

# Semantic Analysis of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And other Tales They Don't Tell You* and Its Relevance Today

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the semantic intricacies of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You*, a seminal text that offers a fresh perspective on Indian mythology, particularly focusing on themes of gender fluidity, inclusivity, and intersectionality. Using a semantic lens, this article conducts a semantic analysis of Pattanaik's narratives, exploring their implications in contemporary discourse on identity and social justice. By examining key stories and characters, this research highlights how his work resonates with current issues such as gender and social equity making it relevant for modern readers. In fact, it highlights how he deconstructs traditional myths to reveal layered interpretations of nonbinary nature, acceptable behaviours, and the construction of identity. By analyzing the text's language, metaphors, and cultural context, the research underscores its relevance in present-day discourse on intersectionality.

**KEYWORDS:** mythology, *Shikhandi*, semantic, myths, discourse, inclusivity

## INTRODUCTION

The realm of mythology serves as a repository of cultural memory, reflecting societal norms, beliefs, and values. In *Shikhandi*, Pattanaik reinterprets Indian myths to explore themes of gender and sexuality, challenging heteronormative frameworks and patriarchal constructs. This study employs semantic analysis to unravel the meanings embedded in his retelling, emphasizing how linguistic choices and narrative structures convey complex ideas about identity and rules governing societies. His text, rich with allegory and layered meanings, serves as an ideal subject for such an investigation. Through this approach, the paper seeks to illuminate the cultural, linguistic, and psychological dimensions of the myths presented in *Shikhandi*. Moreover, *Shikhandi* stands out as a significant text that reinterprets traditional Indian myths to address modern issues related to gender and identity in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. This article aims to analyze the semantic structures within the narratives, revealing how they contribute to ongoing discussions about inclusivity and intersectionality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review highlights the scholarly and cultural significance of *Shikhandi*, positioning it as a vital text for understanding the intersection of mythology, semantics, and societal change. Semantic analysis involves studying the meanings and interpretations of language, symbols, and narratives. Scholars have applied various frameworks to analyze Pattanaik's retellings. This theoretical grounding highlights

the multiplicity of meanings within his work and its alignment with present-time academic debate. These frameworks are pivotal in understanding how he deconstructs traditional binaries of gender and sexuality. Roland Barthes' (1957) ideas of 'myth as language', for instance, are frequently invoked to explore how he reframes myths as a living, evolving text. Similarly, Judith Butler's (1990) theories on performativity and gender queerness provide a critical lens to examine *Shikhandi*. Scholars argue that his narratives challenge essentialist notions of gender, aligning with queer theory principles (Sharma, 2019).

Several studies focus on Pattanaik's language and the semantic richness of his storytelling. These analyses underline the depth of his linguistic choices, which serve as tools for cultural critique and reclamation because he employs a conversational tone that combines academic rigor with accessibility. His use of metaphors and culturally specific terms bridges traditional mythological language with modern readers' understanding (Patel, 2020). Therefore, the words and phrases traditionally associated with marginalization, such as *hijra* and *tritiya prakriti*, are reclaimed and redefined in affirming ways. He uses these terms to highlight their spiritual and cultural significance (Bose, 2018). By situating myths within historical and cultural contexts, he layers his narratives with meanings that resonate across time. For instance, his retelling of Shikhandi's story reframes her gender transition as a semantic challenge to societal constructs (Rao, 2021). Moreover, the symbolism in *Shikhandi* has been widely analyzed for its cultural and mythological significance. These symbolic elements enrich the semantic texture of *Shikhandi*, enabling readers to engage with layered meanings. Scholars point to recurring motifs like Ardhanarishvara (the composite form of Shiva and Parvati) as representations of divine gender nonconformity. These symbols challenge rigid interpretations of divinity and emphasize inclusivity (Sen, 2019).

