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I am a Mother Albeit a Man: A Matrifocal Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King*

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Abstract

The apotheosising of mothers in Indian mythology and subsequently in collective consciousness notwithstanding, their representation is limited to a passive, desexualised figure. The revisionist mythological novel *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik is the story of Yuvanashva, the king of Vallabhi, who accidentally gets pregnant by drinking a magic potion meant for his three wives, who are unable to produce an heir. After giving birth to his child, Mandhata, he longs to be called a mother. Despite being a king, the epitome of manhood, his whole existence becomes a prolonged wait to satiate his burgeoning maternal feelings. The novel takes an interesting stand on what or who makes a mother. It captures the agony of a man unable to father a child and the plight of women whose worth is completely tied to their ability to produce children, especially a male child. It also presents the story of Shilavati, the mother of Yuvanashva, for whom motherhood is a source of power to subvert patriarchal control. In this paper, I propose to read the novel closely through the lens of motherhood studies to locate how this revisionist narrative challenges the subconscious assumption that a woman's primary obligation is to reproduce and that a man cannot assume the role of a caregiver. I will engage with the idea of male mothering by degendering the notion of 'maternal' and considering it a social category. I will analyse the mother-son relationship in the novel through the concept of 'maternal enthrallment' proposed by the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar.

Keywords: Maternal Enthrallment; Maternal Thinking; Matrifocal Narrative; Motherhood; Mythology.

Introduction

The thrust of the novel *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik is its examination of gender and sexuality through a re-engagement with the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata.* The novel, therefore, foregrounds the fluidity of the human body through its interrogation of the conflict between desire and duty, as well as personal and social truths. When questioned about the inspiration behind *The Pregnant King*, Pattanaik's first fictional work, he says that the idea of a man becoming pregnant fascinated him, "As people, we are comfortable exploring the unknown or the unfamiliar through fiction. So I felt this was a great place for people to deal with gender and sexuality related issues that generally frighten us" (Saxena 2017). The popularity and cultural significance of the novel is implicitly illustrated in the translation of the novel into a play by V. Balakrishnan, founder and artistic director of "Theatre Nisha", Chennai. It was also staged by the Delhi-based theatre group "Theatre Worms" under the name *Flesh* and directed by Kaushik Bose.

This research paper focuses on the representation of motherhood and reads the novel *The Pregnant King* as a matrifocal narrative. In matrifocal narratives, the mother plays a significant cultural and social role, and motherhood is structurally central to the plot and is thematically elaborated and valued (O'Reilly "Matricentric feminism" 17). This article looks at how this narrative fiction threatens hegemonic motherhood and disrupts the established narratives of motherhood, or the self-sacrificing mother buttressed through moral codes convened through mythology. It also tries to renegotiate the trope of the good/bad mother. "In India, motherhood is women's a priori identity. Studies on Indian weltanschauung confirm the emphasis on women's procreative role. Indian social ideology is replete with the mother trope: rivers are maternalised, each village has a local mother goddess and, among a considerable section of Hindus, the cow symbolises the ever-giving, silent mother" (Amrita Nandy 65). Since motherhood is seen as a woman's supreme function, it is important to contextualise motherhood's normative appeal and cultural import. The glorification of motherhood results in the impossible standards of idealised motherhood, which can be disempowering if not oppressive to women. "The feminist dilemma is how to retrieve motherhood as a source of emancipation, not by eliminating it as an obstacle but by redefining appropriate terms and conditions, and recreating a social structure that can make motherhood a conceivably creative experience" (Krishnaraj 37-38). Adrienne Rich defines 'mothering' as "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children" (qtd. in O'Reilly

"Matricentric feminism" 22). She posits that the actual experience of this role could be seen as a source of empowerment if utilised efficiently in contrast to 'motherhood,' which is "the institution which aims at ensuring that all women shall remain under male control" (qtd. in O'Reilly "Matricentric feminism" 22). Since motherhood is construed as a patriarchal institution, a cultural construction, the experience of which varies with time and place, it is possible to challenge and change hegemonic motherhood.

