
**QUEERING THE CANON: LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION
THROUGH POST-COLONIAL AND
POSTMODERN FRAMEWORKS**

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, LGBTQ+ representation, post-colonialism, and postmodernism within contemporary literature and cultural discourse. Literature, as both a mirror and a critique of society, has increasingly served as a platform for marginalized voices, challenging normative constructions of identity and power. The research foregrounds how gender and sexuality are not fixed categories but rather socially constructed and historically contingent, shaped by the interplay of cultural, political, and linguistic forces. Within post-colonial frameworks, literary texts destabilize Eurocentric narratives by reclaiming subaltern voices, interrogating colonial legacies, and articulating hybrid identities. Simultaneously, postmodernist aesthetics disrupt grand narratives, foregrounding fragmentation, multiplicity, and the fluidity of meaning, thereby enabling new spaces for representing LGBTQ+ experiences and non-normative identities. By engaging with feminist theory, queer studies, and postcolonial criticism, this paper analyses select literary works that embody resistance, negotiation, and re-imagining of selfhood. The study highlights how narratives of gender and sexuality intersect with questions of race, class, nation, and diaspora, reflecting broader struggles for recognition and justice. Ultimately, this paper argues that the convergence of these discourses—post-colonialism, postmodernism, and LGBTQ+ representation—reshapes the literary landscape, offering critical insights into identity politics and cultural transformation in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS:

Gender, Sexuality, LGBTQ+ Representation, Post-colonialism, Postmodernism, Identity, Contemporary Literature.

1. Introduction: From Margins to Center

The literary canon has long reflected heteronormative values, often ignoring or misrepresenting queer identities. In the past, LGBTQ+ themes were treated as taboo and shown through negative stereotypes. With the rise of queer theory in the late twentieth century, scholars began to reinterpret such texts. Queer theory helps challenge fixed ideas about gender and sexuality and allows literature to be read from more inclusive perspectives. In Indian literature, the “queering of the canon” involves reclaiming indigenous histories of gender fluidity that were suppressed by colonial Victorian morality. Utilizing post-colonial and postmodern frameworks, contemporary Indian authors dismantle heteronormative “metanarratives” by retelling myths and histories to center non-binary identities.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

Postmodernism and Fluidity

Postmodernism connects closely with queer theory because both question the idea of fixed, natural, and permanent identities. Instead of seeing identity as stable, they view it as flexible and constantly changing. Both theories emphasize fluidity, difference, performance, and multiplicity, rejecting rigid binaries such as male/female or heterosexual/homosexual. Important theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have played a key role in developing this connection. Butler’s concept of gender performativity argues that gender is not something one is born with but something that is continuously produced through repeated actions, gestures, language, and social behavior. Because these actions can change, gender itself is not fixed. This idea challenges traditional beliefs that link gender directly to biology.

From a postmodern perspective, identity is shaped by discourse, culture, and language rather than nature. Sexual identities are therefore not natural or universal truths but social constructions that vary across time and place. Sedgwick further expands this idea

by showing how sexuality exists on a continuum rather than within strict categories. Together, postmodernism and queer theory work to destabilize dominant norms, question authority, and open space for diverse and marginalized identities to be recognized and expressed.

Post-colonialism and Intersectionality

Postcolonial theory supports queer theory by questioning the belief that Western ideas of gender and sexuality are universal and should apply to all cultures. In the Indian context, this is especially important because colonial rule deeply influenced how sexuality came to be understood. Before British colonization, Indian society recognized diverse expressions of gender and desire, as seen in mythology, folklore, and community traditions such as those of hijras and other gender-variant groups. However, during colonial rule, Western moral values were imposed on Indian society. Laws like Section 377, introduced by the British, criminalized same-sex relationships and labeled non-heteronormative identities as “unnatural.” As a result, many indigenous understandings of sexuality were erased or silenced. Postcolonial queer theory challenges this colonial legacy by arguing that queerness in India is not a Western import but an integral part of its cultural history.

An intersectional approach is very important in the Indian context because sexual identity cannot be understood separately from other social realities. A person’s experience of gender and sexuality is shaped by many interconnected factors such as caste, class, religion, gender, region, language, and colonial history. These factors do not exist independently; instead, they work together to influence how individuals live, express themselves, and are treated by society. For example, a queer person from an upper-class, English-speaking urban background may have access to education, legal awareness, and social support. In contrast, a transgender person from a marginalized caste or rural area may face extreme poverty, social rejection, violence, and lack of basic rights. Although both may identify as queer, their lived experiences are very different.

This shows that sexuality alone cannot explain oppression or identity in India.

Postcolonial theory helps us understand how many present-day attitudes toward sexuality were shaped by colonial rule. British laws, moral codes, and religious ideas imposed strict heterosexual norms on Indian society. These colonial power structures continue to influence social judgment, stigma, and discrimination even after independence. As a result, queer identities are often viewed as “unnatural” or “foreign,” despite their long presence in Indian history and culture. By combining postcolonial and queer perspectives, Indian literature and theory challenge Western-centered definitions of sexuality. They recover indigenous histories of gender fluidity found in mythology, folklore, and lived traditions. This combined approach allows identity to be understood not as fixed, stable, or isolated, but as something shaped by overlapping social, cultural, political, and historical forces. In this way, intersectionality helps create a more inclusive and realistic understanding of human identity in the Indian context.

