

Rituals of Becoming: Androgyny and Gender Performativity in *The Pregnant*

King by Devdutt Pattanaik

Amlan Asutosh, Research Scholar, Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology, Gunupur

Dr. Shishir Kumar Swain, Associate Professor, Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology, Gunupur

Furti Fiza, Research Scholar, Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology, Gunupur

Abstract

In Indian mythology, androgyny is both revered and constrained by social conventions. This paper examines how Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) constructs, regulates, and subverts androgyny. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it investigates how myth, ritual, and language reinforce or challenge binary gender norms. The novel explores the impact of Yuvanashva's involuntary motherhood on gender, power, and legitimacy within patriarchal frameworks. It also engages with mythological figures such as Ardhanarishvara, Ila, and Shikhandi, demonstrating the paradox of mythic gender fluidity as opposed to the historical erasure of androgynous identities. The novel challenges hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity by revealing how language suppresses gender diversity. It advocates for a new understanding of gender as a performative construct rather than an immutable essence.

Keywords: Androgyny, Gender Performativity, Indian Mythology, Non-Binary Identities, Gender Fluidity

Introduction

Androgyny, the combination of masculine and feminine traits in one person, has long sparked researchers' interest. It challenges the strict binary model of gender by breaking down the absolute dichotomy between masculinity and femininity and instead presenting a fluid continuum of the self. Theorists like Virginia Woolf and Carl Jung have written about the concept of androgyny, describing it as an ideal condition of psychological and creative wholeness as Carl Jung states, “The self is a union of opposites par excellence, and the attempt to realise this prefigures the individuation process, which always involves the integration of unconscious contents, among them the contrasexual element, the anima in a man and the animus in a woman” (Jung 2014). This affirms that true psychological growth requires embracing the fluid totality of gendered identity. Similarly, Virginia Woolf says, “It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.” (Woolf 2016). In the Indian context, however, androgyny means more than its aesthetic, psychological, or literary connotation, taking on deep spiritual, religious, and mythological significance.

Ancient Indian literature often represents androgynous gods and marginal gender categories, highlighting the blending of gender categories instead of their opposition. A prominent example of this in Hinduism is Ardhanarishvara, who represents the blend of Shiva, the epitome of masculinity and Parvati, the strongest form of feminine energies as one. This divine entity subverts the idea of gender as an immovable biological fact, proposing instead that gender constitutes a changing and variable force, one subject to transformation and transcendence. As Mohapatra, Panigrahi and Behura said, “Shiva and Shakti are one. Shiva symbolizes Purusha while Parvati symbolizes Prakriti. Were it not for the balanced union of the two, the universe could not exist. Ardhanarishwara symbolizes the collective

psyche of human beings” (Mohapatra, Panigrahi, & Behura, 2019). Likewise, characters such as Ila and Shikhandi illustrate fluid gender categories in mythological contexts, suggesting that the intellectual constructions of premodern India were not defined by the heteropatriarchy of modern society which upholds heterosexual male dominance as the normative framework, marginalizing all other gender identities and sexual orientations.

Despite the rich cultural heritage of gender fluidity, contemporary Indian society presents a contradictory infatuation with androgyny. Although mythology authorises gender deviation as holy or wondrous, actual examples of departures from conventional masculinity and femininity are excluded socially, legally obliterated, or savagely repressed. This can be observed in B.N. Raveesh’s paper where he states that the image of Ardhanarishwara represents the hermaphrodite, and that while this is acceptable in gods and goddesses because gods can be man, woman, or neutral depending on their needs, it is considered queer in the real world (Raveesh, 2013). The paradox of mythic celebration of androgyny versus socio-political exclusion is an intriguing site of analysis in current gender research.