This paper resists motherhood's universality appeal by bringing the non-normative mothers to the centre. It looks at motherhood as socially and historically constructed by patriarchy and contests the fixed, stable and essentialist identity of motherhood. This article adopts a matrifocal reading of the novel as proposed by Andrea O'Reilly, whereby the understanding of the text "attends to and accentuates the maternal thematic in any given text" (O'Reilly "Matricentric feminism" 17). In the context of the fictional narrative *The Pregnant King*, the research paper tries to extend the obvious queer politics of the novel that has been widely researched (Chandran 2019; Dowerah 2021; Sapkota 2019). This article analyses the different ways of being a mother as represented in the novel, foregrounding the gender-neutrality of 'maternal thinking' proposed by Sara Ruddick. It aims to problematise and subvert hegemonic motherhood and engages with the possibility of queering motherhood. The paper further addresses how the novel figures non-biological mothers and childless women and investigates the question: how does the 'complex of maternal enthrallment' affect the mother-son relationship and impact the lives of the women?

Yuvanashva in the *Mahabharata*

Yuvanashva, the king of Vallabhi, features in the *Mahabharata* as a minor character, the forefather of the Ikshvaku clan, who lived many generations before the Kurukshetra war. In the *Mahabharata*, King Yuvanashva becomes pregnant after accidentally drinking water from a pitcher after a hunting expedition at sage Bhrigu's hermitage meant for his queens to conceive a child*. A son is delivered through the king's thigh by the Ashwini twins. When the child cries for milk, Indra comes down to earth, cuts his thumb, and lets the prince suckle on it, for milk is said to flow in the veins of gods, and Yuvanashva had no breasts and no milk to offer (Srivastava 2017). "Mandhata was thus a man-child born of a man with

* In *The Pregnant King*, Yuvanashva drinks the magic potion the two Siddhas, Yaja and Upayaja, prepared. Yuvanashva drinks from the pot, mistaking it for water after being tricked by the ghosts of Somvat(i) and Sumedha.

men serving as the delivery nurse and wet nurse. This story is meant to show Mandhata as an extraordinary hyper masculine being, much valued in Tantrik tradition… The strange story of his birth indicated a being untouched by women, i.e., material and sensory pleasures" (Pattanaik 2022). Pattanaik subverts this story, which was supposed to be hypermasculine, by construing Yuvanashva with his masculinity compromised. "I may look like a man but I am not sure that I am a man…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?" (331-32). This novel ventures further into the experientiality of the king as both a mother and father.

Pattanaik begins his novel *The Pregnant King* with the assertion, "This book is a deliberate distortion of tales in the epics. History has been folded, geography crumpled" (vii). Pattanaik explains that the story of King Yuvanashva appears only twice in the *Mahabharata*, once recounted by the sage Lomasha during the period of exile of Pandavas and the second time by sage Vyasa to the Pandavas during the war. In the novel, Yuvanashva emerges as a contemporary of Pandavas, who engages in dialogue with Arjuna; his life is influenced by the developments in the Kuru dynasty; and his son Mandhata weds the daughter of Shikandi. Pattanaik also introduces characters such as Shilavati, Yuvanashva's mother, his second son, Jayanta, and Shikandi's daughter, Amba, in this novel. They do not have a scriptural basis, and Pattanaik declares, "They have been churned out of my imagination as I have tried to weave a tapestry of tales that at the very least delights" (vii). In this revisionist narrative, Pattanaik juxtaposes two different timelines, the story of Yuvanashva and of Pandavas, to frame the events in tandem with his perspective. This selective representation of episodes from a text of cultural importance, such as the *Mahabharata*, involving a relocation in time and perspective, is an attempt for "conscienticization", as Elise Boulding puts it, is the "process of awakening on the part of a subjugated group to a consciousness of the facts of structural dominance" (qtd. in Shah 29).

The Pregnant King

The novel begins with an emasculated Yuvanashva being prevented from entering the battlefield of Kurukshetra by his mother, Shilavati, the regent of his kingdom. Despite being crowned king and married to three women, Simantini, Pulomi and Keshini, he considers himself a failed man because of his inability to have children. After Yuvanashva's third marriage produces no heirs, he performs a *yagna* (a ritual of offerings to gods) to

beget a child. Two friends, Somvat and Sumedha, come to this ceremony masquerading as a couple to receive the cows that are distributed to Brahmana couples during the yagna. They get caught and are confined to a dungeon where Somvat exchanges his manhood with a yaksha (a spirit) and transforms into Somvati to escape persecution. The next day in court, they challenge Yuvanashva for insisting they go back to their heteronormative life. Yuvanashva sentences the two youths to death for their aberration from their prescribed gender roles. That night, the king is tricked into drinking the magic potion meant for his wives by the ghosts of the two youths Somvat(i) and Sumedha. Yuvanashva ends up getting pregnant and delivers a healthy baby boy from his left thigh. The child's birth is kept a secret from everyone, including Yuvanashva, who thought it was a lump on his thigh.