3. Literary Analysis

Reclaiming Ancient and Modern Narratives

In the Indian context, many writers have attempted to “queer” literary and cultural traditions by uncovering hidden or ignored histories of gender and sexuality. Scholars like Gita Thadani have explored same-sex desire in ancient Indian texts, especially focusing on lesbian relationships that were erased over time. Similarly, Devdutt Pattanaik brings attention to queer stories within Hindu mythology, showing that ideas of gender fluidity existed long before modern times. Modern autobiographical and fictional works also challenge heterosexual norms. Kamala Das’s *My Story* openly discusses emotional and intimate relationships between women, questioning conventional ideas of marriage, sexuality, and female desire. Through such narratives, Indian literature resists the silence imposed on non-heteronormative experiences. Western writers such

as Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson use postmodern narrative techniques to disturb fixed gender roles. Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) presents a protagonist who changes from man to woman across centuries, thereby questioning the stability of gender identity. Similarly, Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) never reveals the narrator's gender, forcing readers to confront their own assumptions about love, desire, and identity. Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* is a landmark text in Indian queer literature and is especially suitable for postmodern and postcolonial analysis. The novel retells a lesser-known episode from the Mahabharata, focusing on King Yuvanashva, who accidentally drinks a magical potion meant for his queens and becomes pregnant.

Postmodern Perspective

From a postmodern perspective, the novel functions as a mini-narrative that questions the dominance and authority of the grand epic tradition of the Mahabharata. Instead of retelling the epic through familiar heroic figures like kings and warriors, Pattanaik shifts attention to a lesser-known and marginalized character, King Yuvanashva. This shift itself challenges the idea that history and mythology must focus only on powerful masculine heroes. Through intertextuality, the novel reworks and reinterprets existing mythological material rather than treating it as sacred or unchangeable. Pattanaik engages in mythic revision by imagining what the epic leaves unsaid, thereby opening space for alternative meanings. This imaginative retelling reflects a key postmodern belief—that truth is not singular but multiple, and stories can always be retold from different viewpoints.

The novel strongly questions rigid binaries such as male/female, father/mother, king/queen, which traditionally structure both mythology and society. Yuvanashva's pregnancy directly disrupts biological and social expectations, showing that reproductive roles cannot be strictly tied to gender. His experience blurs the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, authority and vulnerability. By

presenting identity as fluid, fragmented, and unstable, the text rejects essentialist ideas of gender. Instead, it suggests that identity is shaped through experience, circumstance, and social interpretation. In this way, the novel uses postmodern storytelling to challenge fixed meanings, destabilize dominant narratives, and create space for marginalized identities within myth and literature.

Postcolonial Perspective

From a postcolonial perspective, *The Pregnant King* strongly challenges the idea that queerness is a Western or modern concept. By placing gender fluidity within ancient Indian mythology, Devdutt Pattanaik shows that non-normative gender identities existed in Indian culture long before colonial rule. This helps counter the common belief that queer identities entered India through Western influence. The novel indirectly critiques the colonial legacy of homophobia, especially laws such as Section 377, which were introduced by the British and labeled same-sex relationships as unnatural. These laws shaped social attitudes and moral judgments that continued even after independence. Through its mythological setting, the novel exposes how colonial morality suppressed older, more inclusive understandings of gender and sexuality.

Although Vedic society followed strict ideas of dharma, duty, and social order, the novel reveals that it was not completely closed or uniform. Within these structures, there existed spaces where gender and sexuality could move beyond rigid binaries. Characters and situations in the narrative reflect flexibility rather than absolute rules, suggesting that tradition itself was more complex than modern interpretations allow. Thus, *The Pregnant King* becomes a powerful postcolonial text that resists Western-centered definitions of sexuality and reclaims indigenous histories of gender fluidity. At the same time, by using postmodern techniques such as mythic revision and alternative storytelling, the novel reimagines mythology from a queer perspective. In doing so, it challenges both colonial morality and modern heteronormativity, offering a more inclusive

understanding of identity and culture.

4. Conclusion

Queering the literary canon is a powerful and revolutionary act because it challenges long-standing social norms and fixed ideas about identity, gender, and sexuality. The traditional canon has mostly privileged heterosexual, male, and dominant voices, often ignoring or silencing marginalized experiences. By queering the canon, writers and critics question these exclusions and open literature to voices that were previously hidden or denied recognition. When postcolonial and postmodern frameworks are used together, contemporary literature moves beyond what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the “epistemology of the closet”—a system where queer identities are forced into secrecy, silence, and fear. Instead, literature enters an “open mesh of possibilities,” where identity is seen as fluid, diverse, and continuously evolving rather than fixed or binary.

This approach allows writers to revisit myths, histories, and canonical texts from new perspectives, exposing suppressed narratives and alternative meanings. It helps challenge colonial morality, rigid gender roles, and heteronormative structures that once controlled storytelling. Through such re-readings, literature becomes a space of resistance as well as imagination. Queering the canon does more than provide representation for marginalized communities; it also deepens and enriches literature itself. By revealing the multiplicity of human experiences—across gender, sexuality, culture, and history—it expands our understanding of humanity. In this way, contemporary queer writing does not weaken the canon but transforms it into a more inclusive, dynamic, and truthful reflection of human life.

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