Devdutt Pattanaik is a mythologist, author, and cultural theorist whose extensive body of work focuses on reinterpreting Hindu mythology through contemporary discourses on gender, sexuality, and power. A significant aspect his work is the deconstruction of strict gender roles through mythical re-telling. By centering non-normative gendered beings in the Hindu epic traditions, he disrupts the usual patriarchal interpretations which have tended to eliminate or marginalise such representations. His work resonates with current gender theory, notably with Judith Butler’s assertion that gender is not a fundamental truth but rather a chain of socially governed performances where beings adopt the scripts sanctioned through their cultures in order to perpetuate the illusion of a fixed gender identity (Butler 2011). In his writings, Devdutt Pattanaik situates the conflicts between early gender fluidity and late

modern patriarchal concerns in the fore, bringing mythology to the fore as the ground both of resistance and regulation.

This research draws upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as the analytical framework. Gender is rendered natural through repetition and ritual and comes to assume the form of essence rather than being constructed through the social order. Where people do fail to meet dominant gender expectations, they make visible the processes maintaining binary gender as a dominant ideology. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in analysing Indian mythological and literary depictions of androgyny, as such narratives often destabilise rigid gender categories, as Judith Butler contends, gender nonconformity is frequently disciplined through mechanisms of social exclusion and symbolic erasure (Butler 2011).

Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* (2008) draws reference from the Mahabharata, reimagines the story of King Yuvanashva, who accidentally becomes pregnant after consuming a potion meant for his queens. His situation upends the strict gender binaries that circumscribe kingship, masculinity, and motherhood, putting him in a liminal position where he is neither king nor mother. This places Yuvanashva in a deeply paradoxical position of performing the socially sanctioned role of a king while embodying the biologically coded role of a mother. His experience destabilises the foundations of heteropatriarchal masculinity, which demands detachment from emotion. Though he performs his duty, his emotional connection to the child he bears, goes unrecognized in the society. Yuvanashva navigates the divide between everyday life and social acknowledgment and shows us the way gender is performed and policed. Yuvanashva's androgyny makes him both sacred and suspect and disrupts the rigid gender order perpetuating kingship and dharma. His eventual abdication is a silent resistance to the institutional forces denying the authenticity of the non-normative self. This paper critically analyses how the performative nature of gender in *The Pregnant King*

uses ritual, language, and myth to both reinforce and subvert gender roles, ultimately interrogating the stability of gender identity by exploring how mythological representations of gender fluidity intersect with contemporary heteropatriarchal discourses, specifically within the context of the androgyny and performativity of gender.

Discussion

Yuvanashva's pregnancy disrupts hegemonic masculinity by undermining its foundational association with reproductive detachment and patriarchal lineage, which, as Raewyn Connell argues, "There is a hierarchy of masculinities: hegemonic at the top; complicit, subordinated and marginalized masculinities making up the rest." (Connell 2005). As a king, Yuvanashva is expected to embody strength, dominance, and virility, yet his transformation into a pregnant individual renders him an anomaly. His queens, enforce patriarchal norms by insisting that he must choose between his kingly authority and his maternal identity:

"Choose. What would you rather be—king or mother?" (Pattanaik 2008).

This ultimatum demonstrates gender as a location of exclusion and strengthens the point being made by Judith Butler about gender identity being performed and also policed through social apparatuses (Butler 2011). Even when he gives birth to a child, the gendered order is restored and Yuvanashva is debarred from maternal recognition; his son Mandhata is removed from his care and fostered by his queen. His existential reflection captures the destabilisation of rigid gender roles:

"I have created life outside me as men do. But I have also created life inside me, as women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetter or free me?" (Pattanaik 2008).

Yuvanashva's situation illustrates the instability of gender norms in conformance with Butler's statement that "the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal

space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.” (Butler 1988). This situation thereby unmask the performative instability of gender and illustrates that gender categories are not biological facts but regulatory ones created to reinforce social hierarchies.

Yuvanashva’s androgyny challenges the essentialist association of motherhood with femininity. His accidental pregnancy forces him to embody both traditionally masculine and feminine roles, yet society refuses to recognise his maternal identity. Despite giving birth and nursing his child, he is forced by the social structure to renounce or suppress his maternal instincts to preserve his status as king. His internal turmoil is encapsulated in his response to Mandhata’s question:

“Are you my father or my mother?”

“Does it matter? I gave you life. That is enough” (Pattanaik 2008).