When Asanga, the palace doctor, announces to Yuvanashva that he has removed the lump from the king's thigh, he responds, "I feel strangely content and fulfilled. I feel happy. I feel like crying. I cannot explain it. I feel a strange feeling in my heart. A longing, a yearning…. I feel as if my body is incomplete. It is crying out for fulfilment. My heart feels heavy. It beats slowly. As if tapping me to sleep. I feel a fullness in my chest. It is a strange feeling. A sweet suffering" (201). After the child's birth, Yuvanashva was overcome by maternal feelings, and when milk oozed out of his chest, he understood that it was no lump but a baby growing in him. Yuvanashva's longing and feeling of incompleteness were overcome only when he suckled his child. He named him Mandhata, meaning "he who was nursed by me" (205). Shilavati opposes Yuvanashva's indulgence with the child. She wanted motherhood to remain with the women and felt that his attachment to the child would weaken him as a King. Half-heartedly, Yuvanashva agrees to take care of the kingdom, leaving his child to the care of his first wife, Simantini, who was declared the mother of Mandhata to the world.

For years, Yuvanashva craved to be called the mother of Mandhata, but fearing society, he could not act on his motherly feelings. "So he focused on kingship and hoped this separation could cure him of his intense craving to be a mother" (279). When Mandhata rejects the proposal of Amba, the daughter of Shikandi, stating that he cannot wed the daughter of someone who has questionable manhood, Yuvanashva finally confesses to Mandhata about his birth. Mandhata tells Yuvanashva to forget the conversation and that the King can never be his mother but his father. Yuvanashva pleads to Mandhata to call him a mother for once at least, but his wish is unfulfilled. Embittered, Yuvanashva declares the truth to the world, but

Shilavati dismisses him as mad, for madness seems a better condition than being an aberration. Yuvanashva leaves his kingdom behind as he cannot lead a fake life. He understands that he will always be a deviant in the world as his truth terrifies people. Amrita Nandy opines that the ideal mother figure that is "embedded in the metanarrative of motherhood, one of the most powerful cultural nuggets of our collective imagination and cultural ecosystem" (Nandy 16) is a "heterosexual, married woman who is, at best, 'naturally fertile'" (Kakar qtd. in Amrita Nandy 16). Since Yuvanashva's motherhood departs from the hegemonic motherhood, it results in his pathologization, branding him as an aberrant and a madman. Pattanaik, through the character of Yuvanashva, the king-mother, queers motherhood whereby "any of the central gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of 'expected' motherhood are challenged. These challenges can be experiential, empirical, or theoretical" (Gibson 6). To queer motherhood, thus, is to destabilize patriarchal motherhood, particularly its ideological mandates of essentialization, normalization, naturalization, and biologicalization. Queering motherhood means that not all mothers are women or that there is one right or correct way to create a family. It also means that the desire and ability to mother is not innate to one sex over the other and that kinship is not defined only by blood (O'Reilly *Matricentric feminism: Theory* 133).

The All-Consuming Mother: A Case of Maternal Enthrallment

The complex relationship between Shilavati and Yuvanashva is one of the striking themes of the novel *The Pregnant King*. Yuvanashva represents the powerful infantile conflict of "the boy's attempt to identify with his mother but also the man's effort to free himself from her domination" (Kakar *Inner World* 116), and Shilavati becomes the all-consuming mother who longs to be a ruler. Born as the princess of Avanti, Shilavati is deprived of kingship being a woman. Later, she is married to Prasenajit, who is prophesied to die at the tender age of eighteen. Her father's acceptance of Prasenajit's proposal stems from his desire to see his daughter rule despite the limitation society placed on women: "with widowhood will come the opportunity to rule" (29). Shilavati understands the nuances of how patriarchy works. Although people are assured of her capability as a ruler, the social restrictions imposed on a woman dissuade them from fully accepting her as their monarch. The markers are always everywhere to remind Shilavati that she is only a regent, not a ruler; it is Yuvanashva to whom the kingdom truly belongs. There is no outrage on Shilavati's part for the disparage, she lodges her resistance by avoiding the Mahasabha, where she is allotted to "sit on a silver pedestal with green cushions placed low-