Pattanaik's work fosters inclusivity by validating diverse identities and experiences. In an era where discussions about LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality are paramount, his stories serve as cultural touchstones that promote acceptance. The character of Shikhandi serves as a powerful symbol of nonbinary aspect because he was born as a girl but raised as a boy, and navigates multiple identities throughout the Mahabharata. His retelling emphasizes the internal conflict experienced by Shikhandi as they grapple with expectations from society. His use of mythological symbols such as the lotus (purity and transformation) and the third eye (insight and transcendence) are reinterpreted to align with themes of gender diversity and identity politics (Chopra, 2020). The ritualistic and cultural symbolism of characters like Aravan and their association with the hijra community is explored to demonstrate how myths validate marginalized identities (Singh, 2021). The narrative strategies have been recognized for their innovative approach to storytelling. These strategies make *Shikhandi* a text that is both timeless and timely, bridging traditional narratives with modern sensibilities. The inclusion of multiple perspectives and versions of myths reflects the pluralistic ethos of Indian storytelling. This strategy allows for semantic diversity, enabling readers to derive multiple interpretations (Mishra, 2019). Scholars note how Devdutt references myths from other cultures, such as Greek and Norse traditions, to create a comparative semantic framework. For instance, parallels between Shikhandi and Hermaphroditus enrich the narrative's universal appeal (Dasgupta, 2020). By reframing traditional myths to emphasize fluidity and inclusivity, Pattanaik challenges imperious and heteronormative readings, creating new semantic layers that reflect contemporary values (Khan, 2021).

The semantic analysis of *Shikhandi* often intersects with broader discourses on gender and identity. These discussions position *Shikhandi* as a critical text in the intersection of mythology, gender studies, and cultural identity. Scholars argue that *Shikhandi* reclaims Indian mythology as a space for queer representation, using semantic re-framing to defy the erasure of non-binary and transgender identities

(Sundaram, 2020). Pattanaik's emphasis on the historical acceptance of fluid identities contrasts with rigidity afflicting the modern society, creating a semantic critique of modern gender politics (Iyer, 2021). The book's narratives celebrate inclusivity as a core value of Indian mythology, using characters like Shikhandi and Mohini to illustrate the spectrum of gender and sexuality (Desai, 2018). The reception of *Shikhandi* underscores its cultural and academic importance as a text that bridges mythology and present-day issues. Scholars appreciate his meticulous research and ability to balance scholarly insight with accessibility. His semantic re-framing of myths has been praised for revitalizing interest in Indian mythology (Nair, 2019). The book has resonated with diverse audiences, including LGBTQ+ communities, who find representation and validation in its narratives (Verma, 2020). Some critics argue that his interpretations, while innovative, risk oversimplifying complex mythological narratives for modern readers (Rajan, 2021).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative semantic analysis, combining textual analysis with cultural hermeneutics. Key passages from *Shikhandi* are analyzed to extract semantic patterns, focusing on four aspects: linguistic choices, symbolism, narrative strategies, and cultural context. Let's discuss each one of these aspects in greater length with illustrations from the text. In current society, where discussions around transgender rights are gaining momentum, Shikhandi's story becomes increasingly relevant. By presenting a character who defies traditional gender norms, Pattanaik opens up conversations about acceptance and understanding within diverse communities.

## THE USE OF SPECIFIC TERMS, PHRASES AND METAPHORS

In *Shikhandi*, Pattanaik's linguistic choices are pivotal in shaping the text's progressive outlook on gender and identity. By employing a combination of traditional and modern language, the author bridges the cultural and temporal gap between ancient Indian mythology and modern discussions. Through specific terms, evocative phrases, and thought-provoking metaphors, he conveys the queerness, complexity, and societal perceptions of gender. His choice of words (loyalty and dedication) when describing Ekalavya, for example, evoke admiration rather than pity. This semantic framing encourages readers to view Ekalavya not merely as a victim but as a figure embodying resilience against systemic oppression. He deliberately employs terms that dares binary understandings of gender, drawing from Sanskrit, vernacular, and modern vocabulary. For instance, the term *ardhanarishvara* (half-man, half-woman), encapsulates the idea of gender unity and fluidity, illustrating that masculinity and femininity coexist harmoniously. It is used in both its mythological context and as a metaphor for balance in human identity (Pattanaik 102). Or another term, "hijra", while historically significant in Indian culture, is reframed in *Shikhandi* to emphasize its role as an identity rather than a derogatory label. He employs it in narratives like that of Brihannala, portraying hijras as integral to societal and spiritual ecosystems (Pattanaik 78). Such terms highlight a linguistic strategy to reclaim and reinterpret identities marginalized by colonial and autocratic discourse. Throughout the text, he uses evocative phrases to emphasize transformation and nonbinariness, which create a conceptual framework for understanding gender as dynamic and intersectional, rooted in Indian mythological ethos. "Gender as a garment" is a case in point which signifies that gender, like clothing can be changed or adapted, reflecting its non-essentialist nature (Pattanaik 12). It metaphorically challenges the rigid perception of gender as inherent or unchangeable. Another phrase "the third space," recurring in the text, positions characters who are neither fully male nor fully female within a liminal, sacred realm. It