Yuvanashva rejects the binary construct of parenthood, challenging the deeply ingrained notion that only women can be mothers. His struggle highlights how society continues to perceive child-rearing as exclusively feminine labour. Even in modern contexts, fathers who actively nurture their children are often ridiculed for deviating from masculine norms, reinforcing Butler’s claim that gender categories exist not as natural truths but as disciplinary mechanisms. As Horowitz notes (drawing on Butler), “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Horowitz, 2013).

Furthermore, Yuvanashva’s experience embodies Gayle Rubin’s concept of “the social organisation of sexuality”, where he states that, “I will call sex/gender system the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin 1998), it argues

that societies transform biological functions into culturally regulated gender roles. Here, motherhood is not merely a physical event but a symbolic identity, one that society refuses to assign to a biologically male king. His dilemma mirrors the real-world struggles of transgender and gender-nonconforming parents, whose legitimacy as caregivers is often contested by societal norms. By positioning Yuvanashva as both king and mother, *The Pregnant King* exposes the rigidity of gendered parenthood. His forced renunciation of his maternal role demonstrates that gender identity is less about biology and more about social perception and institutional enforcement.

Yuvanashva's journey demonstrates the inadequacy of gender binaries in explaining the full range of human experience. His dual roles as king and mother not only undermine heteropatriarchal masculinity, but also call into question the validity of gender as a static identity. This is in line with queer and feminist voices calling for a more expansive and inclusive definition of identity outside the confines of heteropatriarchal expectations according to Mohapatra, Panigrahi, & Behura whose paper asserts that, “gender expression is quite subjective and cannot be generalised as fixed binary entities. This emphasizes the fact that every individual deserves a space of their own wherein they can express themselves freely without pertaining to rigid social ascriptions” (Mohapatra et al., 2019).

Embodied Dualities: Ila, Ardhanarishvara, and Shikhandi in *The Pregnant King*

The Pregnant King explores androgyny, gender liminality, and the instability of rigid identity categories through the characters of Ila, Ardhanarishvara, and Shikhandi, which are deeply interwoven with Hindu mythological traditions. These characters dismantle the binary constructs of femininity and masculinity and thus validate the argument that gender is not a biological construct but is constructed by socio-cultural norms and institutional arrangements. But while mythology reinforces and even sacralises gender fluidity, actual transgressors of

normative gender expectations, represented by Yuvanashva are erased, marginalised, and resisted.

Ila, Ardhanarishvara, and Shikhandi's stories in the novel are meant to critique the inherent contradictions of Indian society; i.e., while mythology is hailing of individuals who enact gender multiplicity and androgyny as extraordinary or divine, modern social institutions rigidly enforce binary norms and exclude individuals who enact gender multiplicity in their daily lives. This contradiction is appropriately reflected by Mohapatra, Panigrahi, & Behura as they state, "Though gender is freed from the binary restrictions when it comes to myths and religion, but reality seems to paint a different spectacle" (Mohapatra et al., 2019).

Ila's story is one of the most explicit examples of gender fluidity in Hindu mythology, illustrating that masculinity and femininity are not fixed but exist on a continuum, influenced by social roles and cosmic cycles. Ila, cursed to alternate between male and female identities, embodies the fluid nature of gender in Hindu cosmology, a concept that stands in stark contrast to the rigid gender norms imposed by contemporary Indian society. As *The Pregnant King* describes:

"On new moon nights the deity in the temple is an enchantress displaying

fourteen symbols of womanhood. Red sari, unbound hair, bangles, nose, rings,

pots, parrots, sugarcane. As the moon starts to wax, each symbol of womanhood

is replaced by a symbol of manhood, one each day. On the first day, the unbound

hair is replaced by a curled moustache. The next day the red sari gives way to a

white dhoti. Then the pot is removed and the bow put in its place. Gradually, the

parrot becomes the peacock, the sugarcane becomes the spear, turmeric becomes

ash, so that on the full moon, when only men enter the temple, the deity is an ascetic displaying fourteen symbols of manhood. Ileshwara makes men fathers.

Ileshwari makes women mothers.” (Pattanaik 2008).