er than the gold throne with red cushions" (41). She chooses to manage Vallabhi's affairs from the women's quarters, sitting on the floor on a tiger-skin rug where nothing is placed above her. Shilavati realises that it is only through her status as the mother of the future king that she can rule Vallabhi. As Kakar points out, "For an Indian woman, imminent motherhood is not only the personal fulfilment of an old wish and the biological consummation of a lifelong promise, but an event in which the culture confirms her status as a renewer of the race, and extends to her a respect and consideration which were not accorded to her as a mere wife" (Kakar *Inner World* 90).

Kakar postulates that during the developmental phase of the child, the notion of a 'good mother', which includes maternal tolerance, emotional vitality, protectiveness, and nurturing, becomes the core of every Indian's positive identity of the mother and the boy expresses conviction in propitiating his mother's demands (*Inner World* 122). "Yuvanashva realised it pleased his mother when he obeyed her. So he obeyed her, doing all that she said without question" (48). "Alongside this positive identity, however, and normally repressed, is its counterpart: the negative identity that originates in experiences with the demanding, sometimes stifling, all too present mother" (Kakar *Inner World* 122). Yuvanashva is caught between his desire to identify as well as resist his mother, who is seen as a threat to his masculinity. After Yuvanashva's marriage to Simantini, he is crowned the king, but Shilavati insists on ruling the kingdom, calling him a child and asking him to focus more on his husbandly duties and produce an heir. "Although sacrificial motherhood, and in particular intensive mothering, requires the denial of the mother's own selfhood in positioning the children's needs as always before her own, there are other ways to mother- ways that do not deny a mother her agency, autonomy, authenticity, and authority, and allow her both her selfhood and power" (O' Reilly *Matricentric feminism: Theory* 97). Shilavati could break away from the shackles of sacrificial motherhood as she focuses on her growth, autonomy, and power, while simultaneously taking care of her child. She embodies a particular way of mothering where motherhood can still be embraced without denying one's selfhood.

In the novel, Yuvanashva and Shilavati exhibit internalised "reprosexuality", or the need for compulsory procreation for the sake of generational succession, which is believed to bring meaning to one's life. Michael Warner defines "reprosexuality" as "an interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction and personal identity that involves… more than reproducing, more than even compulsory hetero-

sexuality: it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfilment in generational transmission" (qtd. in Amrita Nandy 23). The crows haunt Shilavati in her sleep for delaying Yuvanashva's marriage. They represent the *pitrs*, the ancestors of Yuvanashva**,** who wait impatiently for Yuvanashva to pay his debt by fathering a child so they can attain *moksha* (liberation of the soul) by crossing the other side of river Vaitarni and be reborn in the land of the living. The crows remind Shilavati of her duty as the royal matriarch and even accuse her of being stingy with her womb as she stopped with just one son, allowing only one of them to cross the river of Vaitarni. The cawing of the crows becomes intense when Shilavati's daughters-in-law bleed every month with unfailing regularity. The crow is also featured on the cover picture of the novel, pointing out the intricate connection of parenthood and *moksha* in the Indian subcontinent. It is worth noting that the association of the birth of the son with social respectability is also coupled with the notion of *moksha* and liberation of ancestors. If women fail to produce male heirs, it is considered that their ancestors will not attain *moksha* and cannot be reborn again in the mortal world.

The story of Yuvanashva can be read as a case of 'maternal enthrallment', a concept put forward by the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar. According to Kakar, maternal enthrallment is "the wish to get away from the mother together with the dread of separation, the wish to destroy the engulfing mother who also ensures the child's survival and finally, the incestuous desire coexisting with the terror inspired by an overwhelming female sexuality" (Kakar "The Engulfing Mother" 1). Yuvanashva's desire for an heir is exacerbated because he is kept away from the rule, hurting his male ego. Being heirless, he feels less of a man. Yuvanashva exclaims to his mother, "I have two wives, mother. But no children. I hold the bow of kingship but it is you who rule Vallabhi. Even you do not think I am good enough!" (81). Kakar points out that the first element of maternal enthrallment is the two opposing wishes of the older child, that is, leaving versus staying with the mother. Yuvanashva is torn between "a powerful push for independent and autonomous functioning from the mother and an equally strong pull towards surrender and re-immersion in the enveloping maternal fusion from which he has just emerged" (Kakar "The Engulfing Mother" 2). Yuvanashva craves individuation and independence but is unable to do so, fearing exile from his mother's presence. Despite remaining an obedient son, he begrudges his mother for delaying his kingship and infantilising him. He saw an opportunity in the case of the two Brahmana youths, Sumedha and Somvat(i), to demonstrate to people that he, too, can provide appropriate judgements and that he is as capable a