invites readers to view such individuals not as anomalies but as embodiments of divine potential. Similarly, metaphors such as “a bridge between worlds” which is used to describe characters like Shikhandi, emphasizes their role in connecting dichotomous identities—male and female, mortal and divine. It highlights their unique position in myth and society (Pattanaik 47). “The lotus blooming in the mud,” another metaphor encapsulates the idea of beauty and divinity emerging from rejection, as seen in characters like Mohini or Brihannala. It underscores resilience and transformation amid adversity (Pattanaik 91). Another aspect, allusions to mythology and cultural traditions, enrich its semantic depth. “Ritual of Aravan,” for instance, is the tale of Aravan, who marries a male consort before his death, uses ritual as a linguistic and narrative tool to normalize same-sex unions in spiritual practices (Pattanaik 67). Or, “samudra manthan,” the churning of the ocean, that is a recurring motif in Hindu mythology is used metaphorically to signify the turmoil and eventual harmony in reconciling conflicting gender identities. Of course, a striking feature of *Shikhandi* is its juxtaposition of traditional Sanskrit terms with present-time expressions that contemporize ancient myths while respecting their cultural origins. “Maya” (illusion) and “dharma” (duty), as an illustration, are juxtaposed with modern phrases like “gender politics” and “identity crisis” and this interplay bridges ancient wisdom and modern social issues, making the text accessible and relevant to diverse audiences. Besides, his language carries an ironic undertone, subverting traditional totalitarian interpretations of myths. This use of irony engages the reader, prompting reflection on prejudices and their implications, for example, when describing Shikhandi’s role in the Mahabharata, he states, “a half-man brought the great Kuru dynasty to its knees” (Pattanaik 34). In effect, this statement not only highlights Shikhandi’s pivotal role but also critiques tendencies to undervalue those who do not conform to norms.

## CULTURAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RECURRING SYMBOLS

*Shikhandi* is replete with symbolism that enriches its narratives, offering deeper insights into the cultural, mythological, and psychological dimensions of identity. Through recurring symbols, he not only underscores key themes of gender nonconformity and societal constructs but also reclaims their nuanced meanings within Indian mythology. These symbols serve as a bridge between ancient traditions and contemporary discourses, revealing how myths can be reinterpreted to reflect evolving understandings of inclusivity and identity. One of the most compelling aspects of *Shikhandi* is its exploration of nonbinariness since he embodies a complex interplay of gender identities, challenging traditional binaries. His statement “born as a girl but raised as a boy, Shikhandi defies societal expectations” (Pattanaik 45) encapsulates Shikhandi’s struggle against rigid gender norms. The term “defies” indicates resistance, positioning Shikhandi as an agent of change in a patriarchal society. Garment which represents the mutability of identity is one of the most prominent symbols in *Shikhandi* and is used to contest rigid categorizations of gender, as garments signify the transition between female and male roles, highlighting the performative aspects of gender. He writes, “Gender is but a garment, and garments can be changed” (Pattanaik 12). This symbolism aligns with cultural practices where cross-dressing in rituals, such as the *ardhanarishvara* worship or the roles played by hijras, reflects transformation and transcendence. The bridge, another recurring symbol in *Shikhandi* represents the connection between opposites—male and female, mortal and divine, acceptance and rejection. It also symbolizes liminality, a space where binaries dissolve, and new possibilities emerge, challenging customary practices. Shikhandi is described as “a bridge between worlds” (Pattanaik 47), embodying the duality of existence and the potential for integration. Portrayed as *ardhanarishvara*—half Shiva, half Parvati—is a central symbol of unity and