Ila's transformation is not portrayed as a deviation but as a divine order, reinforcing the precolonial acceptance of gender fluidity within the Hindu tradition, highlighting a premodern Indian epistemology that embraced multiplicity and transition. In the aftermath of ritualised experiences, the queerness of practitioners becomes not merely performative but ontologically grounded in the divine and the human. As Carola Erika Lorea writes, “The practitioner who emerges from the liminal experience achieves the status of *mānuṣ* ('human')... transcending the constrictive identity dictated by the sex/gender paradigm” (Lorea, 2018). This challenges the essentialist Western construct of gender as a biological absolute due to the influence of Christianity. The Britishers brought a heteropatriarchal missionary mindset that deeply embedded these binary notions into both societal norms and individual consciousness of the native Indians. Christian doctrine asserted that God created only two sexes of male and female which left no scope for identities that did not conform to this dichotomy. As a result, all other identities were labelled as deviant, leading to their marginalization and erasure.

However, when compared with Yuvanashva's experience of androgyny, the contrast becomes apparent. Ila, being a mythological figure, is accepted within the sacred realm, whereas Yuvanashva, a mortal king, is expected to conform to heteronormative expectations of gender and kingship. His refusal to reject his maternal instincts destabilises the social order, forcing him to become an anomaly rather than an accepted dual-gendered figure like Ila. This disparity between mythological reverence and lived erasure exemplifies Judith Butler's assertion that, “The regulation of gender appears to operate as a set of demands on a social

subject, demands that are imposed through punishment and reward, but also through exclusion and pathologisation” (Butler 2011).

The figure of Ardhanarishvara, the composite deity of Shiva and Parvati, serves as one of Hinduism’s most explicit challenges to gender binaries, depicting the inherent unity of masculinity and femininity rather than their opposition. Ardhanarishvara represents a state of balance, where male and female energies coexist harmoniously, without hierarchy or subjugation. As a symbol, Ardhanarishvara disrupts the essentialist view of gender as biologically predetermined, instead positioning it as complementary and interdependent. The very form of the deity; one half male, one half female, visually and conceptually rejects gender absolutism, emphasizing that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive but coexist within all individuals in different proportions.

In *The Pregnant King*, Yuvanashva embodies an earthly version of this divine androgyny, yet he is not revered like Ardhanarishvara. Instead, his pregnancy and maternal instincts provoke discomfort and erasure, as seen in Simantini’s ultimatum:

“Choose. What would you rather be—king or mother?” (Pattanaik 2008).

This stark contrast raises a fundamental question: Why does Indian society venerate Ardhanarishvara as divine but refuse to accept gender fluidity in real people? Butler argues that “The norm of gender is not only internal to the subject, a psychic and/or bodily imprint, but is also part of a regulatory regime, a disciplinary apparatus of power.” (Butler 2011). Thus, while androgyny can exist in religious and symbolic contexts, its manifestation in human bodies threatens the stability of gendered power structures. This politics of aesthetics is not incidental but a deliberate invocation of bodily desires and semiotics that negotiate a space of agency. As Indrani Chatterjee suggests, “Explicit invocation of bodies, desires, appetites, and signs constituted the foreground of a larger politics at work” (Chatterjee,

2012). By invoking Ardhanarishvara, Pattanaik critiques this paradoxical approach to gender fluidity, demonstrating how society selectively acknowledges gender multiplicity when it serves a symbolic purpose but marginalises those who embody it in reality.

The story of Shikhandi, another significant figure in the Mahabharata, presents a different dimension of gender fluidity—one that is imposed rather than naturally occurring. Shikhandi was born female but was raised as a male by King Drupada, who was determined to have a son capable of defeating Bhishma in battle. This reveals the instrumentalisation of gender, where an individual's identity is shaped and manipulated according to sociopolitical needs. Shikhandi's crisis unfolds on their wedding night, when their biological reality is revealed, creating a rupture in the performative facade of masculinity:

“It was on her wedding night that she was confronted with her femininity for the first time and wanted to kill herself” (Dharma 1999).