ruler as his mother. "Yuvanashva was clear he wanted the case to be presented in the maha-sabha, not in his mother's audience chamber. This was his opportunity to show his prowess as king" (145). When Shilavati suggests to Yuvanashva that he should let the two Brahmana boys walk free, Yuvanashva sees sense in her argument but feels that she is making him an object of ridicule and is publicly invalidating his intelligence through her untimely advice, "Tell my mother, it is for me, the king of Vallabhi, not his mother, or any other woman to decide what is appropriate" (158). This change in Yuvanashva's tone towards his mother can be seen as the second aspect of maternal enthrallment, which is the conflict around the son's survival and destruction of the mother.

Shilavati grows indifferent to Yuvanashva and showcases maternal ambivalence towards him when Yuvanashva fails to go to his mother's chamber because of his morning sickness. She indeed felt ashamed that she was nursing her grudges against her son while he was in misery, but pride came in the way of her maternal affection. Rozsika Parker defines it as "a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings exist side by side" (qtd. in O'Reilly *Matricentric feminism: Theory* 97). Barbara Almond argues "that ambivalence itself is not the problem but rather the guilt and anxiety that ambivalence provokes" (qtd. in O'Reilly *Matricentric feminism: Theory* 97). Shilavati finally visits the king after many months, only after Asanga reveals to her that the king is pregnant with a child. She orders Asanga to kill the baby growing inside the left thigh of the king. When Asanga reminds her that it is still a child, she says: "Women carry children in their bodies. Not men. What men can carry can only be monsters. Kill it" (194). However, the queens of Yuvanashva intercede, and the king gives birth to the child.

For sixteen years after the birth of Mandhata, Shilavati and Yuvanashva do not interact. But when Yuvanashva renounced the world, Shilavati persuades him to return, asking him to let her see him for the last time, but he does not relent. He wished to tell his repentant mother that his renunciation of the world was more of an escape from the lies woven around his life than a punishment to her. "But he could say nothing. He did not want to defend or explain his actions. He longed to turn around and hug her. Just once" (307), but he continued his journey without even saying goodbye to his mother. Shilavati waited for Yuvanashva to return at the palace gates and died waiting for him. Yuvanashva has always longed to function as an adult, virile man, but he felt stifled in the presence of the bountiful maternal figure, his mother. Kakar points out that in the presence of an all-consuming mother who dictates a son's life, the maternal

threat is real. "The fantasied renunciation of masculinity is but one resolution which the male child may resort to in his helplessness" (Kakar *Inner World* 111). Hence, Yuvanashva's renunciation of the world can be seen as symbolic of his castrating himself and giving up his masculinity as a form of recuperation for his vulnerability. Inadvertently, this renunciation sets him on a path of inner growth, and he emerges as the embodiment of society's unspoken truth, an anomalous, unconventional mother, but nevertheless a mother. Yuvanashva gets freedom from his embodied identities only when he atones for his sins and builds a temple for Somvat(i) and Sumedha. Yuvanashva finally understands their predicament as Vallabhi disapproves of them as husband and wife; Vallabhi rejects Yuvanashva as a mother.