balance, “a divine balance of masculinity and femininity” (Pattanaik 102). This symbol challenges Western notions of dichotomous gender roles by presenting a composite form as divine and complete. The symbolism extends to psychological wholeness, where the masculine and feminine coexist within every individual, echoing Carl Jung’s concept of the anima and animus. The cosmic event of *samudra manthan*, or the churning of the ocean, serves as a metaphorical symbol in *Shikhandi* while also offering a universal framework for understanding transformation and reconciliation. He compares the tension and transformation experienced by gender-fluid characters to the churning process, where conflicting forces produce divine nectar (Pattanaik 58). The *samudra manthan* also symbolizes the struggles and rewards of embracing ambiguity and diversity, reinforcing the idea that harmony arises from conflict and integration. Similarly, the lotus, a recurring motif in Indian mythology, symbolizes purity and resilience in *Shikhandi* because of its transformative potential of embracing one’s true self, irrespective of external defiance. Mohini and Brihannala, for instance, are described using imagery of the lotus, which blooms in muddy waters, symbolizing beauty emerging from adversity (Pattanaik 91). Another symbol, the mirror is used to symbolize self-awareness and the confrontation of social practices while also underscoring the theme of introspection and the quest for authenticity in a world of illusions. He describes moments where characters “look into the mirror and see beyond their reflection” (Pattanaik 63), signifying the process of understanding one’s identity beyond physical appearance. Trees, often associated with life and shelter in mythology, and used in *Shikhandi* to symbolize growth and protection ties individual transformation to a larger, natural cycle of renewal and sustenance. The banyan tree, under which sages and outcasts often find refuge, becomes a recurring image in the text, representing a sanctuary for those who defy norms (Pattanaik 78). Trees also symbolize rootedness and growth, reflecting the narratives of characters who, despite constraints, find ways to grow and thrive. He uses some more symbols such as weapons and the river to highlight the empowering aspects of embracing one’s identity, fluidity and continuity. Weapons, for instance, are significant not as mere tools of war but symbols of identity and power as Shikhandi’s acquisition of a weapon to fulfill her destiny signifies her acceptance of a male role within a patriarchal framework (Pattanaik 34). And the river, a dynamic and flowing entity, symbolizes continuity and change in *Shikhandi*, for it reinforces the text’s emphasis on nonconformity, adaptability, and the timeless relevance of mythological narratives. He uses river imagery to describe gender fluidity, where “like a river flowing into the ocean, gender dissolves into humanity” (Pattanaik 88).

### FRAMING AND RE-FRAMING OF TRADITIONAL MYTHS

*Shikhandi* employs innovative narrative strategies to reinterpret traditional Indian myths through the lens of inclusivity, gender fluidity, and identity politics. By framing and re-framing ancient stories, he not only challenges rigid and heteronormative interpretations but also restores the subversive, pluralistic spirit inherent in Indian mythology. His approach combines storytelling techniques, cultural commentary, and modern contextualization to create a multi-layered narrative that resonates with contemporary audiences. Through dialogue and inner monologues, he gives voice to these women, allowing them to express their thoughts and motivations directly. This narrative technique empowers female characters and invites readers to reconsider their contributions beyond traditional roles assigned by society. The narrative structure around Shikhandi is non-linear, allowing readers to understand the character’s journey through flashbacks and reflections. This technique highlights the complexity of identity formation and opposes the notion of fixed gender roles.

Pattanaik begins by situating myths within their cultural and historical contexts, emphasizing their adaptability and relevance while also highlighting how myths are not fixed but evolve with society. This initial framing that traditional myths often reflected the cultural values of their times sets the stage for his subsequent re-framing, enabling readers to view these stories through new perspectives. For example, when he writes, “ancient myths were never rigid; they thrived on multiple interpretations” (Pattanaik 12), he contextualizes the story of Shikhandi within the rigid gender roles of the Mahabharata era, showing how Shikhandi’s identity as a transgender warrior defied societal norms (Pattanaik 34) thus emphasizing the fluidity of their meanings. He often subverts traditional mythological narratives that reinforce imperious values by giving voice to marginalized characters as is evident in his assertion, “the women in Mahabharata were not mere pawns; they were strategists in their own right” (Pattanaik 102).