At this moment, Shikhandi's constructed gender identity collapses, mirroring Butler's claim that gender performance is always precarious and dependent on social validation which is reflected in her statement that, “The reduction of gender to appearance requires both a perceiver and a context of reception in which the appropriateness of that gender is both assumed and confirmed. Without this confirmation, the gender performance may not be read as intelligible at all” (Butler 2011).

The intervention of Sthuna, a Yaksha who grants Shikhandi his masculinity, reinforces the malleability of gender, suggesting that it is not a fixed trait but something that can be bestowed, taken, or negotiated within cultural frameworks. However, Shikhandi's status remains unstable - while he is treated as a man in battle, yet is perceived as female when convenient, particularly when used as a weapon against Bhishma, who refuses to fight women.

This fluid yet conditional recognition of Shikhandi's gender parallels Yuvanashva's struggle- both characters embody gender multiplicity, yet their recognition and legitimacy are externally dictated. They are allowed to exist only within the limits prescribed by social structures, Proving Sara Salih's Claim that, "Gender is not a stable identity but a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs" (Salih 2002).

The juxtaposition of Ila, Ardhanarishvara, and Shikhandi with Yuvanashva underscores a critical inconsistency in Indian tradition. While mythological narratives accommodate gender fluidity, contemporary social structures enforce rigid binaries, excluding and erasing those who do not conform. This contradiction between religious symbolism and lived reality exposes the mechanisms through which gender categories are policed and sustained. Butler argues that the persistence of binary gender norms is not because of their inherent truth but because of the political and institutional power vested in them (Butler 2011). By reviving these mythological figures, *The Pregnant King* critiques the erasure of gender multiplicity in contemporary Indian society, urging a re-examination of identity beyond colonial and patriarchal frameworks.

Role of Language in Enforcing and Opposing Gender Binaries in *The Pregnant King*

Language operates as a fundamental mechanism of power, shaping and reinforcing gender binaries in *The Pregnant King*. Through naming, speech acts, and deliberate silences, Pattanaik reveals how linguistic structures are not neutral descriptors of reality but active agents that police and regulate identity. Gender, as Judith Butler argues, is not pre-discursive but is produced and sustained through language:

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler 2011).

In the novel, Yuvanashva's androgyny is contained through linguistic conventions that deny him recognition as both king and mother. Naming and linguistic categorisation play a crucial role in enforcing gender binaries. Yuvanashva, despite physically experiencing pregnancy and childbirth, is repeatedly addressed as "king" rather than mother. The title "king" functions as a linguistic tool of containment, ensuring that his identity remains within hegemonic masculinity despite his transformation. This reflects West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender", which argues that gender is socially assigned through continuous performance rather than biological fact (West and Zimmerman 1987). Further, it proves Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of linguistic exclusion, which posits that women's power is often erased through their inability to be named within dominant discourses (Spivak 2003). Despite giving birth and nursing Mandhata, Yuvanashva's motherhood remains conditional and temporary. The denial of linguistic recognition functions as a tool of patriarchal discipline, reinforcing Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity.

While naming enforces gender binaries, silence functions as an equally powerful tool of erasure. The resistance to categorisation, especially through visual ambiguity and androgyny, generates unease in the normative frame. As E. S. Abbitt suggests, "The androgynous figure is often read as monstrous precisely because it resists incorporation into a readable system of sexed bodies" (Abbitt, 2001). The most striking instance of linguistic exclusion in *The Pregnant King* is the deliberate suppression of Yuvanashva's maternal identity. Despite giving birth to Mandhata, Yuvanashva is not allowed to claim motherhood:

"The world must not know that you are an aberration" (Pattanaik 2008).

This forced silence aligns with Spender's theory of linguistic erasure, which states that, "Language helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying, and manipulating the world. It is not neutral" (Spender 1980). Yuvanashva's maternal experience

is omitted from historical records, reflecting Adrienne Rich's critique of "compulsory motherhood," which dictates that only women are socially permitted to be mothers. He says, "Motherhood is earned, not assumed. But the assumption that all women are inherently mothers, and that their primary function is to bear and rear children, is one of the most potent forms of female oppression" (Rich 1995). According to Rich, motherhood is not simply a personal experience, but an institution regulated by patriarchal norms that define who is allowed to mother and how. Although Yuvanashva gives birth and desires to mother Mandhata, society denies him this role as he does not conform to the cisgender female identity traditionally sanctioned for motherhood.