Barren Women and Non-biological Motherhood

Ketu. H. Katrak posits that the only expression of sexuality that is acceptable and even romanticised, validated and glorified is motherhood within a heterosexual marriage; "other manifestations that pertain to female sexuality are disrespected or pitied such as childless women who may be single by choice, or infertile women, or widows" (Katrak 10). It is presumed that a woman's identity outside motherhood is meaningless. The enormous significance placed on childbearing, especially a male child, in traditional Indian society points to the larger question of the plight of those women who could not embrace motherhood. *The Pregnant King* addresses this issue, and it highlights the lives of those women who are treated as unfulfilled or incomplete women solely because of their inability to have a child. Women without children are also considered to be possessed by *nirrti* "a negative concept of a spirit that is exceedingly ugly and wholly evil but whose special function is to destroy everything good" (Bhattacharji 66). Hence, childless women are considered inauspicious. The three wives of Yuvanashva long to become mothers because they will be deemed fulfilled women by society only if they give birth. Their claim to power is not as wives of the king but as the mothers of the future king. "The concern with progeny is also a strategy to gain power through proxy control. It further explains the disproportionate importance given to motherhood, primarily because it becomes a means to another end" (Jain 57). Moreover, the stigma of a barren woman is so pertinent that it is impossible to overlook it. When the palace was looking for a wet nurse for Mandhata, "Pregnant women and nursing mothers avoided serving in the palace. They were afraid the unhappy glance of the barren queens would harm their child" (202). When Pulomi, the second wife of Yuvanashva, gets pregnant after he forces himself on her for berating him by question-

ing his manhood. Pulomi feels violated, and for days, she tries to scrub her body to remove her sense of violation. "But then the seed he had left in her womb had sprouted. She felt pure again. But she could not forgive the king" (224). What must be foregrounded here is that despite the sexual violence against her, Pulomi is satisfied that she is finally becoming a mother. She feels pure after the impurity thrust upon her. The two wives of Yuvanashva not getting an invitation to the festivities to celebrate Pulomi's pregnancy is also directly related to the notion of *nirrti*, as they both could not conceive a child, hence inauspicious.

The novel, through the character of Simantini, opens up the conversation on nonbiological motherhood; it brings to light the dilemma of a woman who has assumed the role of mother wholeheartedly without giving birth. When Simantini claims to be the mother of Mandhata, Yuvanashva dismisses her claim as it is him, not her, who gave birth to the child. Simantini's love, care and nurture are not considered. When Yuvanashva discounts her, she says, "I may not be Mandhata's mother by blood or milk. But I am his mother by love" (231). Despite this affirmation, she is haunted by the fact that she could not give birth to a child. She is envious of the gash of childbirth on Yuvanashva's left inner thigh and his ability to breastfeed the child. When her husband was busy at court, "When no one was looking, Simantini would offer her breast to the boy. He would suckle, and find it dry, turn away and cry" (220). In her dream, she hears the tamarind tree shouting from the corner of the room, "lies, lies" (279), and the priestesses of Bahugami, who often tormented her in her dreams, said, "If you are really the mother, then show us the milk in your breast and the tear of your skin" (280). Simantini finds it difficult to fully embrace the term mother only because she falls short of the societal definition of a mother.

The tamarind tree of the corner room is personified in the novel. It can be interpreted as a symbol that stands tall as a reminder of fertility. It is situated in the women's quarters and has cradles on its branches. In Hindu tradition, the cradle is tied to a holy tree as a part of a ritual which is meant to heal infertility. "Childless couples tie a cradle to the holy trees in the temple and pray for progeny" (AstroVedpedia). The corner room is also the place allotted to the three queens of Yuvanashva while they menstruate. "Further, in the Hindu faith, women are prohibited from participating in normal life while menstruating. She must be "purified" before she is allowed to return to her family and day to day chores of her life" (Garg & Anand). The location of the tamarind tree close to the corner room is also a grim reminder to the menstruating women that their womb has not yield-

ed a child at that time. When Simantini and Pulomi accidentally run into the room of Yuvanashva while he is intimate with his third wife, Keshini, neither of the two wives feels anger or jealousy, "Simantini looked at the tamarind tree of the corner room across the wall and the cradles hanging on its branches", hoping that Keshini would bear a son for him. The tamarind tree here emerges as a fertility god or goddess, and this gesture of Simantini appears to be a silent appeal, a prayer to the tamarind tree to make their husband truly king through fathering a child. Yuvanashva is taken to the corner room for the operation, where Shilavati confirms to the queens that the king is pregnant, and the child must be terminated. She could see the tamarind tree through the window: "The cradles on its branches tinkled in the wind as if protesting against her decision" (197) to terminate the pregnancy.