Also Pattanaik re-frames traditional myths by weaving them into current dialogues on gender, sexuality, and identity which involves redefining characters, symbols, and narratives to challenge modern stereotypes reclaiming their radical potential and aligns them with modern understandings of identity. His portrayal of hijras, androgynous figures, and gender-fluid deities repositions them as integral to society and spirituality. For instance, he re-frames the story of Brihannala, Arjuna’s transgender identity during exile, as a powerful critique of rigid masculinity (Pattanaik 67). Stories like those of Mohini, Vishnu’s female form, are re-framed to contest binary gender norms, for instance, “Mohini was not an anomaly; she was a reminder of divine fluidity” (Pattanaik 91) and this perspective normalizes queerness as a divine and human trait, subverting tyrannical interpretations. A key narrative strategy in *Shikhandi* is the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives, reflecting the pluralistic nature of Indian mythology. Polyvocality not only enriches the narrative but also underscores the inclusive ethos of Indian mythology and this polyvocal approach mirrors the fragmented, multi-author nature of traditional myths. He elevates the voices of marginalized characters, such as Shikhandi and Aravan, who have been sidelined in dominant interpretations but become agents of change, challenging normative power structures (Pattanaik 47).

He employs intertextuality, drawing parallels between Indian myths and global narratives, to situate *Shikhandi* within a broader mythological and cultural framework and also to enhance the depth of the narrative, offering readers a comparative lens through which to interpret these tales. He juxtaposes Indian stories with myths from other cultures, such as Greek, Norse, and Chinese traditions, to highlight universal themes of transformation and identity which demonstrates how myths from different cultures address similar questions of identity and cultural expectations, fostering a sense of universality while retaining cultural specificity. For instance, he compares Shikhandi’s gender transition to the androgynous qualities of Greek deities like Hermaphroditus (Pattanaik 59) in order to actively subvert patriarchal interpretations of myths by highlighting their inherent ambiguities and contradictions. Characters like Bhishma, who embody rigid masculinity, are contrasted with Shikhandi, whose gender fluidity enables the Pandavas’ victory in the Mahabharata or the stories of Mohini, Chudala, and others are reinterpreted to showcase their agency and subversive power, challenging narratives that marginalize such figures.

His narrative strategy involves treating myths as open-ended dialogues rather than definitive texts and this dialogic approach democratizes mythology, encouraging readers to engage critically with the narratives. He frequently addresses the reader directly, posing rhetorical questions and inviting them to reflect on the stories’ relevance, such as “What if we saw Shikhandi not as a ‘misfit’ but as a pioneer?” (Pattanaik 12). Each tale is presented with its variations and contradictions, emphasizing that myths thrive on diversity when he says, “No myth is final; every version offers a new truth” (Pattanaik 18). He complements his textual narratives with visual elements, including illustrations and symbolic representations and this

interplay between text and imagery creates a richer, multi-sensory narrative experience. The book's illustrations are not mere decorations but serve as interpretive tools, reinforcing themes of nonbinariness and transformation. He employs symbolic motifs, such as the Ardhanarishvara and the lotus, to visually represent the central themes of unity and resilience (Pattanaik 102).

Humor and satire are integral to his storytelling, allowing him to critique the existing system without alienating readers besides ensuring that *Shikhandi* remains engaging while delivering its subversive message. He often uses wit to expose the absurdity of rigid gender roles as is seen in his description of Bhishma's reluctance to fight Shikhandi as "the great warrior undone by his own prejudices" (Pattanaik 36). Humor makes complex themes more accessible, inviting readers to question their own assumptions in a non-confrontational manner which is why Pattanaik not only reclaims the inclusive essence of Indian mythology but also aligns it with present-time discourses on gender and identity by employing strategies such as polyvocality, intertextuality, subversion, and humor.

### **HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL INFLUENCES SHAPING THE NARRATIVES**

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You* is deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and social contexts of Indian mythology. By exploring gender fluidity and cultural practices, he highlights how these narratives were shaped by the time and milieu in which they evolved which is why his work sheds light on how myths reflected, resisted, or adapted to changing societal attitudes. The book reclaims the inclusive ethos of Indian mythology, as represented in *Shikhandi* which defies the rigid binary constructs of gender and sexuality. He situates these narratives within a more inclusive historical context, recognising gender and sexual queerness as was evident during Vedic period. For example, the concept of *tritiya prakriti* (third nature) acknowledges non-binary and queer identities, reflected in characters like Shikhandi and Brihannala (Pattanaik 22), or myths such as Vishnu's transformation into Mohini who is described as "a reminder that the divine is beyond gender" highlight the divine fluidity of gender (Pattanaik 38).

