogue of myth and meaning.

Shilavati and Savitri: A Comparative Study

Both 'Shilavati' from *The Pregnant King* and Savitri from *Sati Savitri* are presented as strong women who have to deal with issues regarding power, duty, and devotion. They proceed in opposite directions toward self-empowerment. Shilavati is a character emanating from the *Mahabharata* who reveals her strength through deep political deliberateness and a depth of maternal love that propels her into action. Her story elaborates on certain aspects of overcoming moral dilemmas and places much emphasis on her firm stand for righteousness. As opposed to this, in the case of Savitri—a legendary character—*Sati Savitri* indicates a profoundness of spirit and philosophy because her journey is tied to spirituality and morality. Above all, her incomparable loyalty and bravery are evident in the way she faces Yama, the Philosopher God of Death, in a combat of wits and determination to restore the life of

her husband Satyavan. The stories of both Shilavati and Savitri are testimonials to the different ways in which female strength and resilience manifest themselves: one rooted in political acumen and maternal love, and the other in spiritual devotion and philosophical introspection.

CONCLUSION

Devdutt Pattanaik's journey through *The Pregnant King* and *Sati Savitri* itself demonstrates how mythology opens up the complexities of gender issues. These literary works—focusing on the fragile nature of identity, which is hounded by forces from outside and serves as a source of inner strength, respectively—beacon not only a survival impulse, but also an unrelenting resistance within every being. Despite the critical gaze that allows us to see through the masked patriarchal tendencies in the story of the 2008 work, it is relevant that its context for dharma is complex and nuanced. On the other hand, the 2024 collection boldly resurrects the feminist archetypes that were hitherto hidden in India's lore, exhibiting innate diversity and inclusivity within these ancient tales. Through Pattanaik's skillful craft, he pushes us to consider myths not simply as some hoary aunt's tales but rather as a dynamic conversation that is essential to navigating the complexities of modern-day inequalities. Ahead, an exciting trajectory for future scholarship perhaps comes through in continuing the work of exploring his corpus' connections to the wider themes of caste dynamics and ecological consciousness.

REFERENCES

1. Dharmadhikari, P. P. (n.d.). *Trading the Slippery Ground: Blurring Lines of Gender Identities in Devdutt Pattanaik's 'The Pregnant King'*. [PDF source].
2. Doniger, W. (2014). *On Hinduism*. Aleph Book Company.
3. Goodreads & Amazon India user reviews (accessed Nov 10, 2025).
4. Mruthula, J. (2024). *I Am a Mother Albeit a Man: A Matrifocal Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's The Pregnant King*. IIS University Journal of Arts, 13(4), 116-130.
5. Pattanaik, D. (2008). *The Pregnant King*. Penguin Books.
6. Pattanaik, D. (2024). *Sati Savitri: And Other Feminist Stories They Don't Tell You*. HarperCollins India.
7. Halberstam, J. (2018). *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. University of California Press.
8. Tyagi, R. (2023). "Reclaiming Draupadi: Feminist Retellings in Contemporary India." *Indian Literature*, 67(2).