The King-Mother

Maternal thinking refers to the "intellectual capacities (the mother) develops, the judgements she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, and the values she affirms" through the maternal practice (Ruddick 96). O'Reilly points out that Sara Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking" paves the way for the possibilities of male mothering as the emphasis on being a mother is on the practice of mothering beyond the biological and social imperative. The title of a mother is not strictly limited to biological mothers or even women. Ruddick's repositioning of the word "mother" from a noun to a verb helps in degendering the motherwork (O'Reilly *Matricentric feminism: Theory* 66-67). "More specifically, divesting care of biology, Ruddick has enabled scholars to destabilize patriarchal motherhood by dislodging the gender essentialism that grounds and structures it" (O'Reilly *Matricentric feminism: Theory* 67). Ruddick breaks down the maternal practice as a discipline that is governed by (at least) three interests in satisfying the demands for the "preservation, growth, and acceptability" (98) of a child. Not only is it the duty of a mother to preserve the child's life, but also to promote natural growth so that the child grows up to be an adult whom she appreciates and others accept. This maternal practice is governed by maternal thinking in which 'maternal' becomes a gender-neutral social category.

Yuvanashva and Simantini are both mothers to Mandhata by this argument. Both are equally involved in bringing up the child, and they perform motherwork. Despite Simantini being given the charge of raising Mandhata, Yuvanashva does not abstain from mothering duties. In spite of the opposition, Yuvanashva insisted on nursing his child and wanted

the cradle to be placed in his chamber to take care of the baby. Yuvanashva even cross-dresses as a woman in a green saree wearing the sixteen love charms of marriage, such as toe-rings, nose-rings, earrings, anklets, and armlets to offer prayers to the goddess of fever when Mandhata is afflicted by fever. The irony of Yuvanashva's gender transgression is not lost on the readers. The desire to preserve the life of one's child overhauls his earlier commitment to put to death two young boys for not conforming to their gender identity as heterosexual men. His estrangement from Mandhata is part of his maternal practice to promote the growth of his child in a patriarchal society. He has strategically pulled away from his son as motherhood was seen as a disease "when it spring's in a man's body" (278). Hence, he focuses more on kingship as a form of sublimation to his intense craving to be a mother. Yuvanashva cannot be considered an absent father/mother figure; in fact, his detachment is quintessentially a part of his maternal thinking to avoid the ostracisation of Mandhata. He confesses to Mandhata that he kept his motherhood a secret because he wanted his child, the one to whom he had given birth, to become the King of Vallabhi. "I submitted to this lie so that none would challenge your right to the throne. I wanted my son, not Pulomi's, to be king. I did what any good royal mother would do. I secured your inheritance" (294). Yuvanashva gatekeeps the right to rule only for the son born to him; through this exercise, he emerges as a facilitator of hegemonic/patriarchal motherhood.

Yuvanashva's maternal practice is also driven by the third demand of acceptability of the child that is at once social and personal. "'Acceptability' is defined in terms of the values of the mother's social group—whatever of its values she has internalized as her own plus values of group members whom she feels she must please or is fearful of displeasing. Society demands that a mother produce an adult acceptable to the next generation" (Ruddick 102). Ruddick points out that Mothers want their children to grow up to be adults that they and those closest to them can appreciate (103). Yuvanashva wanted Mandhata to be accepted by the social group, hence the secrecy surrounding Mandhata's birth. However, as Ruddick points out, the acceptability factor in maternal thinking involves both social and personal factors. Yuvanashva's revelation to Mandhata about his motherhood is driven by his desire to assess Mandhata's acceptability as a son personally and to test his worth as a ruler, but he feels betrayed when Mandhata, fearing social repercussions, fails to acknowledge him as his mother.

Conclusion

The Pregnant King negates the heteronormative notion of gender and sexuality by highlighting the importance of accommodating multiple human subjectivities and challenging the deterministic notions of identities pertaining to gender and sexuality, thereby emerging as an important text on queer politics in the Indian subcontinent. Through a matrifocal reading of the text, this paper critically analyses how the institution of motherhood is represented and how hegemonic/patriarchal motherhood is subverted in the novel. Yuvanashva makes the "mother" identity a contested and unstable social category, allowing one to rethink normative motherhood's established notions and practices. Shilavati destabilises the idea that sacrificial motherhood is normative and natural. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, this paper examines the ambivalence in a mother-son relationship; it also foregrounds the experientiality of childless women and non-normative mothers. Although Yuvanashva is not an ideal hero, his character can be read as a victim of a patriarchal society who tried to emulate the ways of hegemonic masculinity only to fall short of it.

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