The colonial period in India brought about significant shifts in the interpretation of Indian myths, often through a Western, Victorian lens. By revisiting these myths, Pattanaik challenges the colonial legacy that distorted their interpretations and reclaims their original inclusivity. British colonialists and missionaries imposed heteronormative and patriarchal values, marginalizing the queer and fluid aspects of Indian mythology. He notes how characters like Shikhandi were relegated to the fringes of narratives or portrayed negatively to align with colonial ideologies (Pattanaik 12). Myths that celebrated non-binary identities were sanitized or omitted from retellings, resulting in the loss of their inclusive spirit, the queer undertones in stories like that of Arjuna as Brihannala being a case in point (Pattanaik 49). Indian society's autocratic structure has historically shaped the narratives of mythology, often reinforcing male dominance and gender roles. Through his analysis, he reveals how myths both reflect and resist the hierarchies in societies, offering spaces for subversion and resistance. Characters like Shikhandi, who defy traditional gender roles, are often sidelined or demonized in dominant interpretations. He critiques these biases against gender and sexuality which is influenced by caste and class or the marginalized communities, such as hijras which find representation in these myths but are simultaneously ostracized in societal hierarchies (Pattanaik 77). The cultural context of *Shikhandi* is enriched by its connections to Indian ritual practices and religious traditions, which often celebrate ambiguity and inclusivity, and highlight the coexistence of inclusion and marginalization within Indian culture, providing a nuanced backdrop to the narratives in *Shikhandi*. Ritual practices such as the worship of *ardhanarishvara* (a composite form of Shiva and Parvati) and the

participation of hijras in religious ceremonies underscore the cultural acknowledgment of gender fluidity (Pattanaik 91). He discusses how temples and festivals often serve as sanctuaries for marginalized identities, such as the hijras' association with the Koovagam festival in Tamil Nadu, rooted in the myth of Aravan (Pattanaik 53). India's regional diversity has resulted in multiple retellings and variations of the same myths, reflecting local cultural values and practices. These variations demonstrate the adaptability of myths to regional contexts, showcasing their ability to reflect diverse cultural landscapes. He notes that while Shikhandi is primarily known as a transgender warrior in the Mahabharata, regional folk traditions often depict them as a divine figure embodying duality (Pattanaik 67). The story of Mohini, Vishnu's female form, varies across regions, with some versions emphasizing her role in seduction and others highlighting her as a nurturer or protector.

Oral traditions have played a significant role in preserving and transforming the myths explored in *Shikhandi* and through these oral traditions, myths continue to evolve, reflecting contemporary concerns while retaining their historical roots. Oral narratives allow for reinterpretations and updates, ensuring that myths remain relevant to their audiences as can be seen from his statement, "In oral traditions, Shikhandi is not merely a character but a symbol of transformation" (Pattanaik 78). Communities like the hijras have kept alive stories of Aravan and Mohini, using them to assert their identities and claim cultural space. He frames the narratives in *Shikhandi* within the context of modern debates on gender and identity which bridge the gap between ancient myths and modern audiences, making them relevant to debates today. By revisiting myths that celebrate nonconformity, he aligns them with contemporary LGBTQ+ movements, showing how ancient stories can inspire modern struggles for acceptance (Pattanaik 104). He also critiques modern society's tendency to rigidly define gender and sexuality, contrasting it with the fluidity celebrated in traditional myths as in, "What society sees as deviations, mythology celebrates as possibilities" (Pattanaik 89). The narratives in *Shikhandi* are deeply shaped by the cultural, historical, and social contexts of their origins which Pattanaik uses to highlight the inclusivity and queerness inherent in Indian mythology, reclaiming their relevance in current discussions on gender and identity. By challenging colonial, dictatorial, and heteronormative interpretations, he restores the transformative potential of these myths, offering a more inclusive vision of society.

*Shikhandi* disputes rigid gender binaries by foregrounding characters and tales that defy conventional categorizations. The titular character, Shikhandi, is a pivotal figure in the Mahabharata, born female but raised male to fulfill a destiny tied to revenge. His linguistic choices highlight the fluidity of Shikhandi's identity, terms such as "transformation" "fluid," and "in-between" being some which emphasize the non-binary nature of the character. Similarly, metaphors such as "Gender is but a garment, and garments can be changed" (Pattanaik 12) encapsulate the idea that identity is not fixed but mutable, a perspective deeply rooted in ancient Indian thought yet marginalized in extant discourse. The semantic resonance of "garment" aligns with cultural practices such as cross-dressing in rituals, signifying transformation and transcendence which he juxtaposes inclusive and exclusionary language to critique norms. Characters like Shikhandi, Brihannala, and Arjuna in his eunuch disguise illustrate the tension between acceptance and ostracization. Terms like "ostracized," "mocked," and "exiled" frequently appear in relation to these characters, underscoring their marginalization and emphasizing societal rejection, as in the case of Shikhandi being labeled a "half-man" or "neither this nor that" (Pattanaik 34).