Despite language's role in enforcing gender binaries, *The Pregnant King* also presents moments where language collapses, exposing the performative nature of gender. The most powerful moment of linguistic resistance occurs when Mandhata questions Yuvanashva's identity to which, Yuvanashva's response was, "Does it matter? I gave you life. That is enough" (Pattanaik 2008). This disrupts the binary framework of gendered parenthood, rejecting the linguistic constraints that dictate who can be a mother or father. This aligns with Butler's claim that gender categories are regulatory rather than natural, the moment an individual refuses to conform to language's gendered expectations, the illusion of a stable identity begins to collapse; as she argues, "If the term that confers recognizability fails, then the being to whom that term is meant to refer either does not exist or exists in a radically reduced way" (Butler 2004).

Similarly, Shikhandi's gender recognition is conditional, socially validated only when it serves a purpose. While raised as male and addressed with masculine pronouns, Shikhandi is rejected as a man once their biological reality is revealed, demonstrating that gendered language is a political tool rather than a neutral descriptor as Butler states, "Language

sustains gendered beings before we arrive on the scene, but it also decides, for us, what will and will not be a recognizable life.” (Butler 2011).

By highlighting the ways in which gender is policed through language, the novel critiques the historical processes of exclusion that shape gender identity. Michel Foucault states, “Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (Foucault, 2002). The novel illustrates how gender-nonconforming identities are erased from history through linguistic regulation, forcing individuals like Yuvanashva into silence. At the same time, moments of linguistic breakdown expose the fragility of gender categories. When language fails to contain identity, the illusion of a stable gender order collapses, revealing the performative nature of gender itself (Butler 2011). Thus, *The Pregnant King* forces readers to confront the inadequacy of language in capturing the full spectrum of human identity, urging a re-examination of gender beyond binary linguistic constraints.

Conclusion

Through the characters of Yuvanashva, Ila and Ardhanarishvara, *The Pregnant King* challenges the conventional notion of gender and projects androgyny not as an aberration but as a site of cultural inquiry. Using Hindu mythology and the theory of gender performativity of Judith Butler, the paper analyses how rituals and language collaborate to enforce binary gender roles.

Beyond its narrative structure, *The Pregnant King* also serves as a critique of gender performativity and its institutional codification both across literary traditions and in sociopolitical life. It does not so much portray androgyny as anomaly; instead, he unmasks the historical, textual, and ideological institutions that perpetuate gender binarism. By

drawing upon mythology and gender theory and narrative subversion, the novel reads as a provocative intervention in current gender debates, demanding a rethinking in critical terms of the construction, perpetuation, and policing of gender.

The novel presents gender as a dynamic, evolving spectrum rather than a static binary, demonstrating that identity is fluid, contested, and perpetually reimagined. Yuvanashva's identification as both mother and king directs attention to the manner in which society fights to incorporate bodies that are outside its expectations. Though sanctioned in myths, it is not addressed freely in society owing to the manner in which heteropatriarchal regimes decide to recognise bodies and persons. By erasing boundaries between the reproductive and the political; the sacred and the social, the paper brings forward the tensions between material enforcement and the gender fluidity in mythology.

By analysing Yuvanashva's embodied experience alongside figures like Ila and Ardhanarishvara, the paper depicts how *The Pregnant King* challenges hegemonic masculinity, compulsory motherhood, and the linguistic policing of gender. The paper demonstrates how *The Pregnant King* reimagines mythic traditions and also engages critically with debates related to gender fluidity, recognition, and normativity in the contemporary world. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions about how literature can resist essentialist identities and reimagine gender as a mutable, embodied, and contested domain of meaning. Furthermore, the paper contributes to ongoing critical discussions about the intersection of literature and queerness. It ultimately argues that *The Pregnant King* reclaims mythology as a space for gender experimentation and subversion, inviting us to imagine gender not as a biological imperative but as a narrative site of contestation, agency, and transformation.

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