The semantic analysis reveals that terms related to metamorphosis like "change," "rebirth," and "reincarnation" which not only describe literal transformations but also serve as metaphors for personal and social evolution. For instance, the story of Mohini, the female avatar of Vishnu, is rich in symbolic



language when he describes Mohini's beauty as "bewitching" and her actions as "disrupting norms" (Pattanaik 58). The semantic field of "bewitching" aligns with the idea of enchantment and defies to male dominance, positioning Mohini as both a disruptor and a harmonizer. He frequently revisits mythological terms like *ardhanarishvara* (the composite form of Shiva and Parvati) to underscore the coexistence of masculine and feminine energies. The semantic weight of *ardhanarishvara* lies in its etymology—"ardha" meaning half, "nari" meaning woman, and "ishvara" meaning lord and this composite term encapsulates the unity of opposites, challenging Western notions of gender as dichotomous. The depiction of *ardhanarishvara* in *Shikhandi* is accompanied by phrases like "divine balance" and "harmony in duality" (Pattanaik 102), which convey the philosophical underpinning of androgyny as a state of completeness rather than ambiguity. He employs metaphors to convey complex ideas succinctly. For example, Shikhandi is described as "a bridge between worlds" (Pattanaik 47), symbolizing the character's role as a connector of disparate identities and realities. Similes, such as "like a river flowing into the ocean, gender dissolves into humanity" (Pattanaik 88), emphasize fluidity and integration.

The myths themselves function as allegories for recent issues. For instance, the story of Somvati, a woman who became a man to fulfill social duties, serves as an allegory for the pressures of conforming to traditional gender roles. Repetition is used strategically to highlight key themes through terms like "fluidity," "balance," and "acceptance" recur throughout the text, reinforcing the centrality of these concepts to the narrative. *Shikhandi* has profound implications for contemporary consultations on gender and identity. By revisiting ancient myths through a semantic lens, the text bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, offering a framework for understanding gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. The semantic richness of his language fosters an inclusive understanding of identity and terms like "neither" and "both" challenge exclusivist paradigms invite readers to embrace ambiguity and complexity. By emphasizing the inclusive aspects of Indian mythology, *Shikhandi* reclaims a cultural heritage that has been overshadowed by colonial and patriarchal interpretations. The semantic interplay between scholarly and colloquial language makes the text appealing to diverse audiences, enhancing its cultural and academic significance and the themes explored in *Shikhandi* resonate deeply with current discussions. As society grapples with issues related to gender identity and social justice, his narratives provide a framework for understanding these complexities through mythology. In today's context, his retellings serve as reminders that historical narratives can be re-examined to highlight women's agency in shaping their destinies. His exploration of female characters in the Mahabharata like Draupadi and Kunti as strategists dares traditional portrayals that often depict women as passive figures though they play pivotal roles in shaping events within the epic. Similarly, Ekalavya's story resonates with current movements advocating for caste equality in India but Pattanaik emphasizes loyalty over caste identity thus promoting an understanding that individual merit can surpass the labels.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated how Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi* deconstructs traditional narratives to offer nuanced perspectives on gender and identity. The text's linguistic choices, symbolic imagery, and rhetorical strategies challenge conventional norms, promoting a vision of inclusivity and gender queerness. By revisiting ancient myths, he not only enriches our understanding of Indian culture but also contributes to global discussions on diversity and intersectionality. The intersectional approach found in *Shikhandi* aligns with current social justice movements advocating for marginalized groups. By highlighting interconnected identities, his narratives underscore the importance of solidarity among

various movements for equality. *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You* offers profound insights into modern issues surrounding inclusivity through its rich mythological narratives. By engaging in a semantic analysis of key themes such as gender fluidity, intersectionality, and challenging traditional narratives, this article demonstrates the relevance of his work in fostering discussions about identity in modern society. As we continue to navigate complex social dynamics, literature like *Shikhandi* plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of inclusivity and promoting social justice.

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